

MAPPING MEDIA BIAS IN CHINA

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## ABSTRACT

### MAPPING MEDIA BIAS IN CHINA

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This exploratory study investigates the landscape of media bias in China. First, I propose a new conceptual framework for identifying media bias that is more comprehensive and less context-sensitive than existing models. The framework includes two independent dimensions: an ideological dimension, which is organized as clusters rather than a continuum, and a structural dimension which reveals the relationship of media outlets to the center of political and/or economic power in a given nation state. I then present a novel mixed-methods approach to document media bias across different contexts. This approach draws from previous literature on political communication, journalism studies, and network analysis. More specifically, to gauge the ideological bias of Chinese media, I analyze the journalistic sourcing patterns of expert interviewees in 31 major media outlets. My research reveals a dominant four-cluster pattern of media outlets: the “orthodox party outlets” which consists of central level party media, the “balanced outlets” which includes both provincial party dailies and provincial commercial dailies, the “critical outlets” which is a mixture of party and commercial media that hold relatively critical views toward the government and promote more liberal ideals, and the “nationalistic outlets” which includes two commercial media featuring nationalistic voices. I further identify the positions of these media outlets on twenty major political, economic, social and cultural issues. To measure the structural bias of Chinese media, I examine the frequency with which top

political leaders are mentioned, and find that it closely aligns with the party media/commercial media divide, with party media significantly paying a larger amount of positive attention to top leaders. I also test how the media landscape has changed after President Xi Jinping took power in late 2012. I find that under Xi's strict media control, on the one hand, Chinese media have become more ideologically homogenous, especially that the critical outlets have reduced their critical edge and become more nationalistic; and on the other hand, they have become more structurally biased in favor of the party-state. Finally, I discuss the implications of my research on Chinese media and on the study of media bias in general.

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## CHAPTER 1. Introduction

Are Chinese media biased? If so, in what way? A likely answer from non-experts on China would be: yes, they are biased in favor of the Communist Party due to the authoritarian political system, which imposes censorship and information control. Those who are more familiar with the Chinese media landscape might point out the party media versus commercial media divide and assume two kinds of bias, driven by political control and market imperative respectively. In this project, I demonstrate that the media landscape in China is more complicated and nuanced than either of these answers suggest, with the amount and type of bias varying across media outlets and substantive issues.

In doing so, this study attempts to fill an important gap between the rich and burgeoning literature on political communication in American and Western European contexts, and the scholarly investigation into media and politics in China, and by extension, other non-Western nation states. While there has been a great deal of research and debate on Western media's liberal/conservative bias and their role in political polarization, these theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches have yet to find their way into political communication studies in non-Western contexts such as China. This is largely because several fundamental issues remain unsolved: What does "bias" mean when applied to Chinese media? Does a liberal/conservative spectrum exist in China? How are Chinese media positioned in the ideological landscape of the nation?

Some might argue that the absence of national elections, the tight restrictions on political rights, and the limited pluralism in China render these questions irrelevant. But China has an emerging commercialized media system (Stockmann, 2013; Zhao, 1998,

2000), a significant group of committed investigative and critical journalists (Repnikova, 2017a; Svensson, Sæther, & Zhang, 2013; Tong & Sparks, 2009; Wang, 2016), and diversified opinions expressed in both print and digital media (Pan, 2009; Shi-Kupfer, Ohlberg, Lang, & Lang, 2017; Sullivan, 2013; Wang, Sparks, Lü, & Huang, 2017; Yang, 2009). What remains understudied is how the combination of these characteristics, in the context of China's authoritarian regime, are shaping the range and orientation of Chinese media coverage of local, national and international issues. I hope to both shed light on this question, and in doing so expand academic discussions regarding the relationship between media and politics to a more global and comparative scale.

In this study, I propose a new conceptual framework for identifying media bias that is more comprehensive and less context-sensitive than existing models. I also present a novel mixed-methods approach to document media bias across different contexts. This approach draws from previous literature on political communication, journalism studies, and network analysis. More specifically, to gauge the *ideological* bias of Chinese media, I analyze the journalistic sourcing patterns of expert interviewees in 31 major media outlets. My research reveals a dominant four-cluster pattern of media outlets, each with a different perspective on a variety of major issues. I also examine the frequency with which top political leaders are mentioned to measure the *structural* bias of Chinese media, and find that it closely aligns with the party media/commercial media divide, with party media significantly paying more attention to top leaders. Finally, I test how the media landscape has changed after President Xi Jinping took power in late 2012. I find evidence that under Xi's strict media control, Chinese media have become more ideologically homogenous, and more biased in favor of the party-state. The major theoretical contributions of this

project are two-fold. On the one hand, it provides a new perspective to understand and study the ideological landscape in regimes where a clear ideological alignment has not formed. On the other hand, it synthesizes and extends previous research on Chinese media from different approaches including political economy (Zhao, 1998), market competition (Stockmann, 2013), fragmented authoritarianism (Repnikova, 2017a), and journalistic professionalism (Pan, 2009; Svensson et al., 2013), and provides a more systematic approach to the media landscape in China.

In this introductory chapter, I first discuss my conceptual framework of media bias based on critiques of previous scholarship. I then review the literature on the ideological and structural bias in China. Finally, I introduce the research questions, and provide an outline for the remaining chapters.

### **Media Bias: A Framework**

Media bias is a popular term in both public discourse and academic literature. However, as scholars imply, it is a “curiously undertheorized” term (Entman, 2007, p. 163), and “[i]n essence, there does not appear to be a major theorist of media bias” (D’Alessio & Allen, 2000, p. 135). In this section, I begin with reviewing two types of commonly used conceptualizations of media bias. I then explain their shortcomings, and propose an alternative approach. I conclude by providing a new methodological approach for understanding the ideological landscape in non-democratic regimes.

#### *Two Types of Flawed Conceptualization*

A survey of previous studies on “media bias” reveals that the term has been frequently used as a synonym of media’s *partisan* bias and/or *ideological* slant (e.g., Alterman, 2003; Eisinger, Veenstra, & Koehn, 2007; Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010; Groseclose & Milyo, 2005; Niven, 2002; Patterson & Donsbach, 1996; Puglisi, 2011). More specifically, a large body of studies focus on the “liberal bias,” “conservative bias,” “pro-Democrat bias,” and “pro-Republican bias” of media in the context of American two-party politics. In an even narrower sense, a number of research articles examine which presidential candidate media prefer in the election campaigns, which conveniently provides “a fertile ground for the analysis of media bias” (D’Alessio & Allen, 2000, p. 137).

However, this context-specific definition cannot be easily applied to other democratic regimes such as some multi-party European countries, let alone authoritarian regimes. More importantly, the exclusive focus on partisan and ideological bias leads to the possibility of missing other types of bias. For example, Page and Shapiro (1992) propose several types of media bias that exist in American media across the ideological spectrum: nationalistic and ethnocentric bias, anti-Communist bias, pro-capitalist bias, minimal government bias, and pro-incumbent bias. These biases could be summarized as *structural* bias, which, according to van Dalen (2012), “is not the result of ideological decisions, but rather the result of the routines by which journalists work, such as judging news stories according to their news values or the use of framing which provide stories that are easily recognizable for audiences” (p. 34). In other words, structural bias is unintentional and irrelevant to media’s position on the liberal-conservative continuum. The consequence of structural bias in media is often the tendency to favor the institutional sources, the

established actors, and the status quo. Therefore, it could also be framed as pro-status quo bias.

In contrast to the narrow approach of defining media bias as partisan and ideological, other scholars have proposed more general frameworks of media bias. Baron (2006) defines bias “relative to the truth” (p. 4). McQuail (2010) maintains that “any tendency in a news report to deviate from an accurate, neutral, balanced and impartial representation of ‘reality’ of events and social world” could be seen as bias (p. 549). Similarly, Groeling (2013) suggests that media bias refers to “a portrayal of reality that is significantly and systematically (not randomly) distorted” (p. 133).

By defining bias as deviations from reality, this conceptualization avoids the danger of narrowing media bias to simply liberal or conservative bias in the Western context. However, such a framework is highly descriptive and lacks theoretical rigor. It assumes that there is an objective and measurable “reality,” a view which has been challenged by social constructionist scholars (Cohen & Young, 1973; Schudson, 2003; Tuchman, 1978). Even if we accept the positivist view that social reality does exist on its own and is measurable, it is often unreasonable to expect media to “mirror” (Vos, 2011; Zelizer, 2005) the reality without filtering. For example, as Schudson (2003) suggests, if a weather report perfectly mirrors reality, it should pay much more attention to sunny, mild days than to “hurricanes, floods, heat waves, and cold spells” (p. 37). But we would never consider hurricane news to be “biased.” Focusing on the abnormal and exceptions is, in a sense, a deviation from reality, but it is the nature of news. In a similar vein, Schiller (1981) also considers the mirror metaphor as a “paradoxical notion” (p. 2).

A related strategy to give a general framework of media bias is to equate imbalance with bias, namely, bias as a deviation from balance rather than from reality. For example, Baron (2006) proposes that “the absence of balance, emphasis on one side of a story, or support for a particular world view” are indications of media bias (p. 7). In D’Alessio and Allen’s (2000) meta-analysis of media bias in presidential elections, they maintain that “any departure from a ‘50-50’ split” of coverage on the two sides should be considered as biased (p. 137). However, this simplified criterion is highly contestable. As Niven (2002) argues, a candidate from one party may work harder for coverage than the other one, one may have stronger ability to communicate a message, and one may have much better qualifications than the other one (p. 314). Under these circumstances, why should we expect a balanced “50-50” split? D’Alessio and Allen’s (2000) also admit that this simple split is “impossible to measure” outside of electoral politics (p. 136). Moreover, the emphasis on balance could potentially lead to the trap of false equivalence (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004; Cunningham, 2003). In a word, hindered by what Entman (2007) calls “irresolvable questions about truth and reality” (p. 166), attempts to define media bias in contrast to truth, reality, balance, and objectivity are deemed to be problematic.

### *Bias and the Relative Distribution of Power*

To better conceptualize media bias, we need a more rigorous general framework to replace the narrow definition of partisan bias as media bias and the questionable definition of deviations from reality and balance as bias. In this study, I propose that media bias should not be understood as something deviating from certain *absolute* truth or reality, but rather as **media’s potential to influence the *relative* distribution of power**. Here, power could



be understood as the ability to get others to do what one wants (Nagel, 1975), and influence includes change, reinforcement, and weakening. This theoretical approach posits that all media representations are biased in some way, and what matters is how they are biased relative to each other. The approach is largely borrowed from Entman (2007), who defines the bias of media content as “consistent patterns in the framing of mediated communication that promote the influence of one side in conflicts over the use of government power” (p. 166). His definition is limited to the political and institutional aspects of power, but we could extend it to other forms of power. Different from Entman, I define media bias as the *potential* to influence power distribution rather than the *actual* influence. The reason lies in the fact that, according to literature on media effects, the actual influence of media is shaped by various factors including individual traits and contextual elements. A biased media outlet per se does not guarantee influence. Therefore, it is less appropriate to define media bias in terms of influence, but rather in terms of content. It should be noted that due to differences in the size of readership, the perceived importance, and other factors, the biases of different media outlets are expected to have varying levels of influence, but the calculation of actual influence is beyond the scope of this project.

To give a few examples of media bias under this definition, conservative talk radio in the American political context could be biased in terms of potentially boosting public support for Republicans’ anti-abortion policies and influencing public policy by framing the issue as “the right to life” and likening abortion to murder. Commercial media in capitalist systems could be biased in terms of potentially helping transnational corporations sell their products to global consumers by setting the consumerist agenda. And so forth. In the concluding chapter, I will discuss how the Chinese case fits into the definition.

This definition has several advantages. First, it is broad enough to accommodate different kinds of bias in various contexts, and is not limited to a purely partisan and ideological dimension. Second, it is also open to use in polities that have more than a single ideological “left-right” dimension and that have multiple parties and/or competing centers of power. Third, it avoids the need to measure “objective reality” or assume that media must mirror this reality in order to be unbiased.

### *Two Dimensions of Media Bias*

Drawing from both my definition and previous literature, we can identify two major dimensions where media could potentially influence the relative distribution of power—the *ideological* and the *structural*.

The ideological dimension of media bias refers to the potential influence of media on people’s beliefs and attitudes on ideologically divided issues, which in turn shapes the power dynamic in a society. It could also be understood as how media outlets align with ideological cleavages in a society. The factors behind media’s ideological bias are two-fold. First, on the demand side, scholars argue that media are motivated to provide biased content that sides with consumers’ preferences, value, and ideology, because news consumers are attracted to and thus willing to pay for and/or attend to content that is ideologically consonant. Consumers support biased content in part because they avoid being in a state of cognitive dissonance (Mullainathan & Shleifer, 2005), and because they consider ideologically consonant content to be more credible (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2006).

Second, on the supply side, journalists’ own biases, including partisan predispositions, are often cited as an important source of media bias. Survey results

repeatedly reveal that journalists tend to be more liberal and progressive than the general public in the U.S. (Pew Research Center's Journalism Project, 2006; Weaver, Beam, Brownlee, Voakes, & Wilhoit, 2006; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986, 1996), and such phenomenon holds true elsewhere around the globe (Deuze, 2007; Patterson, 1997). This ideological position could potentially influence how they interpret the world and write their stories. As Patterson and Donsbach (1996) argue, "as journalists go about the daily business of making their news selections, their partisan predispositions affect the choices they make, from the stories they select to the headlines they write... It flows from the way they are predisposed to see the political world" (p. 466). In addition, since contemporary news work is characterized by its highly organized nature, with news organizations setting editorial policies and closely monitoring the production processes, journalists do not enjoy total autonomy in their work because of the teamwork nature and newsroom bureaucracy (Hanitzsch & Mellado, 2011; Sigelman, 1973). Baron (2006) points out that journalists want their stories to be published and positioned in important sections, and that biasing stories in accordance with media organizations' preferences can increase the probability of publication. Thus, the combination of organizational slant and personal career incentive produces ideologically biased content. All in all, the ideological orientations of news stories are influenced by both journalists' individual ideological slants and organizational policy and norms.

The structural dimension of media bias refers to the fact that established media often favor the interests of power elites and the status quo. This is not to say that media cannot be adversarial to the powerful interests—Freedman (2014) shows that mainstream commercial media can sometimes give voice to anti-establishment forces. But most media

outlets do frequently show a pro-status quo tendency. This kind of bias is deeply rooted in several structural factors of media.

First, structural bias could originate from state intervention and other forms of political control. Obviously, media in authoritarian regimes suffer from the restrictions on free speech. For example, in South America, strong control, censorship, and manipulation of the mass media have benefited government officials more than the public (Waisbord, 1995). Media in liberal democracies are not immune from the influence of political power, either, though not in an explicit manner. As Schudson (2005) argues, “journalists at mainstream publications everywhere accommodate to the political culture of the regime in which they operate” (p. 184).

Second, private ownership, commercial imperative, and the advertisement-based business model could bias media content in favor of the interests of their owners, investors, and advertisers. McChesney (2008) argues that private ownership of media leads to “the degradation of journalism and suppression of genuine debate.” To provide empirical evidence on a specific case, Gilens and Hertzman (2000) examine newspaper coverage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act and find that newspapers that stood to gain from the proposed deregulation offered more favorable coverage than those that did not benefit from the policy change. Baker (1994) shows that newspapers’ financial dependence on advertising could influence their non-advertising content in favor of the interests of advertisers over those of readers. Bagdikian (2000) demonstrates that news on tobacco-related diseases have been suppressed by advertising from the tobacco industry. Hamilton (2004) identifies a shift in network evening news programs from a focus on hard news about politics to an emphasis on happy, positive and uncontroversial content as a result of ownership changes

and incentives to attract advertisers. These cases all fit into the general framework of structural media bias as conceptualized in this study.

Third, journalistic routines could also influence media content. Studies on news production (e.g., Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978) have documented the influence of work routines on news content. As one important component of the routine, journalists' interactions with sources from beats could produce bias favorable to the status quo. Entman (2007) gives an example of how the skill of White House news managers and that of opposition party news managers can affect the slant of news items about the U.S. government. Bennett's (1990) indexing theory demonstrates that, as a result of journalistic routines and structural factors, political elites are disproportionately powerful in shaping the range and focus of debates.

To further illustrate the two major dimensions of media bias, I use the much-studied case of contemporary American media as an example. On the ideological dimension, since the U.S. electoral system provides a relatively clear, one-dimensional liberal-conservative cue, and the electorate is overwhelmingly sorted along this continuum according the Democratic and Republican party lines (Levendusky, 2009), it is quite clear that American media's potential to influence people's ideological beliefs and attitudes falls largely on the liberal-conservative spectrum. Under most circumstances, when we talk about American media's ideological bias, we are judging them as either pro-liberal/Democratic or pro-conservative/Republican.

On the structural dimension, as revealed in previous studies, the hegemonic power in the American society is the capitalist system maintained by political, economic, and cultural elites. Elites on both ends of the ideological spectrum buy into the system. Due to

aforementioned structural factors, American media—regardless of their liberal or conservative tendencies—are largely biased in favor of the interests of the power elites and the status quo from which they benefit.

*A “Cluster View” of the Ideological Bias*

For the study of media’s ideological bias, a conventional perspective is to adopt a left-right continuum, or two orthogonal continuums that constitute a two-dimensional ideological space.<sup>1</sup> Here I argue that an alternative and more realistic approach is to adopt a “cluster view” of media outlets, which assumes that media are clustered in a few communities, rather than smoothly distributed along the continuum. Take the American case as an example. Based on previous literature, the actual distribution of media outlets is more likely to be in several clusters – two large clusters of slightly liberal and slightly conservative media outlets (some argue that the liberal cluster is slightly larger, while some argue they are of the same size), as well as two small clusters of outlets on the far-left and far-right.

The cluster approach to ideological landscapes has unique advantage when applying to authoritarian regimes like China, where there is a lack of partisan sorting and ideological alignment. As Lipset and Rokkan (1967) argue, ideological cleavages can emerge without democratic institutions. Linz (2000) also suggests that there is pluralism (albeit limited) in authoritarian regimes (p. 54). Indeed, as Chairman Mao famously argued, “wherever there are people, there are leftists, rightists, and centrists.” Ideological

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<sup>1</sup> For example, a political continuum and an economic continuum.

cleavages exist in most societies, no matter democratic or authoritarian, East or West. However, cleavages in authoritarian regimes are less coherent and attitudinal elements are bound together by weaker constraint than in liberal democracies. The reasons are two-fold. On the one hand, as Chen (2016) argues, their regimes “have yet to produce a viable and recognizable regime ideology that can provide a basis for a distinctive political and economic model,” which means that the ideological landscape is still largely undefined. On the other hand, authoritarian regimes often intentionally suppress public discussions on ideological issues and conceal the disagreements among the elites for fear of losing ideological legitimacy (e.g., China’s “no dispute” policy, see Gilley, 2004). As a result, the public does not have sufficient opportunities to think and deliberate on this issue. It is difficult to identify a clear left-right ideological continuum as in democratic regimes, where citizens are exposed to different sets of party policies and are expected to engage with the ideological lines defined by political elites.

Therefore, although there are cleavages and diversified ideological options available in an authoritarian regime, those options are not likely sorted along a few clearly defined dimensions. Rather, there might be multiple groups or clusters of beliefs and attitudes bound together by some form of constraint (Converse, 1964). Within each cluster, there are multiple specific attitudinal elements. The distribution of ideological bias is thus better reflected in clusters, rather than distribution along one or a few dimensions.

To sum up, “media bias” is an undertheorized term that has often been narrowly defined as partisan bias in previous literature, or loosely defined in contrast to the contested notions of truth, reality, and balance. In this study, I define media bias as media’s potential to influence the relative distribution of power. There are different sources of media bias,

from the demand side and the supply side, as well as from individual and structural factors. Drawing on these approaches, I develop a theoretical framework of media bias that includes two major dimensions: the ideological and the structural. And I propose a cluster view of ideological bias that could be applied to authoritarian regimes where ideological sorting is limited.

### **Previous Studies on Media Bias in China**

I now turn to the review of existing literature on media bias in China. I discuss the two dimensions of media bias respectively, as laid out in the aforementioned framework.

#### *The Ideological Dimension*

Previous scholarship suggests two general levels of ideology: that among the elites and that among the public. Media is considered part of the elites, which also include the government, party, and academia (Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009). Before reviewing studies on media ideology, I present a historical perspective of ideology in China and discuss ideological orientations identified among the public and among intellectuals.

**Historical perspective.** Yang & Stening (2013) propose that the belief systems in China could be categorized according to different eras in Chinese history, namely Confucianism (2500 years ago), socialism (People's Republic of China under Mao), and capitalism (after market reform). According to Nathan and Shi (1996), the ideological dimension in Mao's Red China was decreed from above: "Mao accepted Stalin's scheme that history moved from primitive communism to feudalism to capitalism to communism and that whatever pushed things in that direction was 'progressive' and hence leftist," whereas "those who failed to push historical progress at the appropriate speed were right



deviationists guilty of class compromise” (pp. 526-527). Walder (2015) suggests that Mao styled himself as a genuine revolutionary and punished party members as rightists for “voicing ideas that allegedly expressed the ideology of the former exploiting classes” (p. 152). In essence, the Communist ideology was the dominant and the only available option for the public and the elites. During those three decades (1949-1977), Chinese media adhered closely to the party’s position. Communist Party mouthpieces filled with propaganda stories were the only form of media outlets in the red China (Sukosd & Wang, 2013; Winfield & Peng, 2005).

After Mao’s death, the Chinese regime was no longer able to monopolize public debate, and the Maoist ideologues in high-ranking positions were replaced by pragmatic officials like Deng Xiaoping, resulting in the collapse of the former ideological system. However, this collapse did not lead to a significant level of political pluralism. Indeed, many scholars argue that there has been an ideological vacuum in China since the inception of the economic reform in the late 1970s. There are multiple reasons behind the vacuum. First, the party has been suppressing ideological debates and promoting “ideological homogeneity” (Lieber, 2013) by emphasizing Deng’s dictum of “don’t argue,” which was further revived by subsequent leaders Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao (Gilley, 2004). Second, the state fails to provide a coherent ideological repertoire. As Chen (2016) argues, “China is still struggling to come up with a clear and viable regime ideology that goes beyond the existing eclectic amalgam of many seemingly incompatible elements” (p. 13). Third, the so-called “state-capitalism” in contemporary China (Tsai, 2007) tends to atomize social relationships and encourage citizens to retreat to the private domain (Nisbet, 1953), making it difficult to form ideological camps. Fourth, the autonomous civil society is weak

due to state suppression (e.g., Hildebrandt, 2013), thus further discouraging the emergence of different ideological positions.

Nonetheless, there is at least some evidence suggesting that identifiable ideological cleavages and contentious ideological landscape do exist in contemporary China despite the unfavorable conditions. For example, although the state attempts to suppress ideological debates, there have been several significant debates since late 1970s, including the one prior to the Tiananmen student democratic movement in 1989 (Lau & Lo, 1991). A more recent example is the debate on “universal values,” which “focused on whether democracy, liberty, human rights and humanities are universal values shared by all human beings” and was widely participated in by two opposing camps (Qi, 2011).

President Xi Jinping has intensified the control over Chinese society since he took power in late 2012. There are speculations that the room for plural ideas has vanished under Xi’s rule. However, empirical studies on the media as well as the online sphere suggest that a certain spectrum of diversified and even dissenting opinions are still allowed (Repnikova, 2018; Repnikova & Fang, 2016; Shi-Kupfer & Ohlberg, 2018; Shi-Kupfer et al., 2017)

**Ideology among the public.** With the emergence of polls in China since the 1980s, scholars have investigated different aspects of public opinion in China such as political trust and support for the government, but only a few of them have examined the overall structure of ideology (Manion, 2010; Wu & Meng, 2016). Based on data from a 1990 national sample survey, Nathan and Shi (1996) claim that a multidimensional ideological landscape has emerged. They term the dimensions as the Tiananmen agenda, the reform agenda, the economic welfare agenda, and the foreign policy agenda. However, their

argument is not widely accepted by other scholars. According to Lee (2003), the ideological landscape has become more complicated with the rise of neoliberalism, the New Leftism, neo-Confucianism, and the revival of Maoism since late 1990s and 2000s. Other scholars have suggested that nationalism has become one of the most pervasive ideologies in China and an important source of legitimacy of the party-state (Wang, 2014; Zheng, 1999). Based on another original set of nationally representative survey data collected in 2015, Wu and Meng (2016) identify a two-dimensional space of the overall ideology structure—the state-market divide (the economic dimension) and the authoritarian-democratic divide (the political dimension). Analyzing data from a large scale opt-in online survey, Pan and Xu (2018) find a one-dimensional ideological space, where the one end represents authoritarian rule, support for traditional norms, and support for political distribution of resources, while the other end represents political liberalization, opposition to traditional values, and support for markets allocation of resources. While survey research has made a significant contribution to the study of ideology in China, they all suffer from the nature of the study designs—all survey questions were determined beforehand. Thus, if any significant issues were missed in the survey, which is highly likely due to the limited knowledge of China’s ideological space, the results would be far from a complete or accurate picture. In addition, the sample used in Pan and Xu’s (2018) study was non-representative.

Another approach to studying ideology among the public is to analyze social media posts. Two research reports published by German think tank Mercator Institute for China Studies used data from Weibo and five influential online forums to analyze the opinions expressed in the posts (Shi-Kupfer & Ohlberg, 2018; Shi-Kupfer et al., 2017). They

observed “a remarkable plurality of opinions” (Shi-Kupfer et al., 2017, p. 9) in these online communities. Relying on pilot conversations with 100 online-savvy individuals and a subsequent survey of 1,552 urban Internet users, they identified eight clusters of Internet users: party warriors, flag wavers, China advocates, Mao lovers, traditionalists, equality advocates, industrialists, market lovers, democratizers, U.S. lovers, and humanists. These clusters shed light on our understanding of online public opinion in China, but the data are drawn from a specific group of active social media and online forum users, who are not necessarily representative of the overall online population.

**Ideology among the intellectuals.** In general, intellectuals are more likely than the general public to form coherent ideology based on attitudinal elements bound together (Jost et al., 2009). An early attempt to map out the “ideological camps” of Chinese intellectuals was done by Lee (2003), who qualitatively identified the camps of the old left, reform Marxists, liberals, and the New Left. Similarly, Cheek et al. (2018) examined intellectual discourse in China identify three groupings of Chinese intellectuals: liberals, New Left, and New Confucian. In a more recent study, Mulvad (2018) interviewed 28 “leading Chinese intellectuals” and proposed a two-dimensional spectrum of elite intellectuals’ ideological structure: one axis between capitalism and socialism, and the other axis between paternalism and fraternalism. He places his interviewees in the four areas of this space, each representing an ideological vision in the Chinese context: de-privatizing statism (socialism + paternalism); Confucianizing liberalism (capitalism + paternalism); proletarianizing constitutionalism (socialism + fraternalism); and liberalism (capitalism + fraternalism). While these works provide useful insights into the elite ideological structure, they all draw from qualitative analysis of selected scholarly

discourse. There remains no systematic quantitative analysis of the ideological structure among Chinese intellectuals.

**Ideological bias of the media.** Partly due to the limitations and disagreements in the understanding of the overall ideological structure in China, there are only a few studies that have discussed media's position and bias in this complicated and only partially understood ideological space. In his mapping of four intellectual ideological camps, Lee (2003) gives examples of websites that belong to each camp (p. 20). In a more recent study, Lu, Chu, and Shen (2016) put forward three clusters of ideological items—liberalism, culture conservatism, and the new left—and test the relation between media use and these orientations. However, the clusters are inferred from previous literature (mainly political philosophy pieces) rather than based on empirical data.

A recent project conducted by a group of economists provides by far the most systematic study on this topic (Qin, Strömberg, & Wu, 2018). Using computer-assisted text analysis to examine data from 117 newspapers during the years 1999-2010, they position the papers on a party-commercial continuum, which treats “party bias” and “commercial bias” as two opposite ends. However, this is not necessarily the case—as indicated by Stockmann (2013), the party line and the commercial interests converge on some issues such as nationalism. More critiques about their methodological approach are provided in the next chapter.

In a few case studies, ideological biases are analyzed through the lens of specific issues. For example, Duckett & Langer (2013) focus on the policy issue of health reform, on which the government did not have a unified stance during the 2000s. They find that media coverage took diverse positions, “with narratives centering on market and state roles

in health, but a vocal minority of pro-market articles challenged the dominant pro-state reporting.” They also find that pro-state positions were populist and paternalist, while the neoliberals were elitist. Zhao (2003) analyzes the discourses in coverage of China’s decision to join the World Trade Organization (WTO) and argues that there is a neo-liberal hegemony in Chinese press.

In a word, while studies acknowledge that media no longer hold a rigid ideological commitment to communism, only a few have empirically investigated media’s ideological biases. In addition, none of these studies examine a comprehensive set of dividing issues in a systematic manner.

#### *Media Bias in China: Structural Dimension*

Previous studies on the structural dimension of media bias in China concentrate on two factors: authoritarian control of information and media commercialization since the 1980s. A vivid metaphor is that Chinese news media have to “serve two masters”—the party and the market. Although there is still no ownership diversity in Chinese news industry—all print media, broadcast media, and online media that could produce original news content have to be state-owned, the introduction of market-oriented media does bring arguably major changes.

There are generally two views about the influence of the state and the market on media bias. The first argues for Chinese media’s partial separation from political power as a result of commercialization. In this view, the emergence of a group of market-oriented outlets has decreased the general pro-state bias of media and brought a more open and diverse space. The rise of commercial media in circulation and advertising revenue was

accompanied by the proliferation of content that was “open, lively, and even assertive at times vis-à-vis the state” (Pan, 2009). Based on empirical findings, Huang (2001) argues that press commercialization is “a significant and positive development towards a free press” (p. 447). Such optimism is shared by other scholars, who believe that the party-state is losing control of the mass media (Pei, 1994).

On the other hand, however, there are scholars portraying a gloomier picture. They question “the supposed contradiction between market and state control” and the assumption that “the needs of the media to build and retain a mass audience would inevitably conflict with the demands of the party for detailed control of media output” (Sparks, 2010). According to them, the party’s information control has not gone away. The party-state has made various adaptations and diversified its control in many alternative ways along with the commercialization and technological advances of Chinese media (Winfield & Peng, 2005). Content analysis conducted by Stockmann (2013) reveals that there is no substantial difference in official media and commercial media’s coverage on the issues of labor law and of the United States. Worse still, the market impetus has driven media to focus on serving the rich, urban residents (Zhao, 2000) and commodify their products, which were increasingly light-hearted, mundane, and entertaining (Wu, 2016). Some fear that the combination of political censorship and market censorship could ‘turn China into a nation of tabloid-dazed couch potatoes’ (Schell, 1995). In other words, media content is still biased toward the party, and is also biased toward the rich – political control and market imperative often converge and reinforce the bias in favor of the power elites.

The latter view receives, by and large, more empirical support in previous studies, and also makes more logical sense in China’s “state corporatist system” (Pan, 2009). This

study assumes that the structural dimension of media bias in China remains characterized by a single power center – the Communist Party. To be more specific, all the media outlets in China, to varying degrees, are required to cover the party and the leaders in a positive light. This kind of coverage is mainly to show a gesture of compliance and to “signal” (Huang, 2015) the party’s power, rather than taking ideological stances. Therefore, it is unrelated to the ideological bias of the outlets.

### **Research Questions**

The above review shows that there is no consensus regarding the political cleavages and ideological orientations that exist within the Chinese public, intellectuals, or media. As a result, my own study on media bias in China is admittedly exploratory in nature, following the approach of grounded theory to develop theories from data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). While the majority of media bias studies in the U.S. follow the top-down, deductive hypothesis-testing approach, studies in the Chinese context at the current stage will be a combination of inductive and deductive approaches.

This study aims to provide answers to the following research questions.

**Research Question 1:** What does the media landscape of contemporary China look like, and how do the biases found in this landscape comport with the distribution of ideological perspectives and structural control found in China?

**Research Question 2:** What are the major clusters of media bias in China and which media outlets are there in each cluster?

**Research Question 3:** What are the major dividing issues among these clusters of media outlets?



I also attempt to answer two additional questions on the specific changes in media landscape after the leadership transition in late 2012. President Xi Jinping has been widely criticized by domestic and international observers for his conservative mindset and hardline policies. The prevailing opinion among China watchers is that Xi is consolidating power and aspiring to be the new Chairman Mao (Lam, 2015; Miller, 2014). Critics say that China's human rights record has worsened (Phillips, 2015), and news media have become more heavily censored since Xi took power (Freedom House, 2016; Reporters Without Borders, 2016). However, although there are widely covered cases of journalists being arrested and news stories deleted, there is still a lack of systematic, objective evaluation of the changes in press freedom under Xi's rule. This study provides an empirical assessment of Xi's impact on media content by measuring the changes in the media landscape under his rule. Following the general framework of media bias proposed above, this study attempts to answers these two questions:

**Research Question 4:** How has Chinese media's ideological landscape changed after 2012?

**Research Question 5:** How has Chinese media's structural bias changed after 2012?

## **Chapter Outlines**

The structure of the remaining chapters in this manuscript is as follows. Chapter 2 provides a review of previous methods in measuring media bias, and proposes a novel methodological approach that is valid and universally applicable. It also explains the qualitative data collection and analysis, and discusses how these methodological

approaches inform each other. This chapter also provides detailed information on the nature and processing steps of data used in this project.

Chapters 3 and 4 present research findings in detail. In Chapter 3, the focus is on the general landscape of media bias in China. This chapter begins with validating the methodological approach by interviewing journalists and examining their sourcing practices in China. I then present and discuss the ideological clusters of Chinese media as identified in the data analysis, as well as the extent to which these clusters changed after President Xi Jinping took power in late 2012 and early 2013. In the last section of this chapter, I turn to structural bias and show to what extents different types of media are biased in favor of the top political leaders. Chapter 4 furthers the investigation into ideological bias, focusing on the patterns of coverage of 20 major political, economic, social and cultural issues.

Finally, in the concluding Chapter 5, I synthesize the findings presented in the previous two chapters, followed by discussions on the implications for research on Chinese media and for research on media bias in general. I also discuss the limitations of this project, and propose some possible directions for future studies.

## **CHAPTER 2. Follow the Sources: Methods and Data**

“Follow the money!” Generations of investigative journalists take this approach to uncover corruption, as money is so central to numerous scandals that its transfer between parties could bring wrongdoings to light. I argue that, in a similar vein, sources are so central to journalism that the examination of sourcing patterns could reveal much about the nature and structure of journalism in a cross-national manner. They could also indicate shortcomings of this profession, such as the problem of “indexing” elite sources (Bennett, 1990). In this dissertation project, the principal method of tackling the difficult question of measuring media bias in China is to investigate how news media in China cite intellectual sources. In short, follow the sources.

This chapter begins by reviewing methods used in previous studies to measure media bias and discussing their validity and applicability in comparative contexts. I then propose and explain the methodological approach of the current project. Next, I introduce the technical details of data collection and analysis strategies. Finally, the analysis is supplemented by 32 in-depth interviews with media professionals in China, which I introduce in the last part of this chapter.

### **Previous Methods of Measuring Media Bias**

Efforts to measure ideological or partisan bias/orientation exist in a number of arenas. For example, political scientists have developed reliable methods of measuring the bias/orientation of legislators by using congressional voting records (e.g., Groseclose, Levitt, & Snyder, 1999; Poole & Rosenthal, 2000), and public opinion researchers in a

number of fields often use partisan voting or self-reports in surveys (e.g., Abramowitz & Saunders, 2006; Ansolabehere, Rodden, & Snyder, 2008). In the case of measuring media bias, communication scholars have developed several approaches, with varying degrees of applicability to non-U.S. contexts. In this section, I summarize previous methods in three categories (consumer-based, journalist-based, and content-based) and discuss their applicability in two types of non-U.S. contexts: multi-party systems and non-democratic regimes.

### *Consumer-based measures*

**Public perceptions.** The first category of measures focuses on consumers of media. One method is to simply ask the general public to provide their perceptions of the bias of specific media outlets. For example, Watts et al. (1999) has measured public evaluations and found that Americans considered the media to have become increasingly liberal over past three general elections. Having asked survey respondents to provide their opinions on media bias for decades, Pew Research Center (2012) suggests that there has been a significant rise in seeing bias in news coverage among the public, especially among Republicans. In 1989, only a quarter of Republicans agreed that there is “a great deal of bias” in the news, whereas in 2012, the number increased to 49%. In the specific context of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, a Gallup (2016) poll shows that over half (52%) of registered voters think the media have a pro-Clinton bias.

Thanks to its simplicity, this approach is universally applicable. Surveys have been conducted in Europe (YouGov, 2016), Japan (Flanagan, 1991), South Korea (Lee, 2012)

and other parts of the world to gauge public opinion on the bias of specific news outlets or media as an institution overall.

However, due to the widely recognized problem in audience' judgement of media orientation ("the hostile media effect", see Gunther & Schmitt, 2004), this measurement is far from an ideal method to examine media slants. Ultimately, what it measures is the public *perception* of media bias, which is different from media bias *per se*.

**The ideological composition of media audiences.** An alternative method is to infer a media outlet's orientation from the ideological composition of its audiences, either through conducting surveys, or through using data from audience research companies like Nielsen and comScore. Since we assume audiences choose media outlets according to their own ideological preferences and positions in the society, this measurement is a reasonable proxy to the bias of media outlets. For example, Pew Research Center's study on political polarization and media habits identifies the distinct favorites of media sources on the left and right (Mitchell, Gottfried, Kiley, & Matsa, 2014). Another example is that Gentzkow and Shapiro (2015) uses comScore's audience data to measure the ideological orientations of media websites. This method could also be used in non-U.S., multi-party contexts, as long as audience data is available.

However, this approach has limited applicability in non-democratic contexts due to the lack of measures on audience ideology. While it is possible to gauge the demographics of the audience, it is very difficult to measure the ideological composition of them. As Lu et al. (2016) suggest, "despite the plethora of political belief measures in the West, very few empirical measures of political ideology were tailored to the Chinese context" (p. 79).

### *Journalist-based measures*

**Journalists' perceptions.** To avoid the hostile media effect among audiences, we can also ask journalists about their evaluation of the ideological position of media outlets. In surveys of American journalists (Weaver et al., 2006; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986, 1996; Willnat, Weaver, & Wilhoit, 2017), researchers asked them to place the media they worked for on the liberal-conservative scale. This straightforward method is applicable in multi-party and non-democratic contexts. However, although media professionals might be better in judging bias in news coverage than audiences, this measurement is still about perception rather than media bias *per se*. In addition, journalists may be hesitant to provide an honest assessment of their perceptions, especially those working in less democratic regimes.

**The ideological composition of journalists.** Media organizations are run by individuals, and so could be influenced by media workers' own ideological bias (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013). Therefore, another approach to measure media bias is to assess the ideological orientations of the people working in different media outlets. We can conduct surveys with journalists and media executives to collect their ideological orientations. The aforementioned surveys on American journalists contain data on the ideological positions of individual journalists at various publications. There is also a global scale survey that measured the ideological orientations of journalists in democratic countries other than the U.S. (Weaver & Willnat, 2012). Researchers find that journalists are generally more liberal than the public around the globe.

However, surveys in non-democratic regimes rarely examine the ideological orientations of journalists due to the lack of measures as mentioned above. For example,

the global journalists survey (Weaver & Willnat, 2012) does not include ideological measures about Chinese journalists. Furthermore, media practitioners' own bias is only one of the many factors influencing the bias of media content. The objectivity norm of journalism (Schudson, 2001) constrains the direct expression of journalists' bias in media content. As a result, the ideological composition of journalists is not a proper proxy for media bias.

### *Content-based measures*

**The Filtering of Certain Issues.** Other than inferring media bias from people producing or consuming media content, several other methods directly measure the ideological bias of media content. One such approach is to calculate the frequency of selected media outlets in covering certain issues that are clearly reflecting certain bias. In other words, bias is determined by the types of stories that are filtered or amplified by media outlets. For example, Puglisi and Snyder (2011) focus on coverage of political scandals and find that Democratic-leaning newspapers provide relatively more coverage of scandals involving Republican politicians than those involving Democratic politicians, while Republican-leaning newspapers tend to do the opposite. Similarly, Larcinese et al. (2011) count media coverage on unemployment. They find that liberal newspapers “systematically give more coverage to high unemployment when the incumbent president is a Republican than when the president is Democratic,” and vice versa. Baum and Groeling (2008) examine how political websites chose stories from wire services and find evidence for partisan filtering. Stovall (1985, 1988) investigates media bias by looking at

the filtering of media coverage during presidential campaigns: which events to cover, which not?

This approach is related to the agenda-setting theory—media set biased agenda through the selection and filtering of certain issues. The downside of this approach is that it requires sufficient knowledge about the “pool” of issues for media to cover and to avoid. As a result, while it can be applied in multi-party democracies, it is rarely applicable in non-democratic contexts because the full range of such issues is not known. One important exception is economists Qin, Strömberg, & Wu’s (2018) work on Chinese media, as mentioned in the first chapter. They calculate the amount of media coverage on three types of events: the “party line” events (e.g., political leaders’ activities; the annual top 10 news events listed by the official Xinhua News Agency), the “mass line” events (e.g., corruption, disasters, and accidents), and the “bottom line” events (e.g., sports and entertainment). The underlying logic is that these events indicate the distance from the official discourse. While this paper makes a seminal contribution to the study of media bias in China, it oversimplifies “media bias” as bias in favor of the Communist Party. In addition, the amount of coverage on certain selected events is not necessarily indicative of bias. For example, the authors find that party newspapers actually cover corruption more than commercial papers. That might result from the intensive coverage of the achievements in anti-corruption campaigns by party outlets, in contrast to the less frequent yet more critical coverage by commercial papers. Here we could see the exact problem we discussed at the beginning of this paragraph—the insufficient knowledge about the “pool” of issues and subsequent uninformed selections.



**Editorial Endorsements.** Endorsements in presidential elections provide a straightforward measure of media bias, but only in democratic contexts. Ansolabehere et al. (2006) find that newspapers in the U.S. have shifted from strongly favoring Republicans in the 1940s and 1950s, to dividing their editorial endorsements roughly equally between the parties. From DiMaggio et al.'s (1996) perspective, this change could be seen as evidence of polarization. Stroud (2008) has also measured media's ideological slants by endorsements.

During recent election cycles, an increasing number of outlets do not explicitly endorse a presidential candidate (Casas, Fawaz, & Trindade, 2016; Stanley & Niemi, 1994), and radio and television stations do not endorse political candidates in the first place. To deal with this problem, Ho and Quinn (2008) examines newspaper editorials in the U.S.—not on political candidates, but on government and supreme court decisions: do they support or oppose certain ideological decisions? This approach provides a much larger amount of data than candidate endorsements. They reach the conclusion that most newspapers took “political positions that are relatively centrist.”

One important limitation of this set of approaches is that editorials are only a small part of media content. It should also be noted that newspapers' editorial endorsements are not necessarily related to the orientation of their news coverage and other opinion pieces (Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998), due to the strong separation between the editorial divisions and the news divisions in professional news organizations. A prominent example is *Wall Street Journal's* strong conservative tone in editorials and relatively balanced news reporting. Therefore, the information we can get from those separate endorsements is very limited (Ho & Quinn, 2008). In terms of applicability, it cannot be used in democratic

countries where editorial endorsements are not practiced (e.g., Argentina, France, and Portugal, see Fawaz, Trindade, & Casas, 2016). They are not directly applicable in non-democratic regimes where no national election is being held, either.

**The Tone of Content.** To gauge the ideological bias in news content rather than editorials, one approach is to manually code the tones of stories. Lowry and Shidler (1995) have analyzed radio content and coded sound bites about candidates in the 1992 election. They find that the sound bites were substantially more negative toward Republican candidates George Bush and Dan Quayle. Similar methods are used in Dalton et al. (1998) and Watts et al. (1999). However, this approach, as Ho and Quinn (2008) suggest, requires “substantive knowledge on the part of the coders, is often expensive, and can be prone to a variety of coding errors” (p. 355).

Computer-assisted content analysis including sentiment analysis offers promise in dealing with the problems of manual coding (e.g., Soroka, Young, & Balmas, 2015; Young & Soroka, 2012). It is also open to studies in different contexts, because such analysis could be run on various types of texts regardless of context. However, this approach cannot eliminate subjective decisions on issues such as building the “dictionary” and setting the training set for supervised learning. Getting a reasonably high accuracy rate and efficiency also requires the familiarity of the technique development, as well as careful thought and reasoning (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013).

**Politically charged phrases.** Another approach to measure the ideological bias in news content is to count the frequency of “politically charged” phrases. For example, Gentzkow and Shapiro (2010) calculate how often a media outlet uses certain phrases (e.g., “death tax”), and then compare the results with Congressional Record “to identify whether

the newspaper’s language is more similar to that of a congressional Republican or a congressional Democrat” (p. 42). Similarly, Wihbey and colleagues (2018) measure bias in news content by examining how often phrases representative of a strong ideology (e.g., “undocumented workers” suggests a liberal ideology, while “illegal immigrants” indicates the opposite) are used. This process simply deals with counting and thus reduces subjectivity, but it requires the knowledge of a group of these words/phrases and the consensus that these words/phrases do signal bias. Unfortunately, these requirements are often difficult to meet in non-democratic regimes, where such politically charged phrases do not exist due to the lack of open competition among political groups.

Table 1 summarizes the methods discussed above and whether they could be applied effectively in the study of media bias in multi-party and non-democratic systems.

**Table 1 Summary of previous methods of measuring media bias**

| <b>Category</b>  | <b>Method</b>                          | <b>Applicability in multi-party systems</b> | <b>Applicability in non-democratic systems</b> |
|------------------|--|---|--|
| Consumer-based   | Public perceptions                     | Y   | Y  |
|                  | Ideological composition of audiences   | Y   | N  |
| Journalist-based | Journalists’ perceptions               | Y   | Y  |
|                  | Ideological composition of journalists | Y   | N  |
| Content-based    | Filtering of certain issues            | Y   | N  |
|                  | Editorial Endorsements                 | Limited                                     | N  |
|                  | Tone of content                        | Y   | Y  |
|                  | Politically charged phrases            | Y   | N  |

## **Journalistic Sourcing Pattern of Intellectuals as Indicator of Media Bias**

The methods reviewed above all provide insights into how to measure media bias, but suffer from different problems in validity and applicability in non-democratic contexts. Here I argue that using journalistic sourcing patterns to study media bias in various contexts is the best approach that is currently available.

This approach is rooted in several important branches of research from different areas. The first is journalism studies, especially the sociological study of media work (Gans, 1979; Schudson, 2003; Tuchman, 1978), in which scholars have paid intensive attention to how journalists gather factual information and opinions from others. Sources are so important to news media that O’Neill and O’Connor (2008) argue that sources are actually “making” news. The bedrock position of sourcing in journalism practice lies in the fact that journalists across the globe are constrained by the objectivity norm (Schudson, 2001)—the reliance on sources to provide information thus protects “the professional from mistakes and from ... critics” (Tuchman, 1972, p. 678). However, sourcing is only a kind of “strategic ritual” of objectivity (Tuchman, 1972) rather than a magical method to ensure objectivity—“journalists make subjective choices all of the time as to whom they interview or what documents they quote” (Hamilton & Lawrence, 2010, p. 683). To put it differently, sourcing could be a way for journalists to implicitly express opinions through others’ voices, especially when they resort to intellectuals, researchers, commentators, and think tanks for comments (rather than when they interview persons involved in the stories or witnesses).

The second branch of study that relates to this approach is political communication studies that often critically assess how the sourcing patterns are in favor of power holders

and produce media bias. There is a rich set of literature that have examined the disproportional reliance on institutional and official sources such as government officials and leaders of major political parties and business organizations (e.g., Aday, 2010; Brown, Bybee, Wearden, & Straughan, 1987; Reese, Grant, & Danielian, 1994; Sigal, 1973). As a consequence, the power elites' interpretation of political and social issues "commands the field in all subsequent treatment and sets the terms of reference within which all further coverage and debate takes place" (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978, p. 58). Based on this prevalent sourcing pattern, Bennett (1990) proposes the widely-cited "indexing theory" to predict that news coverage on political and public policy issues will generally follow the parameters of elite debate.

The third branch that sheds light on media bias research is research on citation networks that is often used to study scientific and scholarly networks (White, 2011). I argue that it could be adapted to the study of media bias. In academia, citation is the process of building knowledge upon previous work, and citation networks can reveal the influence of authors and the relationship among them. This methodology provides illuminating insights on how the citation network of news media could be established. Due to different substantial meanings of citation in academic research and in media coverage, the networks reveal very different things. For the citation network of media, it is not about how theory is built upon each other or how studies influence each other, but about how media share similarities in choosing individuals to express opinions.

One important study that relies on journalistic sourcing patterns to measure media bias is conducted by Groseclose and Milyo (2005). They examine how 20 selected media outlets in the U.S. (including newspapers, magazines, TV news programs, radio programs,

and websites) cite 50 influential think tanks on different ends of the ideological spectrum. In order to measure the ideological position of think tanks, they calculate how members of Congress cite them. If a think tank is frequently cited by a liberal legislator (whose position was revealed by adjusted ADA scores, compiled by the Americans for Democratic Action and developed by Groseclose, Levitt, & Snyder, 1999), then it is considered to be liberal. A media outlet that overwhelmingly cites liberal think tanks is then positioned on the liberal side of the spectrum.

This approach is groundbreaking, but again, it could not be directly copied to the Chinese context for two reasons. First, it predefines a liberal-conservative continuum, which is not theorized in China, as explained in the first chapter. Second, the ideological positions of sources (i.e., think tanks) are calculated with the help of congressional data, which is also unavailable in China.

To address these two problems, I develop a novel methodological approach which borrows insights from Groseclose and Milyo (2005) but extends it in important aspects. It does not require a predefined ideological continuum or congressional (or similar elite) data. Adopting the “cluster view” proposed in the first chapter, I combine Groseclose and Milyo’s method with a data-driven network approach to capture the sourcing similarities among media outlets, and construct a network without predefining the position of sources. In addition, I use individual intellectuals and commentators rather than think tanks because the think tank industry is still weak and heavily controlled in China. As Wang (2017) suggests, Chinese think tanks are unlikely to “express thoughts that are in conflict with the government.” Instead, they “think what they’re told to think.” Therefore, think tanks are not useful in differentiating ideological positions. In contrast, individual intellectuals in

China hold different opinions, including opinions that are in conflict with the official policies (Mulvad, 2018).

Next, I turn to a detailed introduction to the methods and data used in this study.

## **Data Collection and Analysis Strategies**

### *The selection of media outlets*

To measure media bias and map the landscape in China, I selected 31 major news outlets to be included in this study, drawn from newspapers, magazines, broadcasting, and websites. Specific outlets were selected using two criteria: reach and representativeness. Reach is defined in terms of circulation, viewership, or traffic. I chose the most widely circulated/viewed/visited media outlets. Representativeness refers to: a) the inclusion of both party media and commercial media, and b) covering two types of signature publications in China, i.e., outlets that aimed at promoting the ruling party's "authoritative voice" (such as *Qiushi*, the official magazine published by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China) and those known for investigative journalism (such as *Southern Weekly* and *Caixin* magazine). This purposive sampling approach is in line with media bias research in the Western context—focusing on influential ones such as *The New York Times* and Drudge Report rather than randomly selecting titles. I also surveyed previous studies on Chinese media to make sure that no major outlet that has been studied

before is missing here.<sup>2</sup> Appendix I provides a more detailed explanation on the process and why each of the outlets in this project was selected.

The final dataset of media outlets is constrained to those whose full-text data are available. Unfortunately, there is no Chinese equivalent to LexisNexis, which provides full-text data of nearly all major news outlets in one place. The most similar database is WiseNews, where I collected data of 19 newspapers. I used web scraping to collect data from another 11 outlets (including online newspapers, magazines, TV programs, and websites), and relied on my personal connection to get data from the remaining one newspaper (Table 2).

**Table 2 Media outlets included in the sample**

| <b>Title (Chinese)</b> | <b>Title (English)</b>         | <b>Circulation (thousand)</b> | <b>Data source</b> |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------|
| <b>Newspapers (22)</b> |                                |                               |                    |
| 人民日报                   | The People's Daily             | 3,334                         | Web scraping       |
| 广州日报                   | Guangzhou Daily                | 1,850                         | WiseNews           |
| 南方都市报                  | Southern Metropolis Daily      | 1,826                         | WiseNews           |
| 钱江晚报                   | Qianjiang Evening News         | 1,580                         | WiseNews           |
| 环球时报                   | Global Times                   | 1,165                         | WiseNews           |
| 楚天都市报                  | Chutian Metropolis Daily       | 1,012                         | WiseNews           |
| 南方日报                   | Nanfang Daily                  | 968                           | WiseNews           |
| 华西都市报                  | Western China Metropolis Daily | 824                           | WiseNews           |
| 南方周末                   | Southern Weekly                | 760                           | Provided by editor |
| 经济日报                   | Economic Daily                 | 756                           | WiseNews           |
| 光明日报                   | Guangming Daily                | 730                           | WiseNews           |
| 新民晚报                   | Xinmin Evening News            | 601                           | WiseNews           |
| 今晚报                    | Today Evening Post             | 505                           | WiseNews           |
| 湖北日报                   | Hubei Daily                    | 440                           | WiseNews           |
| 羊城晚报                   | Yangcheng Evening News         | 417                           | WiseNews           |

<sup>2</sup> I reviewed 51 academic papers on Chinese media that use content analysis and are published in 16 major journalism and mass communications journals during recent two decades, see Fang, 2015.



|                         |                                |                             |              |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------|
| 浙江日报                    | Zhejiang Daily                 | 408                         | WiseNews     |
| 江南都市报                   | Jiangnan Metropolis Daily      | 400                         | WiseNews     |
| 北京晚报                    | Beijing Evening News           | 330                         | WiseNews     |
| 中国青年报                   | China Youth Daily              | 300                         | Web scraping |
| 新京报                     | The Beijing News               | 281                         | WiseNews     |
| 北京青年报                   | Beijing Youth Daily            | 250                         | WiseNews     |
| 京华时报                    | Beijing Times                  | 247                         | WiseNews     |
| <b>Magazines (4)</b>    |                                |                             |              |
| 求是                      | Qiushi                         | 1,729                       | Web scraping |
| 财新周刊                    | Caixin Weekly                  | 220                         | Web scraping |
| 三联生活周刊                  | Sanlian Life Weekly            | 750                         | Web scraping |
| 南风窗                     | Nanfeng Chuang                 | 660                         | Web scraping |
| <b>Broadcasting (2)</b> |                                |                             |              |
| 新闻联播                    | Xinwen Lianbo / News Simulcast |                             | Web scraping |
| 焦点访谈                    | Focus                          |                             | Web scraping |
| <b>Websites (3)</b>     |                                |                             |              |
| 澎湃新闻                    | The Paper                      | 402 (Alexa rank in China)   | Web scraping |
| 界面新闻                    | Jiemian                        | 469 (Alexa rank in China)   | Web scraping |
| 观察者网                    | Guancha.cn                     | 1,738 (Alexa rank in China) | Web scraping |
| <b>Total:</b>           |                                | <b>31 news outlets</b>      |              |

Note: Circulation data based on *China Journalism Yearbook 2016*.

For these media outlets, I collected and analyzed 4 years of data: 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2016.<sup>3</sup> The major goal of this longitudinal design is to capture the changes in media landscape after President Xi Jinping took power in the end of 2012 (The 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China) and early 2013 (The 1st Session of the 12th National People's Congress), as discussed in the first chapter.

#### *Extracting intellectuals' names and quotes*

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that Pengpai and Jiemian were both launched in mid-2014. Therefore, these two outlets only have data for the years 2014 and 2016.

As illustrated in Figure 1, after obtaining the full-text data of the 31 media outlets, I extracted articles that met the following two criteria: a) they were relevant to this study and the methodological approach—those on political, economic, and social issues, which was judged by the pages/sections they appear, and b) they cited intellectual or opinion sources. To be more specific, articles with keywords “professor” (教授), “researcher” (研究员), “economist” (经济学家), “political scientist” (政治学家), “sociologist” (社会学家), or “commentator” (评论员) in their full texts and appeared in sections of politics, economy, or social issues were extracted.

After the articles were selected, I implemented an algorithm to recognize names in Chinese characters<sup>4</sup> with the requirement that the names appeared within 10 characters of any of the aforementioned keywords. It should be noted that these names include non-Chinese experts whose names were transliterated into Chinese characters.<sup>5</sup> A large spreadsheet was then produced. Each row of the spreadsheet contained the following information: name cited, media title, article headline, article date, and the full sentence in which the name appeared. By keeping the article headlines and full quotations in the spreadsheet, I was able to identify the specific issues discussed and analyze the media outlets’ issue positions, which is to be discussed in detail later.

### *Data cleaning*

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<sup>4</sup> The Chinese model in Stanford Named Entity Recognizer (NER), see <https://nlp.stanford.edu/software/CRF-NER.shtml>.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Niall Ferguson was transliterated into 尼尔·弗格森 in Chinese media. The algorithm was able to identify these transliterated names.

After creating the large spreadsheet of “raw” data, I, with the help from three research assistants, cleaned the data by removing duplicates<sup>6</sup> and irrelevant quotes (see Appendix II for a detailed explanation on the data cleaning process), identified and marked different individuals with the same names, supplemented data on the individuals’ basic demographics (gender and nation of origin) and areas of specialization, and identified quotes that are used to criticize the intellectual’s view rather than endorsing it.<sup>7</sup>

The cleaned spreadsheet contained 47,476 entries and 8,710 individuals. In other words, 8,710 individual intellectual sources appeared one or more times in at least one of the 31 media outlets to provide their opinions, and the total amount of “appearances” was 47,476. Among the 31 media outlets, *Southern Metropolis Daily* quoted expert sources the most frequently, with a total amount of 3,731 times, while *Qiushi* quoted the least, with a total amount of 101 times. This is unsurprising, given the fact that *Southern Metropolis Daily* is one of the most successful commercial daily newspapers and literally the thickest paper with the most pages for a long time, while *Qiushi* is a biweekly magazine.

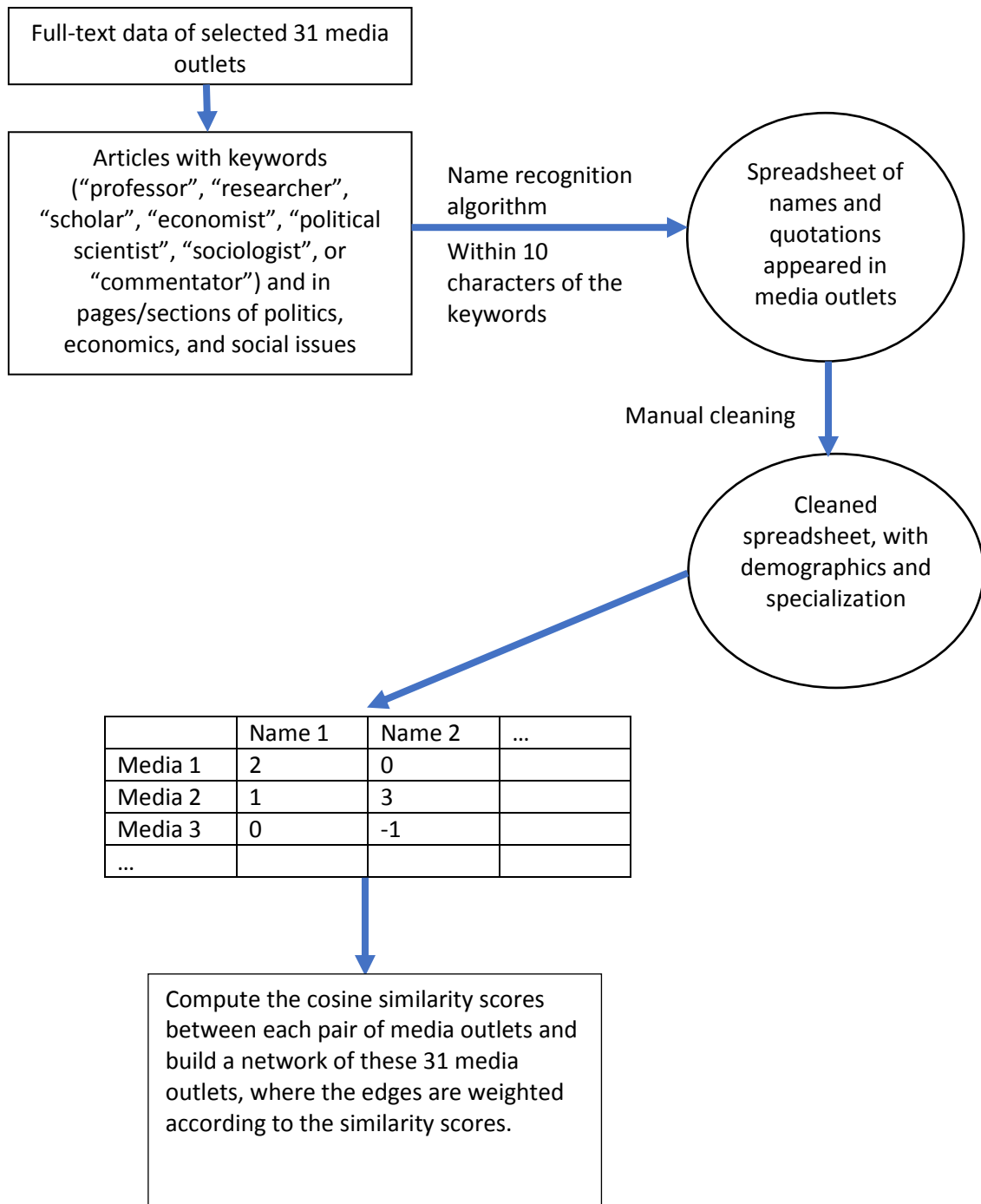
### *Counting the frequency*

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<sup>6</sup> One quotation might be picked up twice by two different keywords.

<sup>7</sup> For example, in an article on the South China Sea disputes published by *Southern Metropolis Daily* (<http://gcontent.oeeee.com/8/4c/84c578f202616448/Blog/eef/38fe8e.html>), Peter Brookes, Senior Fellow at the Heritage Foundation, was cited as an “anti-China” expert whose claim that China’s actions in the South China Sea negatively influenced global economy was “totally false and absurd;” in another article published by *Guancha.cn* ([https://www.guancha.cn/wen-yang/2012\\_08\\_21\\_92325.shtml](https://www.guancha.cn/wen-yang/2012_08_21_92325.shtml)), economists Mao Yushi (茅于軾) and Zhang Weiyong (张维迎) were quoted as examples of “economists who lack history lessons but love to talk about history” and who should not be trusted.

With the cleaned spreadsheet, I then created a  $31 \times 8,710$  table for the total frequency of each name appearing in each outlet (as shown in Figure 1). It should be noted that I used negative counts to denote the situations in which a media outlet cited a person in order to criticize him/her. These circumstances were rare yet existent. They included important information on the sourcing patterns of certain outlets.



**Figure 1 Quantitative data collection and analysis process**

### *Comparing similarity between each pair of outlets*

Next, using the  $31 \times 8,710$  table, I computed the cosine similarity scores between each pair of media outlets. Cosine similarity is “a measure of similarity between two vectors of an inner product space that measures the cosine of the angle between them” (Gomaa & Fahmy, 2013, p. 14) and is frequently used in comparing the content of two webpages. In the case of the current study, each media outlet could be seen as a vector of 8,710 values, each of which represented the frequency of a name appearing in that outlet. If two outlets had the exact same pattern of intellectual sourcing<sup>8</sup>, the cosine similarity score would be 1. If two outlets shared no source in common, the score would be 0. If every source cited by one outlet was criticized by the other, the score would be -1. In the current study, the similarity scores ranged from 0.006 (between *Guangzhou Daily* and *Qiushi*) to 0.798 (between *Nanfang Daily* and *Yangcheng Evening News*), with a mean of 0.227 and standard deviation of 0.185.

Another possible approach to quantifying the similarity between each pair of media outlets was to compute the total number of experts that co-appear in any pair of outlets. I did not take this approach for two reasons. First, as indicated above, the amount of stories in each outlet varies a lot. As a result, the thick newspaper *Southern Metropolis Daily* and other outlets that published more frequently would naturally have a bigger chance to have more co-appeared individual sources, even if their sourcing patterns were quite different.

The cosine similarity approach avoided this problem, for the score was only based on the

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<sup>8</sup> The same pattern could be: a) the two outlets had exact same sourcing frequency for each individuals, or b) the frequency for each individual in one outlet was proportional to that in the other outlet (e.g., the first outlet quoted individual A once, individual B twice, and others zero times, while the second outlet quoted individual A twice, individual B four times, and others zero times).

“angle” rather than the size of citations. Second, the negative counts denoting criticisms would play little role in this alternative approach, while cosine similarity score would fully make use of the information of negative counts.

Table 3 provides the summary statistics of the data.

**Table 3 Summary statistics of the data**

|   |  |
|---|--|
| Amount of media outlets                 | 31   |
| Amount of individual intellectuals      | 8,710  |
| Amount of quotes                        | 47,476   |
| Media outlet with the most quotes       | <i>Southern Metropolis Daily</i> (3,731 quotes)                                  |
| Media outlet with the fewest quotes     | <i>Qiushi</i> (101 quotes)   |
| Average amount of quotes                | 1,531  |
| Most similar pair of outlets            | <i>Nanfang Daily</i> and <i>Yangcheng Evening News</i> (similarity score: 0.798) |
| Most dissimilar pair of outlets         | <i>Qiushi</i> and <i>Guangzhou Daily</i> (similarity score: 0.006)               |
| Average of similarity scores            | 0.227  |
| Standard deviation of similarity scores | 0.185  |

### *Building the network*

I then built a network of these 31 media outlets, where the edges between each pair were weighted according to the similarity scores. I detected the community structure in this network in R, using the “fast and greedy” algorithm by Clauset, Newman, & Moore (2004). This algorithm is developed from a previous technique proposed by Newman (2004). It is based on the greedy optimization of modularity, which measures the strength of division of a network into clusters. If a network has a high modularity score, the nodes within the same cluster have dense connections, and those in different clusters have sparse connections (Newman, 2006). Therefore, a clearer community structure is identified as the algorithm optimizes modularity.

There are multiple community detection algorithms developed by previous studies, and I have run the four major ones available in the igraph package in R and compared their results, which are summarized in Table 4. It could be seen that the modularity scores are relatively low compared to the conventional standard (0.3-0.7, see Newman & Girvan, 2004). This is because the current network is a complete graph, where each pair of nodes is connected, and the only thing that differentiates the clusters of nodes is the weight of the edges. The modularity score is calculated in a way that it tends to be higher with communities detected in a sparse graph. Nonetheless, we could tell from the table that the fast and greedy algorithm and the Louvain algorithm (Blondel, Guillaume, Lambiotte, & Lefebvre, 2008) are performing better than the other two. The only difference in the community structures detected by the two better algorithms is that the central-level party newspaper *Economic Daily* is recognized in the cluster of other central-level party outlets by the fast and greedy algorithm, and in the cluster of provincial dailies by the Louvain algorithm. I chose fast and greedy because a) the modularity score it produced is slightly higher than the Louvain algorithm, and b) it makes more sense to see central-level party outlets in the same cluster rather than having a cluster of all provincial dailies plus a central-level newspaper. But it also suggests that the *Economic Daily*, which has more coverage on economy and business issues, might be somewhat different from other party outlets. I will discuss this more in the next chapter.

**Table 4 Comparing community detection algorithms**

| Community detection algorithm | Modularity score | Number of communities |
|-------------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Fast and greedy               | 0.083            | 3                     |
| Edge betweenness              | 0.050            | 6                     |



|          |       |   |
|----------|-------|---|
| Walktrap | 0.055 | 3 |
| Louvain  | 0.080 | 3 |

### *Qualitative interpretations*

So far the analysis was purely quantitative. After the communities were detected, however, additional qualitative interpretations were needed to decode the meanings of the communities identified by the algorithm. I examined and compared the background information (location, ownership, and hosting institution) of media outlets in each cluster, and investigated the “unique” sources in each cluster. Here “unique” means that such sources appear very frequently in one cluster, and rarely in other clusters. I closely read all the quotations by these sources, and summarized the major opinions expressed in these quotations following a thematic coding process (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### *Comparing Pre-Xi and Xi eras*

To answer the fourth and fifth research questions, I compared the community structure before Xi took power and that under his rule. More specifically, I divided the dataset (the large, cleaned spreadsheet) into two parts: the first part contained data in 2010 and 2012, and the second part for 2014 and 2016. I followed the same approach as introduced above to identify clusters in each of the two sub-datasets, and compare the amount of communities and the affiliation of the media outlets.

### *Examining issue attitudes*

Ideological bias is largely studied through the lens of issues. The common practice is to measure the subject’s stances on a set of key issues and then synthesize them into a one or more dimensional space. As Baldassarri and Gelman (2008) argue, however, people’s views are usually incoherent across issues, and their preferences on specific issues might not neatly fit into a coherent ideological space. This is likely to be especially true in nations such as China, which as noted in the previous chapter does not have a clear and easily captured ideological structure. To account for this, in this study I also examined the media outlets’ standpoints on 20 major issues, revealing a more comprehensive picture of the ideological landscape of Chinese media. The issues were selected by the following steps. First, I collected the issues examined in previous important studies on ideology in China (Lee, 2003; Pan & Xu, 2018; Wu, 2014; Wu & Meng, 2016). Second, during the in-depth interviews with experienced media professionals in China, to be introduced in the next section, I asked them to tell if these issues were truly heavily covered in Chinese media. Those that were not significantly present were dropped. I also asked them to provide their selections of additional important issues. Third, I also identified additional issues through the above-mentioned qualitative reading of the quotations. The final selection of the issues is shown in Table 5.

**Table 5 List of issues and corresponding keywords**

| <b>Category</b> | <b>Issues</b>               | <b>Keywords</b>   |
|-----------------|-----------------------------|---|
| Political       | Adherence to party ideology | 马克思主义 (Marxism), 马列主义 (Marxism–Leninism), 毛泽东思想 (Mao Zedong Thought), 邓小平理论 (Deng Xiaoping Theory), 三个代表 (Three Represents), 和谐社会 (Harmonious Society), 中国特色社会主义 (Socialism with Chinese characteristics), 习近平思想 (Xi Jinping Thought), 新时代 (Socialism with Chinese Characteristics) |

|          |  |  |
|----------|--|--|
|          |  | for a New Era), 中国梦 (The Chinese Dream)  |
|          | The “China Model” (as compared with Western liberal democracy) | 中国模式 (the China Model), 中国崛起 (the rise of China), 中国道路 (the Chinese road), 道路自信 (confidence in the path), 理论自信 (confidence in theories), 制度自信 (confidence in system of socialism with Chinese characteristics), 三个自信 (three matters of confidence), 中国经济模式 (China’s economic model), 北京共识 (Beijing Consensus), 西方民主 (Western democracy), 美式民主 (American-style democracy) |
|          | Sovereignty and territorial integrity                          | 南海 (South China Sea), 仲裁 (South China Sea Arbitration), 钓鱼岛 (Diaoyu Island), 台独 (Taiwan independence), 台湾问题 (Taiwan issue), 藏独 (Tibet independence), 西藏问题 (Tibet issue), 疆独 (Xinjiang independence), 新疆问题 (Xinjiang issue), 互联网主权 (Internet sovereignty), 占中 (Occupy Movement), 港独 (Hong Kong independence)  |
|          | China’s international presence                                 | 中国威胁论 (China threat theory), 和平崛起 (peaceful rise), 上合组织 (Shanghai Cooperation Organization), 一带一路 (One Belt One Road Initiative), 中日关系 (China-Japan relations), 中美关系 (China-U.S. relations), 中欧关系 (China-Europe relations), 中非关系 (China-Africa relations)  |
|          | Corruption   | 反腐 (anti-corruption), 廉政 (clean government), 公务接待 (official receptions), 八项规定 (an eight-point code to cut bureaucracy and maintain close ties with the people), 老虎苍蝇 (tigers and flies, referring to high-level corruptions and low-level corruptions)   |
|          | Government accountability                                      | 治理 (governance), 公众监督 (public oversight), 舆论监督 (supervision by public opinion), 监督政府 (holding government accountable)  |
|          | Rule of law  | 法治 (rule of law), 法制 (rule by law), 依法治国 (law-based governance of the country), 司法 (judiciary), 审判 (trial), 案件 (cases), 诉讼 (lawsuits), 宪法 (constitution), 刑讯逼供 (extorting a confession), 程序正义 (procedural justice)   |
|          | Social conflicts   | 社会矛盾 (social conflicts), 社会稳定 (social stability), 社会管理 (social management), 维稳 (maintaining social stability), 上访 (petition), 信访 (complaint), 群体性事件 (mass incidents)   |
|          | Civil society  | 公民社会 (civil society), 公益 (public service), 慈善 (charity), NGO, 社会组织 (social organizations)  |
| Economic | The role of the government in                                  | 市场经济 (market economy), 市场作用 (the functions of the market), 政府干预 (government intervention), 大政府 (big government), 小政  |

|                     |  |   |
|---------------------|--|---|
|                     | economy, the extent of state intervention        | 府 (small government), 政府退后 (government stepping back), 民间金融 (private finance)   |
|                     | State-owned and private enterprises              | 国有企业 (state-owned enterprises), 垄断国企 (state-owned monopoly), 民营企业 (private enterprises), 民企 (short for private enterprises)   |
|                     | Tax and income distribution (state vs. citizens) | 收入分配 (income distribution), 财政收入 (government revenue), 居民收入 (resident income), 民富 (fortune of citizens), 税负 (tax burden), 减税 (tax cut), 偷税漏税 (tax evasion)  |
|                     | Inequality (rich vs. poor)                       | 贫富差距 (the gap between rich and poor), 城乡差距 (urban-rural gap), 基尼系数 (Gini coefficient), 农村 (rural), 寒门 (poor family background), 分配不均 (uneven distribution)  |
|                     | Housing price regulation                         | 房地产 (real estate), 房价 (housing price), 限价 (price limit), 楼市 (property market), 买房 (buying a property)   |
|                     | Interpretation of key economic statistics        | 经济数据 (economic statistics), GDP (Gross Domestic Product), CPI (Consumer Price Index), PMI (Purchasing Managers Index), 上证指数 (SSE Composite Index), 深圳成指 (SZSE Component Index)  |
|                     | Currency   | 人民币 (Renminbi), 汇率 (currency)   |
| Social and Cultural | Gender equality                                  | 性别 (gender), 性教育 (sex education), 男孩危机 (crisis of boys), 家暴 (domestic violence), 性侵 (sexual abuse), 性骚扰 (sexual harassment), 男女平等 (equality between men and women), 性别平等 (gender equality), 女权 (feminism), 同性恋 (homosexual) |
|                     | One-child policy                                 | 计划生育 (one-child policy), 二胎/二孩 (second child)   |
|                     | Environmental protection                         | 环保 (environmental protection), 资源 (resources), 能源 (energy), 污染 (pollution), 雾霾 (smog), 全球变暖 (global warming), 气候变化 (climate change), 碳排放 (carbon emissions)   |
|                     | Traditional culture                              | 传统文化 (traditional culture), 文化自信 (confidence in culture), 儒家 (Confucian School), 儒学 (Confucianism), 国学 (Sinology)   |

Table 5 also lists the corresponding keywords for each issue. To examine the ideological positions of the 31 news outlets on these 20 issues, I extracted 20 issue-specific sub-datasets from the large, cleaned spreadsheet by keyword searching in the quotations and the headlines of the articles. I then followed a similar approach explained above to map

the network of the outlets on each issue and detect the community structure of each issue-specific network. The detailed results are presented in Chapter 4.

### *Measuring structural bias*

The process discussed above is used to measure the ideological dimension of media bias, with the assumption that intellectuals are providing ideological opinions on political and social issues. For measuring the structural bias, I rely on the data of mentions of top political leaders from both the national and provincial levels. Previous studies suggest that the relative amount of space devoted by media outlets to political actors is a strong indicator of structural power (e.g., Ban, Fournaies, Hall, & Snyder, 2018; Jaros & Pan, 2018). More specifically, on the national level, I include all 25 members the Central Politburo of the Communist Party of China, who are the most powerful persons in the ruling party. On the provincial level, I include the provincial party standing committee members (11-13 members in each province) of the provinces where the selected outlets are based. Leaders before and after the leadership transition are all included<sup>9</sup>. I calculate the frequencies (in proportion to the total amount of articles of each outlet) of these media outlets mentioning the top leaders to analyze their structural bias. It should be noted that due to censorship, it is very unlikely for news media in China to mention top leaders for the purpose of criticizing them. To distance themselves from the party-state, the most probable strategy for media outlets is to avoid mentioning the top leaders.

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<sup>9</sup> For example, after the leadership transition at the first plenary session of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 10 members of the previous Central Politburo remained, while the other 15 retired. Therefore, a total of 40 Central Politburo members were included in the study. The total amount of top national and provincial political leaders in the study was 192.

Overall, the methodological approach adopted in this study has several advantages. First, it covers a fairly large number of media outlets in China, thus giving a relatively comprehensive picture of Chinese media. Previous studies usually choose less than 10, or even less than 5 outlets (e.g., Wang, Sparks, Lü, et al., 2017) and face challenges in claiming any generalizing statements based on the limited sample size. Second, by synthesizing quantitative and qualitative methods, this study is inherently bottom-up and data-driven, rather than presuming any structure of the ideological landscape. It avoids the problem of predefining the landscape which is not escapable in survey research. Third, the major part of the analysis is done by automatic rather than manual coding. It largely avoids subjective decisions and provides more reliable findings.

### **In-depth Interviews as Supplementary Data**

In addition to the analysis based on media content, I also conducted in-depth interviews with experienced media professionals in China to supplement the investigation. The interviews mainly serve two goals. First, it provides evidence on whether this “follow the sources” approach works in the Chinese context. If journalists do consider the ideological alignment in selecting intellectual interviewees, the above-mentioned methodological approach would be valid. Second, it provided expert assistance regarding the major issues and the standpoints of news outlets in the Chinese context, which facilitates my qualitative interpretation of content and the analysis of key issues.

I conducted the interviews in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou from August to December 2017, with some follow-ups in late 2018. There were 32 interviewees in total, 18 of whom were reporters or editors (with more than 3 years’ journalistic experience) at the

31 news outlets in the sample. The remaining 14 interviewees held management positions (chief editors, deputy chief editors, executive editors, managers, etc.) at those outlets. I managed to include interviewees from newspapers, magazines, broadcasting, and digital outlets, and also covered both national and provincial media in the interviews. To protect the identity of the interviewees, I use numerical coding to replace their names.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face in cafes chosen by the interviewees. The length of the interviews ranged from 1 to 2 hours. During these semi-structured interviews, I mainly asked questions on the following topics: their working routine, especially their sourcing practices; the factors determining the choice of certain sources; their relationships with expert sources; their perceptions of media bias in China; their perceptions of the bias of the media they worked for; the key issues heavily covered and discussed in Chinese media; and the standpoints of representative media outlets on those issues.

I used Mandarin in the interviews, and the recordings were transcribed by myself in Chinese, except for 3 cases in which the interviewees preferred not to be recorded. In those cases, I made written notes during the interviews. In analyzing the interview data, I used the NVivo software and followed a thematic coding approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify the common themes in the interviews. In order for additional themes to emerge from the transcripts, I also followed the open coding method during the analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Overall, the mixed methods introduced in this chapter are suitable for the exploratory nature of this project, allowing for a bottom-up, inductive process in identifying patterns and interpreting findings, while also maintaining the rigor and validity

of the analysis. It is built on a combination of large volume quantitative data and in-depth qualitative data. In the following chapters, I will present the findings produced by this methodological approach.



## CHAPTER 3. The Landscape

In this chapter, I present the findings on the overall landscape of media bias in China.

Before going into the details of the network and clusters of news outlets, I discuss Chinese journalists' practices in expert sourcing based on the in-depth interviews. The findings generally validate the approach of measuring media bias by patterns of expert sourcing. I then introduce the network structure and the clusters of the ideological landscape of Chinese media, followed by the comparison between the pre-Xi Jinping era and the Xi era. In the last section of this chapter, I turn to the findings on the structural bias of Chinese media as measured by mentions of top political leaders.

### **How Chinese Journalists Cite Intellectuals for Opinions**

As discussed in the previous chapter, I argue that sources make the news (O'Neill & O'Connor, 2008). One central practice in this profession, then, is to choose from the seemingly endless options of potential sources. To use Carlson's (2009) words, "the external world is a world of potential sources harboring individual interpretations of reality. Yet... not all individuals stand the same chance of being called upon as a source" (p. 527).

There are generally two types of sources, who serve distinct purposes in journalism. The first type is sources providing factual information and evidence for news stories. They are directly or indirectly involved in the stories, or at least could provide some relevant or background information as a witness or observer. The choice of this type of sources is usually quite straightforward and based on relevance and access, though there are still problems such as the tendency of favoring elite and official sources over other interested

parties in the stories (Bennett, 1990). The second type of sources is those who provide opinionated information including interpretation, explanation, and viewpoints. As scholars have argued, news reporting during recent decades has put increasing emphasis on interpretative journalism, which has “increased journalists’ need to consult experts for assistance in interpreting and explaining the news” (Albæk, 2011, p. 338). While factual information sources are relatively objective, interpretations and explanations unavoidably bring more subjective appraisals into news stories. And the decision of choosing which experts to interview is not only based on relevance and access, but also about ideological alignment. As an interviewee working for a provincial newspaper said,

“There are usually dozens or even hundreds of experts on a specific topic we cover. Any one of them will do the job of interpreting the factual information, so the choice is really based on two factors: whether we can get in touch with them, and whether they want to talk with us. And these two factors could further be summarized into one sentence: whether we have good collaboration. And one crucial part of good collaboration is that we should share similar values (价值观).”<sup>10</sup>

The prerequisite for a source to “share similar values” with the news outlet is practiced at both the individual journalist level and the organizational level, echoing previous studies on the different levels of influence on news making (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Sigelman, 1973; Voakes, 1997). For the former, several journalists mentioned in my interviews that they personally would never call certain experts to solicit their opinions.

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<sup>10</sup> Interview 6.

One journalist working at a national commercial media said that he would “never give the platform of our media outlet to those nationalistic voices.”<sup>11</sup> For the latter, two interviewees recalled instances during their early years of their journalistic careers when their initial choices of expert sources were rejected by the editors, who cited “ideological incongruence” as the main reason.<sup>12</sup>

This is not to say that ideological congruence is always a major factor in “screening” potential expert sources. Many interviewees, especially those working for daily newspapers, acknowledged that the fast news cycle often left them with no time to carefully and strategically choose expert sources. The decisions are largely pragmatic, i.e., calling those who have been in their contact lists for a long time and have already frequently appeared in their outlets. The majority of my interviewees mentioned that there were internally shared contact lists of experts who were long-time “collaborators.” But again, one essential factor in establishing such collaborations is the alignment in terms of ideological positions.

To implement “sharing similar values” as an important criteria in selecting expert sources, one has to know the values held by both the media outlet and the sources. In my interviews, journalists were generally aware of the standpoints of their media outlets—at least on the issues they covered, and were also familiar with the opinions of major experts in their areas. For example, a journalist at a commercial magazine covering legal affairs shared that “we are always promoting the idea of judicial independence and I know almost all of the major legal scholars who are willing to openly advance this idea in the

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<sup>11</sup> Interview 2.

<sup>12</sup> Interviews 3 and 17.

interviews.”<sup>13</sup> The sourcing practice essentially becomes a confirmation process rather than the discovery of new opinions. This is in line with arguments in previous literature that journalists seek for “compensatory legitimacy” from experts—to confirm the opinions, interpretations, and conclusions that they themselves have already formed (Albæk, 2011; Weiler, 1983). Albæk (2011) also finds that in about half of the cases, the framing of a news article has already been settled before journalists actually begin contacting experts. This phenomenon is also confirmed in my interviews. The aforementioned legal affairs journalist suggested that in most of the cases, he had estimations on the opinions that scholars would provide. “I prefer reaching out to the ones that are likely to provide comments that I am looking for, and in most of the cases, I do get what I want.”<sup>14</sup> Another example is that a business journalist at a provincial daily shared in my interview that among the multiple interviewees for one story, she almost always chose to contact the expert interviewees the last, after she decided on the general structure and orientation of the story. She claimed that “experts are often like the icing on the cake (锦上添花), and I know which ones to choose for each story.”<sup>15</sup>

One possible challenge to this sourcing practice is the norms on objectivity, balance, and opinion diversity in journalism, which are also honored in China as in Western countries. However, as previous studies suggest, journalists often find ways to ostensibly comply with the norms without changing their ideological preferences. For example, scholars find that “adherence to balance and diversity norms was limited to half a sentence

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<sup>13</sup> Interview 16.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Interview 32.

noting that someone disagreed,” and that “most uses of second viewpoint did little to achieve a balanced presentation” (Tenenboim-Weinblatt & Baden, 2018, p. 491). In my interviews, one journalist working for an online publication called it “a trick that every journalist knows about”: “Yes, you need to appear to be objective and balanced, but you can always implicitly show your preference by adjusting the ratio of agree/disagree. For instance, you can cite three experts that you agree with, and only one you don’t agree with. And of course, you can begin with quoting the one you disagree with, and then go on with ‘but...’.”<sup>16</sup> This “trick” echoes Baden & Tenenboim-Weinblatt’s (2018) finding that journalists could add positioning on quoted viewpoints to “endorse, distance, question, or even discredit the source’s frame” (p. 155). My interviews also suggest that at daily newspapers, there is little pressure on citing more than one expert source. As a journalist said, “our article is very short, and one expert to provide his or her opinion is usually enough.”<sup>17</sup>

I also considered two other questions regarding the expert sourcing practice. The first is that: do experts have consistent points of view? In the interviews, journalists generally agree that it is highly unlikely for experts to express very different opinions to different media outlets or at different times. “They might adjust the wording a little bit, depending on the context and the nature of the publication,” shared one journalist who keeps close connections with dozens of scholars, “but the major ideas are very difficult to change.”<sup>18</sup> The second is that: what if the experts themselves are in charge? Although in

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<sup>16</sup> Interview 22.

<sup>17</sup> Interview 1.

<sup>18</sup> Interview 19.

some rare cases, scholars take the lead to contact journalists and pitch stories, the overwhelming consensus among my interviewees is that it's usually the journalists who take the initiatives. This also confirms Albæk's (2011) study on the relationship between journalists and expert sources, which finds that only in 1-2% of the cases, the contact comes as the result of initiatives taken by the experts.

So far, we have discussed the expert sourcing practices of Chinese journalists that are also true for Western journalists. My interviews also reveal some elements unique to the Chinese context, and perhaps also to other authoritarian contexts. The first is the government-enforced "blacklists" that prevent certain outspoken intellectuals from appearing in news outlets. The interviewees suggest that such blacklists are usually communicated orally from the propaganda department to the editors, for fear that any written orders might be leaked and make the government look bad. The lists, according to my interviewees, has grown significantly longer under Xi Jinping's rule. The media outlets overwhelmingly choose to comply with the blacklists, because otherwise the editors will be punished or even lose their jobs. Because of the secret nature of such lists, it is not feasible to get the full list of banned names. However, as I will discuss in the following sections, the data could reveal some names that disappeared after 2012. Some banned names mentioned during the interviews include He Weifang (贺卫方), a Peking University law professor who is also an activist promoting judicial system reform and a prominent advocator for human rights and constitutionalism, Leung Man-tao (梁文道), a Hong Kong writer, host, and critic who writes extensively on social and cultural issues, and Xu Zhiyuan (许知远), a Beijing-based writer and former journalist. It should be noted that

ensorship in China is a fragmented system (Roberts, 2018; Shambaugh, 2007), so these blacklists are not necessarily in effect in every province. In addition, journalists could occasionally circumvent censorship by creative means such as using a pseudonym. For example, in October 2016, *Southern Weekly* published a piece on “Why corrupted officials like to get a law degree”<sup>19</sup>, in which a Peking University law professor named “Zhu Shouzheng (祝守正)” was quoted intensively. My interview with a *Southern Weekly* editor reveals that this is in fact a pseudonym for the blacklisted professor He Weifang<sup>20</sup>. The battle on which intellectuals to quote shows that expert sourcing is indeed an important way of showing ideological orientations. By preventing certain experts from being interviewed, the blacklisting practice influences the ideological bias as reflected in media content, and such influences could be detected by the methodological approach adopted in this study.

The second unique phenomenon is the so-called “imperiallly-appointed scholars” (御用学者), which refers to experts who are recognized, approved, and arranged by the party-state to express pro-government opinions in news media. Such opinions could push the ideological and structural bias of media content in a more pro-government direction. These scholars usually hold titles that are the same as others, such as university professors or think tank researchers. In fact, there is no clear line between “imperiallly-appointed scholars” and “non-imperiallly-appointed scholars.” It is more a matter of distance to the

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.infzm.com/content/120505>.

<sup>20</sup> Sensitive readers might be able to decode the pseudonym. The Chinese characters “贺卫方” and “祝守正” can be considered as a “couplet.” 贺 and 祝 both mean congratulating. 卫 and 守 both mean guarding. 方 and 正 Both mean square.

party-state. A scholar would be perceived as “imperiallly-appointed” if he or she becomes too close to the authorities, and promotes the pro-government opinions too blatantly. This group also appears in party media more often than in commercial media. My interviews suggest that there is a more or less vague consensus among journalists on who are the “imperiallly-appointed” ones. As will be discussed in the following sections, data from the current study do suggest the growing influence of a group of experts that could arguably be labelled as “imperiallly-appointed.” It also demonstrates that expert voices play a vital role in shaping the ideology embedded in news stories.

In sum, the interview findings discussed above support the idea of measuring the patterns of intellectual sourcing as a valid method to study media bias in China. Next, I will present the major findings on the overall ideological landscape of Chinese media.

### **The Ideological Landscape based on Intellectual Sourcing**

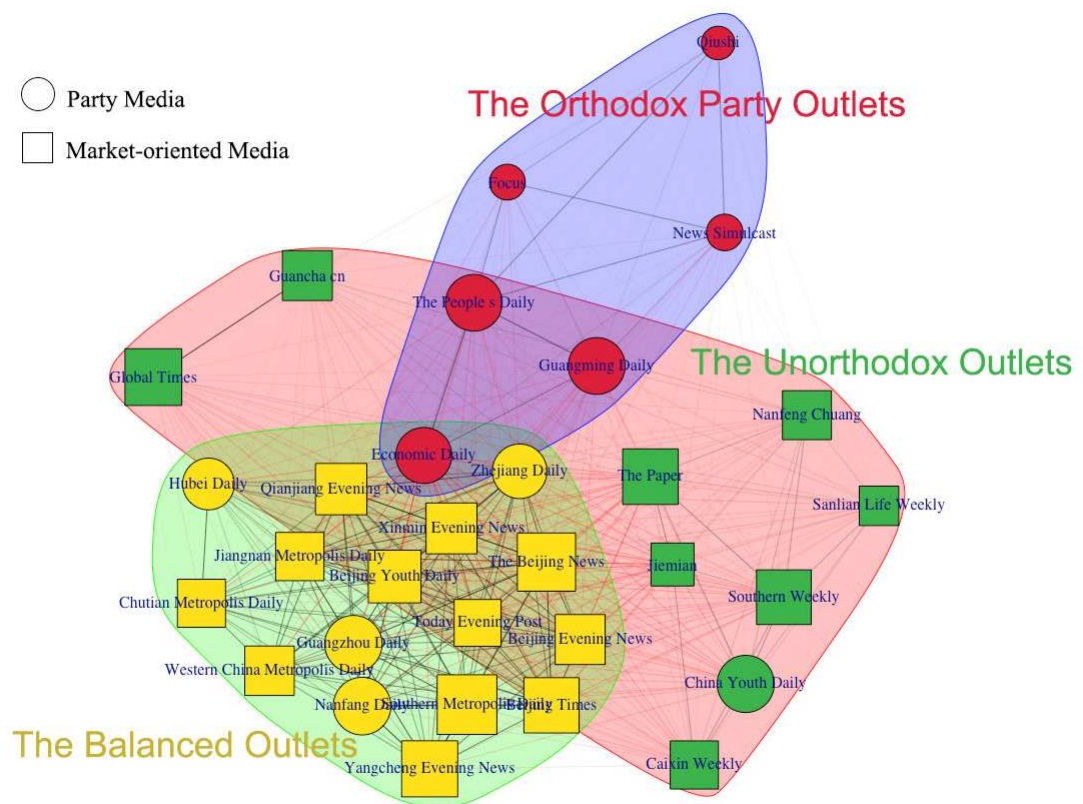
In this section, I examine the network structure and ideological clusters of media outlets based on the full dataset of 31 publications in 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2016. The network is visualized by the igraph package in R as in Figure 2, where the size of the nodes are proportional to the log-transformed amount of expert citations in each outlet<sup>21</sup>, the shape of the nodes represents the type of the outlets (circle denotes party media, and square denotes market-oriented media), and the edges are weighted according to the cosine similarity scores between each pair of outlets. Three clusters have been identified by the community detection algorithm introduced in Chapter 2 and are visualized in different colors. I named

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<sup>21</sup> As mentioned in Chapter 2, the largest node is *Southern Metropolis Daily*, which quoted expert sources for a total amount of 3,731 times, while the smallest node is *Qiushi*, with a total amount of 101 quotations.



the clusters based on my qualitative interpretation of the nature and content of publications in each cluster. One immediately noticeable finding is that the network is not structured along the party media/commercial media divide, thus defying the convenient presumption made in most of previous studies that the ideological bias of Chinese media is rooted in the party/commercial divide. Next, I go into the details of each cluster in this network graph.



**Figure 2 The ideological landscape of Chinese media (2010, 2012, 2014 and 2016)**

Note: the size of the nodes are proportional to the log-transformed amount of expert citations in each outlet.

*The Orthodox Party Outlets*

Let us begin with the cluster with the fewest publications, which are uniformly party media, as shown in red in Figure 2. I call them “orthodox party outlets” for two reasons. First, this cluster covers all of the four print publications affiliated with the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and two primetime television news programs on the primary channel of China Central Television (CCTV) that are largely dedicated to state propaganda. *The People’s Daily* is the official newspaper of the party’s Central Committee and is known as the major channel for the party’s voice. Its president and editor-in-chief are appointed by the party directly through the *nomenklatura* system (Hassid, 2008; Truex, 2016) and are on the provincial-ministerial level in the political ranking system. The current president, Li Baoshan, is also a member of the 19<sup>th</sup> Central Commission for Discipline Inspection of the Communist Party of China, a position that could only be filled by party members at very high rankings, usually among the top few hundred. Both *Guangming Daily* and *Economic Daily* are also directly under the party’s Central Committee and respectively have their target audiences among intellectuals and people in the economic sector. They have slightly lower status inside the party, with their presidents and editors-in-chief at the vice provincial-ministerial level. *Qiushi* is the only magazine of the party’s Central Committee. Its major mission, according to its official website, is to “publicize the governing philosophy” of the party through the coverage of “political, economic, cultural and social issues” as well as “analysis of world politics and China’s foreign relations.”<sup>22</sup> Its president also ranks at the vice provincial-ministerial level. In terms of broadcasting, CCTV is the state television broadcaster, whose president is at the

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<sup>22</sup> See [http://english.qstheory.cn/about/201109/t20110919\\_110860.htm](http://english.qstheory.cn/about/201109/t20110919_110860.htm).

vice provincial-ministerial level in the party cadre system. News Simulcast (Xinwen Lianbo) is the daily news program aired at 7 pm and boasts to be one of the most-watched programs around the globe, mainly thanks to the state requirement that all local television stations in China have to air this program simultaneously every day. News Simulcast enjoys unparalleled political significance among television news programs and is widely regarded as a “mirror” or “barometer” of politics in China (Chang & Ren, 2016). Another primetime news program, aired immediately after News Simulcast, is Focus (*Jiaodian Fangtan*). Combining news and commentary, this program originally focused on investigative journalism in the 1990s but changed to propaganda content during recent years. Previous studies suggest that, even in its peak years, Focus remained “conservative in its subtle and cautious control of the frequency, timing, level, and content of the criticism” (Chan, 2002, p. 35) and did not give voice to different political perspectives (Zhang, 2006). It’s not surprising to see that it falls in the same cluster as News Simulcast.

Notably, there are two important official media organizations that are not included in my sample. The first is Xinhua News Agency, which is affiliated with the State Council of China and enjoys a provincial-ministerial level ranking. However, due to its nature as a news agency, it is difficult to collect the full-text data for its enormous daily wire news. The other important official media is the *People's Liberation Army Daily*, the official newspaper of the army, which is under the total control of the party. Unfortunately, there was no available full-text data of this newspaper. My hypothesis is that these two media organizations would also fall in this “orthodox party outlets” category. Future studies could test this speculation if data become available.

The second reason why I named this cluster “orthodox party outlets” is based on the analysis of content, i.e., the “unique” experts quoted intensively by these publications but not by those in the other clusters, as well as their major viewpoints. I compared the frequency for each expert source to appear in this cluster with the frequency to appear in the other two clusters, and divided the former by the latter<sup>23</sup>. The larger the quotient is, the more “unique” a source is for this “orthodox party outlets” cluster. The five most unique sources include: a researcher in the Research Center on the Theoretical System of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, who argues for the “superiority” of the guiding thoughts of the Communist Party of China, and explains why the party can rule the country for a long time<sup>24</sup>; a professor at the Central Party School and researcher affiliated with the School’s Research Center on the Theoretical System of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, who introduces the theories built by the Communist Party, how they have been developed over time, and why it’s important to study and follow those theories; a professor in the Research Center on Marxism at the National Defense University of People’s Liberation Army, who interprets the top leaders’ thoughts and policies, with a focus on the party’s guidelines on military development; a researcher in the Department of Philosophy at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, who discusses the theoretical foundations of state policies; and a professor at Fudan University’s School of International Relations and Public Affairs and researcher affiliated with the University’s China Institute, who explains why the Chinese political

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<sup>23</sup> I excluded the non-frequent sources that only appeared on or two times in this cluster and never appeared in the other two clusters.

<sup>24</sup> In this dissertation, the names of some Chinese experts are anonymized to protect their confidentiality.

system is actually democratic and why it is more suitable for China than American-style democracy. As we could see from this list, the intellectual sources that connect these six outlets and separate them from the other two clusters are mostly scholars working at the institutions whose primary goal is to promote party ideology and state policies. These institutions usually include “Marxism” or “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” in their names, and are often considered the most heavily politically-controlled and most “sensitive” institutions in universities. As one journalist working at a central party newspaper shared in the interview, “researchers at those institutions are largely considered official mouthpieces, or the so-called ‘imperial-appointed scholars.’ Their appearance in media are usually arranged by the party to interpret the policies, argue for the smartness and timeliness of the policies, and promote a positive image of the party.”<sup>25</sup> A journalist at a commercial publication told me that he seldom interviews this group of intellectuals unless being required by the propaganda government, because their opinions are usually “purely propaganda”.<sup>26</sup>

One interesting thing to note for this “orthodox party outlets” cluster is that, as can be seen in Figure 2, *Economic Daily* has almost “drifted away” from the other five outlets and is quite close to the cluster of “Balanced Outlets.” A close look at the data suggests that this is largely due to the fact that the official party newspapers’ sourcing patterns on economic issues is close to that of commercial papers. Since *Economic Daily* has a larger portion of content on economic issues, it tends to be somewhat dissimilar from other

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<sup>25</sup> Interview 11.

<sup>26</sup> Interview 4.

“orthodox party outlets.” Chapter 4 will present detailed findings on sourcing patterns in different issue areas.

### *The Balanced Outlets*

We now turn to the largest cluster in the network graph—“the balanced outlets” which consists of 16 publications. This cluster is uniform in the sense that the publications are all provincial or municipal-level daily newspapers, but also quite mixed in terms of the official/commercial nature: 4 party newspapers and 12 market-oriented ones. The fact that provincial/municipal party and commercial newspapers are very similar in terms of intellectual sourcing is the most important finding in this cluster. This is surprising because scholars and observers have long taken the official/commercial divide as the key factor in shaping the landscape of Chinese media, with the assumption that party newspapers align closely with the party ideology, while commercial newspapers enjoy more freedom and are more critical towards the party-state. However, this finding is not entirely unprecedented, for a few previous studies have suggested similar results.

The most important previous study is in Daniela Stockmann’s (2013) seminal book *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China*. She conducted content analysis of provincial newspapers on two cases: news coverage on the National Labor Law and on the United States. For the former case, she finds that although commercial newspapers (*Chongqing Times* in this case) tends to offer “a more critical evaluation of state policies, a more realistic portrayal of the law, and a positive relationship with companies” than party newspapers (*The People’s Daily* and *Chongqing Daily* in this case), both types of newspapers are actually quite similar in terms of the “core political message,”

which is to portray the law in a positive light without challenging the legal system or exposing its weaknesses (pp. 109-111). For the latter case, the same pattern is also identified—although party newspapers (*The People's Daily* in this case) describe the United States consistently more positively than commercial newspapers (*Beijing Evening News* in the case) even on cases such as the war in Iraq, the difference is “small and subtle” and the overall tones are “fairly uniform” (pp. 126-128). It should be noted that here Stockmann compares the provincial commercial newspaper with the national *The People's Daily* rather than the provincial *Beijing Daily*. It is possible that, based on the findings of the current study, such “small and subtle” differences would become insignificant if we compare party and commercial newspapers on the provincial/municipal level.

Similarly, in economist Han Yuan's (2016) study on media bias in China based on the patterns of most frequently used words, he also finds that provincial/municipal level party and commercial newspapers are very close on the spectrum. For example, Shanghai's *Liberation Daily* (party newspaper) and *Oriental Morning Post* (commercial newspaper) are similar to each other according to Yuan's measurement. The same is true for the pair of Jilin province's *Jilin Daily* (party newspaper) and *New Wenhua Post* (commercial newspaper), and Guangdong province's *Yangcheng Evening News* (party newspaper) and *Southern Metropolis Daily* (commercial newspaper).

Why are the ideological orientations as reflected in news content in party and commercial newspapers quite uniform? Stockmann's (2013) insightful argument is that even on issues that are considered to be open for different perspectives, commercial newspapers still choose to stay close to state policies due to audience demands, which usually converge with state policies. In other words, commercial newspapers do not

provide dissident opinions because readers do not really expect “political messages that differ strongly from those of official papers” (p. 153). While her analysis is rigorous and convincing, here I provide some complementary arguments based on the systematic analysis of expert sourcing practices rather than individual case studies.

As suggested by the in-depth interviews with journalists and media executives, provincial daily newspapers, no matter party or commercial, follow similar work routines. They tend to cover similar issues, with the exception that party newspapers are required to devote a few pages to the activities of national and provincial political leaders. Their news articles are about the same length, following the similar format, and tend to feature the voices of experts who are “middle of the road.” One journalist working at a provincial commercial newspaper shared in the interview that, “As compared to the weekly newspapers and magazines, we don’t do in-depth investigations and rarely present controversial or radical opinions. We focus on providing daily updates on events that could be easily and quickly digested by readers, so I prefer to interview experts who could offer some quick interpretations that would be accepted by most of our readers.”<sup>27</sup> This confirms the “audience demand” argument by Stockmann, and also adds another layer regarding the nature and work routines of daily newspapers to the explanations.

Although opinions featured in provincial/municipal daily newspapers tend to be less extreme, they cover a diverse range of issues, and their stances on the issues cannot be easily summarized in one word. That’s why I call this cluster of media outlets “the balanced outlets.” As will be elaborated in the next chapter, this cluster of publications is

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<sup>27</sup> Interview 10.



present on every major issue, and could be described as: pro-market on most economic issues; nationalistic in terms of foreign affairs; culturally both cosmopolitan (in terms of focusing on middle class tastes) and conservative (in terms of highlighting Chinese traditional culture); etc. Regarding the amount of coverage, however, the overwhelming focus is in economic and financial areas. The most “unique” sources of this cluster, calculated in the same way as explained in the previous section, are: chief economist at Industrial Bank Lu Zhengwei (鲁政委) and chief economist at Bank of Communications Lian Ping (连平), both of whom frequently interprets economic figures such as GDP and CPI, and predicts the future of China’s economy in a way that is positive but not exaggerating way; Wang Tao (汪涛), chief economist of the Swiss UBS Securities’ China branch, who mainly interprets currency rate changes and other issues of Chinese economy from a global perspective; Wang Yukai (汪玉凯), a professor at the China National School of Administration, who comments on government issues and policies from an administrative and de-politicized perspective; Ba Shusong (巴曙松), Deputy Director-General of the Financial Research Institute at the Development Research Center of the State Council, who mainly provides opinions on the financial and real-estate markets.

Taking a closer look at this cluster, we notice the factor of locality at play. Newspapers in the same province tend to have high cosine similarity scores. For example, the scores between each pair among *Nanfang Daily* (party newspaper), *Southern Metropolis Daily* (commercial newspaper), and *Yangcheng Evening News* (party newspaper), all of which are Guangdong’s provincial level papers, are above 0.7. Similarly,

Beijing's *Beijing Youth Daily*, *The Beijing News*, *Beijing Evening News*, and *Beijing Times* are close to each other. The same holds true for Zhejiang's *Zhejiang Daily* and *Qianjiang Evening News*. One possible explanation is that these daily newspapers tend to interview experts in their own provinces. However, an analysis on the affiliation of the cited expert sources in these dailies reveals that newspapers in Guangdong are not significantly more likely to cite Guangdong experts than newspapers in other provinces ( $p > 0.05$ ). The same pattern is also seen in the sourcing patterns for experts in Beijing and Zhejiang. The influence of locality on media orientations in China has been discussed in case studies in the works by Lee et al. (2007) and Lei (2016). The current project supports their conclusion in a more systematic way.

Following the discussion on media locality, one question that remains to be answered: what about newspapers in less developed and more politically sensitive provinces such as Tibet and Xinjiang? In this study, I did not include provincial dailies from those areas because they had smaller circulations. It is highly likely that party dailies and commercial dailies in those areas share similar ideological orientations, but they might be quite different from provincial dailies in more developed areas such as the coastal Zhejiang province. Future studies could further explore this issue by including media outlets from less developed and more politically sensitive areas, and potentially identify more diversity among provincial and municipal level daily newspapers based in different areas in China.

One thing to note is that the “blending” of party and commercial outlets only applies to provincial and municipal dailies. It would be wrong to suggest that the divide between party and commercial media does not exist at all. Outside the group of provincial

dailies, there is still divide between party and commercial publications. As could be seen in Figure 2, “orthodox party outlets,” which mainly consists of central-level party media outlets, are very different from commercial outlets. Provincial dailies are also different from other types of commercial media and certain type of central-level party media, which are to be discussed in the next section.

### *The Unorthodox Outlets*

The last cluster, which I call “the unorthodox outlets,” is characterized by an emphasis on interpretive, analytical, and argumentative elements in media content. As will be explained in detail shortly, the expert sources cited in this cluster tend to have stronger and clear-cut opinions on various issues. And different from the “orthodox party outlets,” their opinions often deviate from the party ideology.

As shown in Figure 2, there seem to be two “sub-clusters” in this cluster, since two of the media outlets are located relatively “far away” from others. Results to be presented in the next section will further demonstrate that these two outlets did constitute a separate cluster in the years 2010 and 2012. The reason why they “merged” with other seven outlets is related to the changes in the media landscape after Xi Jinping took power, which will be discussed in the next section.

The two seemingly separate media outlets are *Global Times* and Guancha.cn. The former is a daily commercial newspaper affiliated with *The People’s Daily* and is well-known for its nationalistic positions (e.g. Wang, 2015; Yahuda, 2013). It has even been called “China’s Fox News,” which “makes Bill O’Reilly seem fair and balanced” (Larson, 2011). The latter is a commercial news website registered in Shanghai. It also

carries a nationalistic tone and features columns for a number of pro-regime commentators, including the editorial department of the *Global Times*.<sup>28</sup> The high similarity score between this pair (0.78) suggests that they largely feature the opinions from the same group of experts. The similarity scores between *Global Times* or Guancha.cn and any of the other seven outlets in this cluster are all below 0.20. If we consider these two outlets as a cluster, their most unique expert sources are: a researcher at the PLA Naval Research Academy, who frequently comments on foreign affairs and military issues, with a firm stance of applauding the Chinese government's actions in "protecting national interests and sovereignty" and criticizing American, Japanese, and other countries' "aggressive policies and moves"; a professor at Fudan University and Director of the University's China Institute, who is a prominent promoter of the "China Model" and has published several books in the English world, explaining why China will succeed under the Communist Party; a Shanghai venture capitalist and a trustee of the China Institute at Fudan University, who is known for his defense of China's political system in prominent international media; a professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, who often criticizes Western liberal democracy and speaks highly of the Mao Zedong era and the so-called "Chongqing Model," which was a set of policies closely resembled the Maoist socialist policies and were promoted by Bo Xilai, who was the former party leader of Chongqing and was found guilty of corruption and sentenced to life imprisonment in 2013; and a researcher at the Academy of Social Sciences in Guangxi in southwest China, who mainly provides opinions on China-Southeast Asia relations. As can be seen from this list, the sources that

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<sup>28</sup> See <https://www.guancha.cn/authorcolumn>,  
[https://www.guancha.cn/DanRenPing/list\\_1.shtml](https://www.guancha.cn/DanRenPing/list_1.shtml).

have been heavily cited by *Global Times* and Guancha.cn but not by other outlets are mostly defenders of China's national interests, sovereignty, and the political system. Interestingly, these experts do not have a significant presence in the "orthodox party outlets." Interviews with journalists at party newspapers suggest that the major reason is that their opinions are considered too aggressive and "hawkish," and might be controversial for the general audience in China. As a journalist at national party newspaper shared, "Although *Global Times* and Guancha.cn are popular, they are different from our party newspaper because our readers are presumed to be the general public, whereas they have their specific target audiences, who are the highly nationalistic citizens. Many of them could be described as the so-called 'voluntary fifty-cent army.'"<sup>29</sup> Here "voluntary fifty-cent army" refers to those who defend the authoritarian regime and combat criticism that targets the regime on an unpaid basis, as compared to the state-hired online commentators (Han, 2015). This might suggest that strong nationalistic rhetoric and arguments on the superiority of the Chinese political system are not commonly shared by the public, echoing previous studies on the declining nationalism in China (e.g., Woods & Dickson, 2017).

The remaining seven media outlets in this cluster mainly take a more critical view towards state policies<sup>30</sup> and promotes ideas such as free market and rule of law. The most unique expert sources shared by them are: He Weifang (贺卫方), the aforementioned Peking University law professor who got "blacklisted" under the Xi Jinping leadership for

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<sup>29</sup> Interview 11.

<sup>30</sup> It should be noted that these outlets are not critical towards all kinds of state policies. As will be demonstrated in the next chapter, they generally show support of foreign policies and economic policies.

his outspoken opinions on rule of law and constitutionalism; Jiang Hong (蒋洪), a professor at Shanghai University of Finance and Economics and a delegate of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) from 2009 to 2018, who studies government revenue and expenditures and promotes the transparency of budget and government accountability; Chen Ruihua (陈瑞华), a law professor at Peking University and a colleague of He Weifang, who often comments on legal reform and criminal justice; Jia Xijin (贾西津), a professor at Tsinghua University's School of Public Policy and Management, who promotes the legitimization of non-governmental organizations; and Qian Liqun (钱理群), a retired professor at Peking University, who is vocal about the problems in the education system and the "shrewd egoists" (*jingzhi liji zhuyizhe*) among Chinese young elites (Qian, 2014). The seven outlets include four commercial weekly newspaper or magazines (*Southern Weekly*, *Caixin Weekly*, *Sanlian Life Weekly*, and *Nanfeng Chuang*) which publish in-depth stories and commentaries; two websites (*Pengpai* and *Jiemian*), which are newly launched online publications that aim at attracting audiences on their smartphones by quality content and at the same time disseminating new, slick propaganda content (Repnikova & Fang, 2019; Speelman, 2015); and one central-level party newspaper *China Youth Daily*, which is sponsored by the Communist Youth League. This is a very interesting case of party media that falls closer to more critical voices rather than propaganda mouthpieces and regime defenders. This finding echoes Wang, Sparks, and Huang's (2018) study, in which they argue that *China Youth Daily* challenges the bipolar understanding of Chinese media as party-oriented official press and market-oriented commercial press. They argue that *China Youth Daily* offers a relatively large amount of

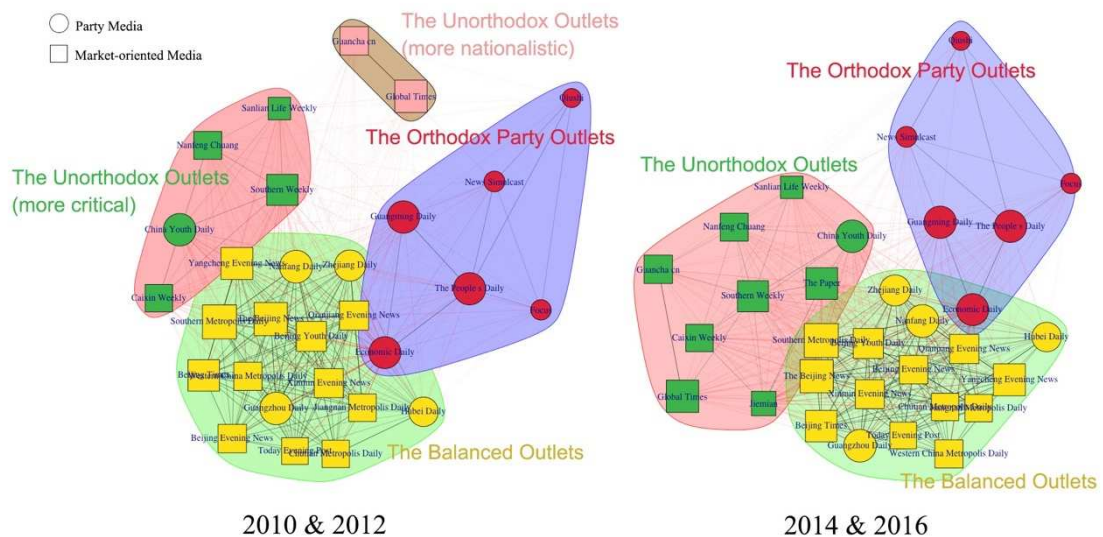
watchdog journalism and infotainment content. While not disputing their findings, the current study adds another layer to our understanding of *China Youth Daily*, which is that in terms of intellectual sourcing patterns, it is close to the media outlets that people conventionally describe as “regime critics” and “liberal voices.” Wang, Sparks, and Huang (2018) suggested that the uniqueness of *China Youth Daily* could be explained by the role of the Communist Youth League, which is to influence young people. In order to target at a younger audience, a more “popular” approach rather than orthodox propaganda is needed. My interviewees familiar with this newspaper suggest that the historical tradition of the Communist Youth League also plays an important part in shaping *China Youth Daily*’s content. An executive at a party newspaper shared that, “During the 1980s, party leaders of *tuanpai* (the Communist Youth League faction) were generally reformers. Important figures including Hu Yaobang (胡耀邦) and Hu Qili (胡启立) promoted a more open and democratic vision, which was unfortunately ended due to the Tiananmen Student Movement in 1989. However, the critical tradition of *China Youth Daily*, which started to publish influential investigative journalism and commentary pieces in the 1980s, remained because of key journalists of that era such as Li Datong (李大同) and Lu Yuegang (卢跃刚) stayed and passed on the heritage to younger generations of journalists.”<sup>31</sup> While further studies are needed to uncover the uniqueness of *China Youth Daily*, the current finding further challenges the conventional party/commercial divide of Chinese media landscape.

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<sup>31</sup> Interview 25.

## Changes in the Ideological Landscape after Xi Jinping Took Power

Did the expert sourcing patterns of Chinese media change after President Xi Jinping took power in late 2012 and early 2013? I divided my dataset into two parts and ran analysis on the two separate networks. The results are shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3 Comparison between the ideological landscape before Xi (2010&2012) and under Xi (2014&2016)**

Note: the size of the nodes are proportional to the log-transformed amount of expert citations in each outlet.

As can be seen in the network graphs, two of the aforementioned clusters (the “orthodox party outlets” and the “balanced outlets”) remained unchanged. The only difference is that the “unorthodox outlets” was divided into two separate clusters in the years 2010 and 2012—one is the nationalistic cluster of *Global Times* and *Guancha.cn*, and the other one includes the other five outlets that are more critical towards state policies.



Because online publications *Pengpai* and *Jiemian* were launched in 2014, they did not appear in the network graph of 2010 and 2012.

What drives the changes in the ideological landscape, i.e., the merger of the two clusters of unorthodox outlets? There are three possibilities. First, the five more critical outlets changed to cite more nationalistic sources, thus increasing the similarities with *Global Times* and *Guancha.cn*. Second, the two nationalistic outlets moved to cite more critical experts. Or third, both of the two unorthodox clusters changed their expert sourcing patterns and moved to cite a third type of intellectuals. In order to identify the most probable answer, I calculated the cosine similarity scores between each of the seven outlets' pre-Xi (2010&2012) citations and Xi-era (2014&2016) citations. In other words, I did the “within-publication” comparison to see if these outlets changed in their expert sourcing patterns after Xi took power. Results show that *Global Times* and *Guancha.cn*'s expert interviewees basically remained unchanged, as indicated by similarity scores above 0.85 (0.91 for *Global Times* and 0.88 for *Guancha.cn*). However, the other five more critical publications all changed to a certain extent. The similarity score between *Southern Weekly*'s 2010&2012 sources and its 2014&2016 sources is only 0.37, suggesting a noticeable shift in selecting expert interviewees. The “within-publication” similarity scores for *China Youth Daily*, *Caixin Weekly*, *Sanlian Life Weekly* and *Nanfeng Chuang* and are respectively 0.61, 0.57, 0.49, and 0.43, all of which are lower than the nationalistic duo.

Following the same approach to identify the most “unique” sources, I identified the expert sources that contributed the most to the changes of the five critical publications. To be more specific, I calculated the ratio of the frequency of each source appearing in the 2014&2016 sub-dataset of those five outlets to the frequency of him/her appearing in the

2010&2012 sub-dataset. The largest numbers produced by this method suggest the most prominent new sources. They include: a professor at Renmin University of China, who frequently comments on China's contributions to global governance and promotes the Belt & Road Initiative; the aforementioned researcher at the PLA Naval Research Academy, who frequently comments on foreign affairs and military issues; a military theorist and a retired Major General in the People's Liberation Army Air Force, who is known for criticizing the U.S. foreign policies and arguing for non-traditional military strategies to defeat the U.S.; a professor at Tsinghua University's Institute of International Relations, who comments on foreign policy and national security; and a professor at Peking University, who mainly provides opinions on China-Japan relations. This list clearly suggests that the turn of the five publications which were generally more critical towards state policies was primarily driven by the increased reliance on foreign policy experts, who largely use the national interests rhetoric in their quotations.

Reversely, we could also examine the expert sources who used to appear frequently in those five publications before Xi and then largely disappeared in 2014 and 2016. Based on the ratio calculated above, the disappeared sources as indicated by the smallest numbers include: Wang Changjiang (王长江), a professor at the Central Party School, who calls for reforms of the Communist Party, especially the "intra-Party democracy" (*dangnei minzhu*); He Weifang (贺卫方), the aforementioned "blacklisted" Peking University law professor; He Bing (何兵), a professor at China University of Political Science and Law, who shares similar views with He Weifang on legal reforms; Jiang Ping (江平), a retired professor and former President of China University of Political Science and Law, who has been

consistently advocating for rule of law; and Mao Yushi (茅于軾), an economist described by the Cato Institute as “one of China’s most outspoken and influential activists for individual rights and free markets”.<sup>32</sup> These names indicate that the room for the discussions on legal and political reforms shrank after Xi took power. In-depth interviews with journalists at these five publications confirm that they have experienced heavier censorship on these topics during recent years. They suggested that although scholars such as Jiang Ping and Mao Yushi are not officially on the “blacklist,” journalists tend to interview them much less than before, mainly for two reasons. First, there are less stories for them to comment on due to increased censorship in these areas. Second, their viewpoints become more likely to trigger self-censorship—not because they become more radical, but because the overall environment become tenser and less tolerant.<sup>33</sup>

All in all, these findings suggest that the ideological landscape under the Xi Jinping leadership has experienced significant changes, which are most evident on several high-profile publications that are known for their critical stances on many issues (Repnikova & Fang, 2015). In 2014 and 2016, these publications feature less voices that advocate legal and political reforms as compared with the years 2010 and 2012. Instead, they cite more experts who emphasize national interests and security, starting to resemble the nationalistic outlets.

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<sup>32</sup> See <https://www.cato.org/friedman-prize/mao-yushi>.

<sup>33</sup> Interviews 4, 27, and 29.

## The Landscape of Structural Bias

The findings presented above illustrate the landscape of ideological bias of Chinese media. We now turn to the other dimension of media bias—structural bias, which in this study is operationalized by the distance to the Communist Party. As elaborated in the previous chapter, I measured the frequency of mentions of top political leaders in each media outlet as a proxy of the relative political distance. The results, combined with the ideological bias, is presented in Figure 4.

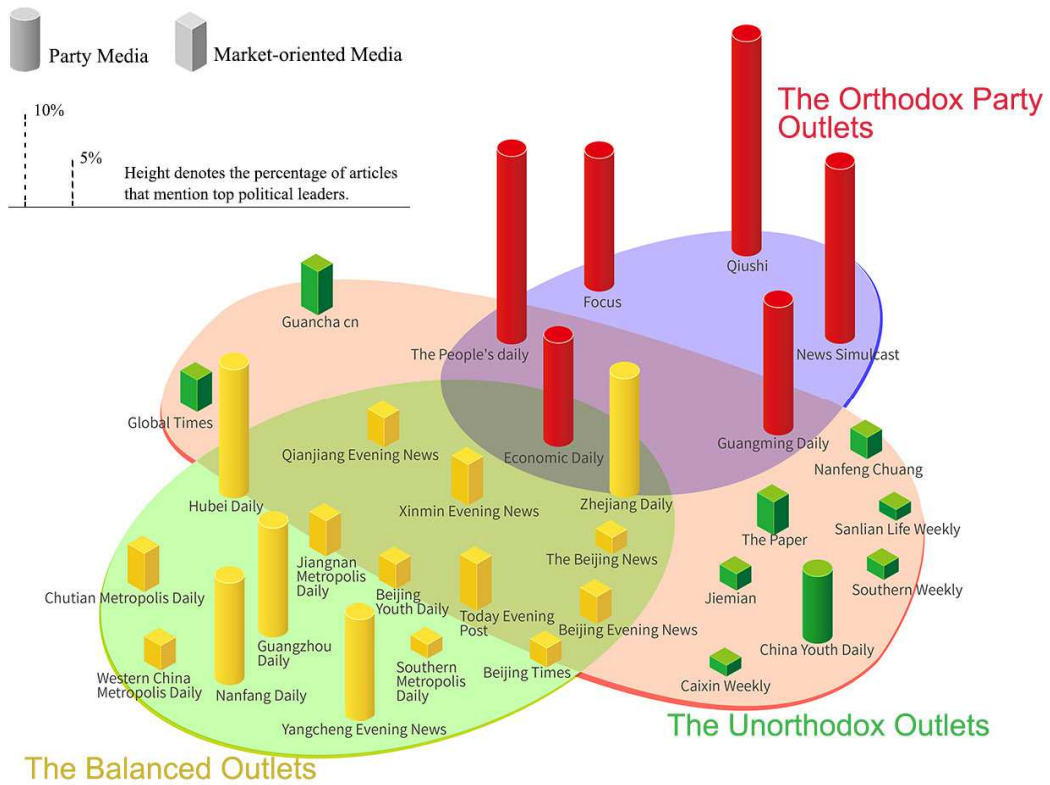


Figure 4 The ideological and structural bias of Chinese media

In this figure, I kept the community structure of ideological bias as in Figure 3.1 (the edges were eliminated for the sake of clarity and simplicity of the graph), and added the structure bias as the dimension of “height.” The higher a media outlet is in the graph, the more it is structurally biased towards the party. As can be seen from the figure, there are clear differences between party media and commercial media. On average, 15.9% of articles published in party media mention top leaders, while commercial media only mention them in 3.1% of their articles. The publication that most frequently mentions top leaders is *Qiushi*, with a percentage of 26.0%. The lowest percentage is seen in both *Caixin Weekly* and *Sanlian Life Weekly*—only 1.3% of their articles mention top leaders. This result is largely in line with Qin, Wu, and Stromberg’s (2018) finding about mentions of political leaders.<sup>34</sup> It shows that the party/commercial division is clearly present in terms of structural bias. Even *China Youth Daily*, the unconventional party newspaper, mentioned top leaders in 8.1% of its articles, which confirms previous findings that it does cover much propaganda-related materials (Wang et al., 2018, p. 1203). The nationalistic commercial outlets *Global Times* and *Guancha.cn* only mention top leaders in 3.9% and 5.2% of their articles respectively. Interviews with journalists and media executives suggest that party media outlets are required to cover top national and provincial leaders and disseminate propaganda messages, while commercial media outlets are not subject to this obligation. “Party newspapers are the face of the party,” shared a journalist at a party media, “people

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<sup>34</sup> In their study, 21% of party media articles were found to mention leaders, while 4% of commercial media articles mention them. The reason why their numbers are slightly larger is because they included a larger pool of political leaders in their calculations.

will suspect that something have gone wrong if we don't devote the first two pages of our newspaper to the leaders."<sup>35</sup>

However, the fact that top leaders appear more frequently in party media than in commercial media is independent from the ideological bias of these two types of media. Provincial party newspapers and *China Youth Daily* are not ideologically orthodox as *Qiushi* and *The People's Daily*. Commercial outlets *Global Times* and *Guancha.cn* are more enthusiastic defenders of the political system than many party newspapers.

Finally, has the landscape of structural bias changed after Xi Jinping took power? I calculated the frequencies of mentions before and under Xi. According to the results, the pattern that party media mention top leaders more than commercial media is unchanged, but all the publications have increased the mentioning frequency. The average percentage has increased from 7.7% in 2010 and 2012 to 8.3% in 2014 and 2016. While these differences are small, they are consistent with the observations about the increased control on both party and commercial media and Xi's cultivation for his personality cult (Luqiu, 2016), and are also in line with Jaros and Pan's (2018) finding that top political leaders are mentioned with greater frequency after Xi's ascent (pp. 14-15). Interviews with journalists suggest that on the one hand, there are more orders from the propaganda department that require more coverage on top leaders, especially Xi; on the other hand, media outlets voluntarily devote more column inches and air time to top leaders in order to display loyalty and seek political safety.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Interview 11.

<sup>36</sup> Interviews 2, 5, 7, 11, 14, 18, 27, and 30.

To sum up, findings presented in this chapter illustrate the ideological and structural bias of media outlets in China. Four ideological clusters have been identified, and they challenge the conventional party/commercial division. However, the structural bias of Chinese media closely aligns with this division. Under Xi Jinping's rule, the ideological diversity of Chinese media has shrunk, especially for the more critical publications which have changed to cite more experts on national interests and security rather than those on legal and political reforms. Media outlets, both party and commercial, have also cited top political leaders more frequently in the Xi era. In the next chapter, I will take an issue-centered view of the ideological landscape and discuss Chinese media's positions on major political, economic, social and cultural issues.

## CHAPTER 4. Issues

Conceptually, ideology is defined as a “set of beliefs about the proper order of society and how it can be achieved” (Erikson & Tedin, 2003, p. 64). These beliefs both influence and are reflected in the issue positions held by individuals, groups, and institutions.

Operationally, the empirical study of ideology is overwhelmingly conducted through the examination of issue-based opinions or issue attitudes (Jost et al., 2009). To get a deeper understanding of the ideological landscape of Chinese media, this chapter takes a similar issue-centered approach, mapping where the various outlets included in Chapter 3 stand on twenty political, economic, social and cultural issues, as identified by methods explained in Chapter 2. I use network graphs similar to those in the previous chapter to illustrate the ideological landscape on each issue, combined with qualitative interpretations of the clusters and representative opinions. Where relevant, I also note differences in patterns that exist between the pre-Xi and Xi eras.

### **Political Issues**

#### *Adherence to party ideology*

Ever since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the Communist Party has put significant resources and efforts into ideological work (Brady, 2008; Brown, 2012).

However, since the late 1970s the party-state has adopted a pragmatic approach of reform and development, resulting in what some have called a “post-ideological” society (Brown, 2012). Rather than being post-ideological, however, the party-state has abandoned the aggressive, doctrinaire methods of the Maoist regime for a more subtle, flexible approach.

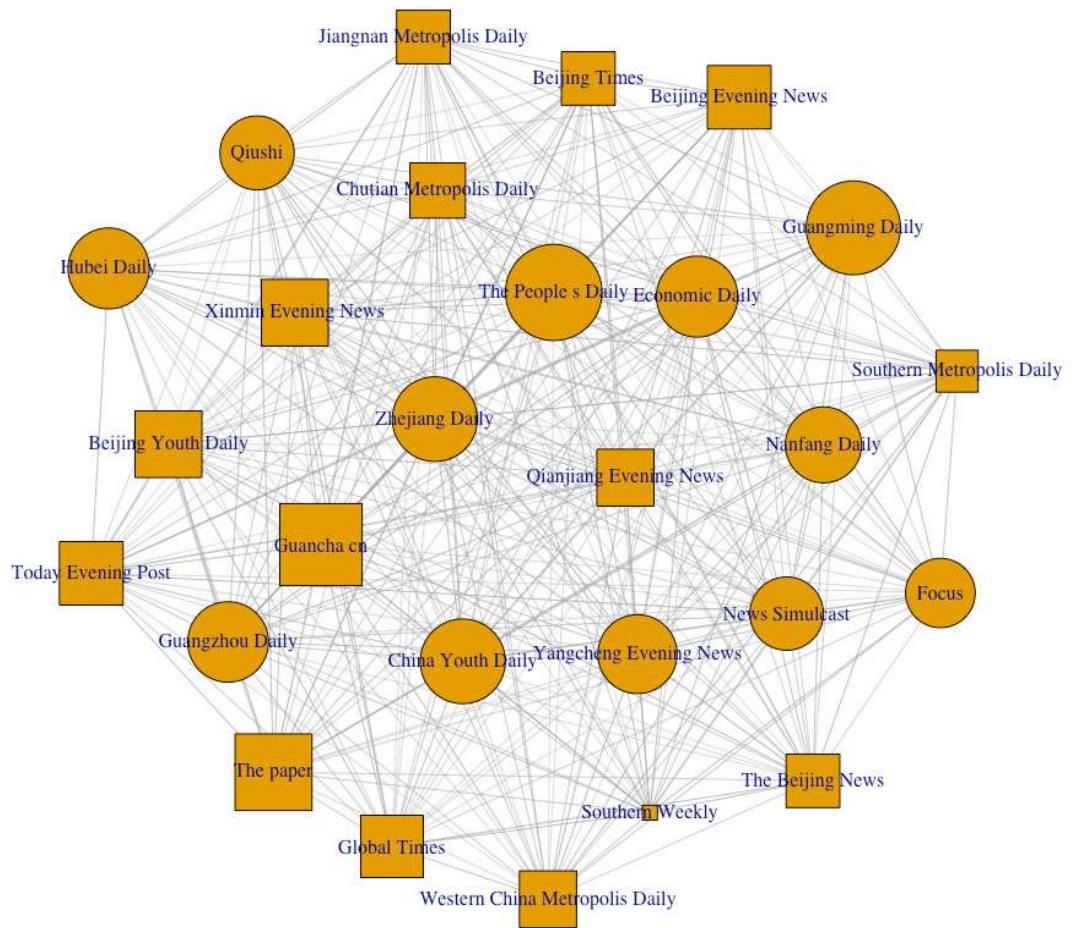


As Holbig (2013) insightfully points out, party ideology in contemporary China is not a matter of the direct indoctrination of a rigid set of beliefs, but a language game that aims at legitimizing the authoritarian rule and “a set of practices and incentives for the proper performance of the political elite” (p. 61). Therefore, the adherence to party ideology is superficial. Politicians painstakingly mention “Socialism with Chinese characteristics,” “Marxism–Leninism,” “Mao Zedong Thought,” “Deng Xiaoping Theory,” “Three Represents (proposed by Jiang Zemin),” “Harmonious Society (proposed by Hu Jintao),” “Xi Jinping Thought,” “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era,” and “The Chinese Dream” in their speeches to show their loyalty to the top leaders, and use them as umbrella justification for whatever policies they promote.

These phrases occupy an essential role in China’s political discourse. How do news media cover and interpret them? Figure 5 maps the landscape of the media outlets’ positions on the adherence to party ideology. As in previous figures, I use circles to denote party media and squares for commercial media. There are two major features of this figure: first, there is only one single community in this network—all the outlets quote similar groups of experts, leading to a densely connected graph without clear divides among the outlets. A closer look at the cited experts suggests that they are mainly scholars affiliated with research centers on party ideology at various universities and institutes, such as the Institute of Marxism Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Interviews with journalists suggest that those scholars act as the official “interpreters” of party ideology, and all the news outlets turn to them for comments on the official ideology.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Interviews 2, 18, and 20.



**Figure 5 The ideological landscape of the issue: adherence to party ideology**

Note: Circle = party media; square = commercial media. The size of the nodes are proportional to the log-transformed amount of expert citations in each outlet.

Second, although there are no discernable communities in this graph, we can identify a pattern: party media (circles) are generally larger than commercial media (squares), suggesting that they cover the party ideology more. Three commercial outlets (*Caixin Weekly*, *Sanlian Life Weekly*, and *Jiemiao*) do not cover this issue at all, and thus are absent in this graph. On average, a party media outlet has 46.1 quotations on this issue,

significantly more than commercial media outlets (13.0 quotations). This pattern is explained by an interviewee as the “distancing” strategy of commercial media outlets: “they do not have the freedom to choose dissenting opinions, if there is any, but they are allowed to largely skip this issue area and stay away from those official scholars.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, on this highly controlled issue, there is no option of diverse viewpoints, and the only freedom is to cover it less. My interviews suggest that during recent years, under Xi’s leadership, this freedom has been increasingly limited. Many commercial publications are now required by the propaganda department to join the language game and propagate Xi’s thoughts. Data show that in the years 2010 and 2012, commercial media outlets on average only have 5.4 quotations on this issue, significantly less than in the years 2014 and 2016 (8.3 quotations). An example is that both of the only two quotations in *Southern Weekly* appeared in 2016, confirming the taming of this once outspoken newspaper (Repnikova & Fang, 2015). In other words, although the overall structure of the landscape on this issue remains the same, the size of the commercial outlets in the graph grows larger in the Xi-era as compared with the pre-Xi era.

### *The “China Model”*

Next, we examine the issue of the so-called “China Model,” which proposes that China has offered a “distinctive model of economic and political development” that is largely

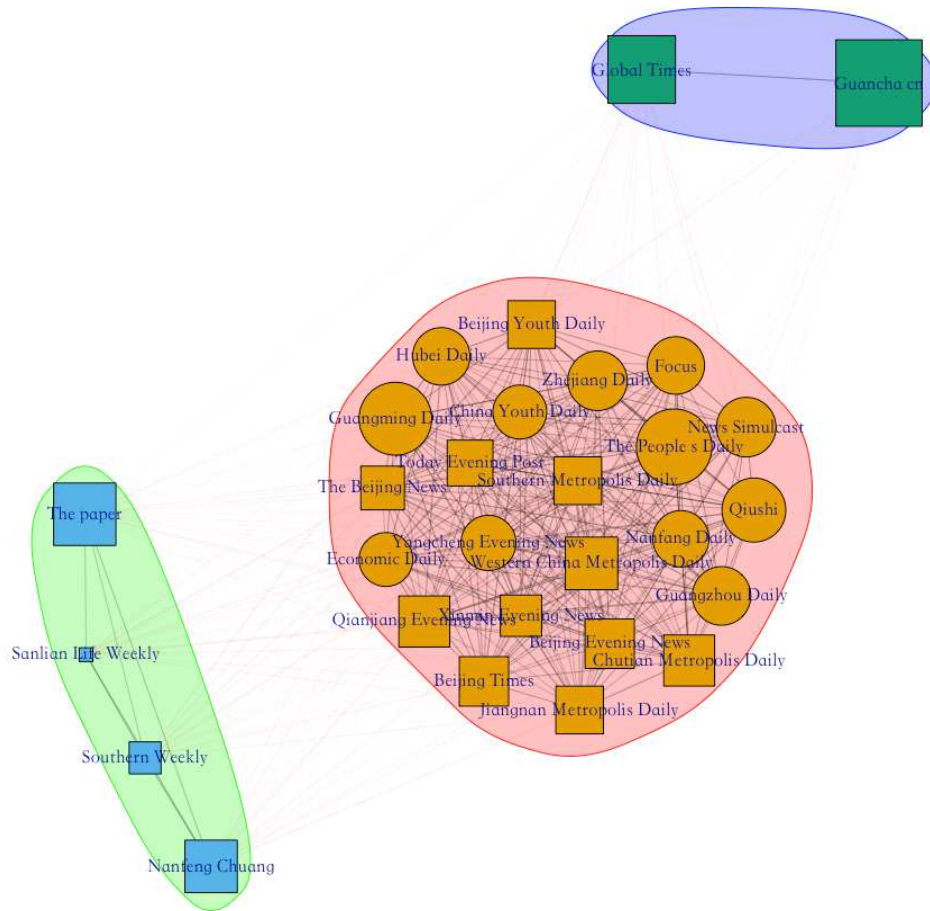
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<sup>38</sup> Interview 7.

characterized by the co-existence of free market and authoritarian state<sup>39</sup> (Zhao, 2010). Proponents of the China Model often claim that the Chinese political system is as good as, if not superior to, Western liberal democracy. Relatedly, the Chinese party-state has been promoting the idea of “three confidences,” which refer to confidence in the theory of “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” confidence in China’s current path, and confidence in its current political system (Zhao, 2017; Zheng, 2014). If the vision of a unique and successful China Model is desired by the party-state, one might expect that news media in China would be homogenous in viewpoints towards the model, just as they are regarding the issue of official ideology discussed above. However, the data reveal a different landscape, as shown in Figure 6.

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<sup>39</sup> The Chinese state propaganda never uses the word “authoritarian” to describe its political system. It usually talks about the centralized power of the government, the absolute leadership of the Communist Party, and the meritocratic process of selecting officials.



**Figure 6 The ideological landscape of the issue: the “China Model”**

Note: Circle = party media; square = commercial media. The size of the nodes are proportional to the log-transformed amount of expert citations in each outlet.

The majority of the news outlets—including the “orthodox party outlets,” the provincial party dailies, and the commercial dailies—are densely connected and form the central cluster in this figure, suggesting that they tend to interview a similar group of experts when covering the issue of the China Model. It is notable that provincial commercial dailies, including the ones that are conventionally known as “liberal” newspapers such as *Southern Metropolis Daily* and *The Beijing News*, also feature the

voices of some prominent China Model proponents. The most frequently cited experts in this major cluster include: a professor at Fudan University's China Center for Economic Studies, who argues that China's economic development is based on a powerful government and strong state capacity; a professor at Peking University's National School of Development, who attributes the "miracle" of China's economic development to China's unique strategies characterized by government interventions; Francis Fukuyama, a professor at Stanford University and the author of *The End of History and the Last Man*, who has visited China for several times during 2010-2016 and has been frequently cited in Chinese media for his updated idea that history did not end and that China proposes another possibility with its great achievements ensured by strong state capacity; and a professor at National University of Singapore's East Asian Institute, who takes a more nuanced stand that the China Model requires constant reforms.

The two nationalistic outlets—*Global Times* and *Guancha.cn*—also frequently discuss the issue of the China Model, but their viewpoints are different from publications in the major cluster. A closer look at the quotations suggest that the difference is not about how they evaluate the China Model, but about how they treat the Western models. News outlets in the major cluster tend to avoid talking about Western democracies, or to put the China Model and the Western models on the same level. However, for the nationalistic duo, they are more likely to cite experts who not only promote the China Model, but also criticize the political systems in the U.S. and Europe. These experts include: Stein Ringen, a professor at University of Oxford, who appears in these outlets to question the future of American democracy for its low efficiency, its failure in serving the public interest, and its decreasing appeal to the rest of the world; Martin Jacques, a British political commentator

and the author of *When China Rules the World*, who claims that the 21<sup>st</sup> century will witness the decline of the Western world; and Zhang Weiwei and Eric X. Li, the two prominent proponents of China's political system introduced in the previous chapter. It is interesting to note that foreign experts play a central role in shaping the discussions on the China Model and its claimed superiority. Ever since Edgar Snow, the American journalist who covered the Chinese Communist revolution in the 1930s, the Communist Party has partly relied on non-Chinese voices to claim its legitimacy.

The third cluster in the graph comprises four commercial outlets that are generally more critical of the party-state (note that *Caixin Weekly* and Jiemian.cn are again absent in this graph). The Party newspaper *China Youth Daily*, which was part of this commercial-media dominated cluster in the general landscape, is instead in the major cluster on this issue, suggesting a tighter control on Party media when it comes to coverage of the China Model. Close readings of the quotations in this cluster reveal that these publications strategically insert their vision of the political system under the guise of championing for the China Model. For example, *Nanfeng Chuang* magazine cites legal expert and professor Xu Chongde (许崇德) to argue for the importance of constitutionalism for ensuring future progress, and cites Yale University economist Chen Zhiwu (陈志武) to argue for the importance of free market and deregulation in China's economic development. *Southern Weekly* quotes several critical scholars to warn against the potential pitfalls of the China Model and argues that the model needs to be deeply updated and fixed in order to achieve long-term success. This kind of strategy is well-documented in previous studies of Chinese journalism (e.g., Repnikova, 2017a; Svensson et al., 2013) and

illustrates how dissenting opinions can still be expressed in a controlled media environment.

Overall, my quantitative and qualitative analyses suggest that coverage of the China Model is permitted a somewhat wider range of views than that of party ideology. In addition, this greater latitude not only includes voices critical of the China Model, but also those that are critical of Western democratic systems. Further longitudinal analysis shows that there is no significant distinctions between the pre-Xi and Xi eras on this issue.

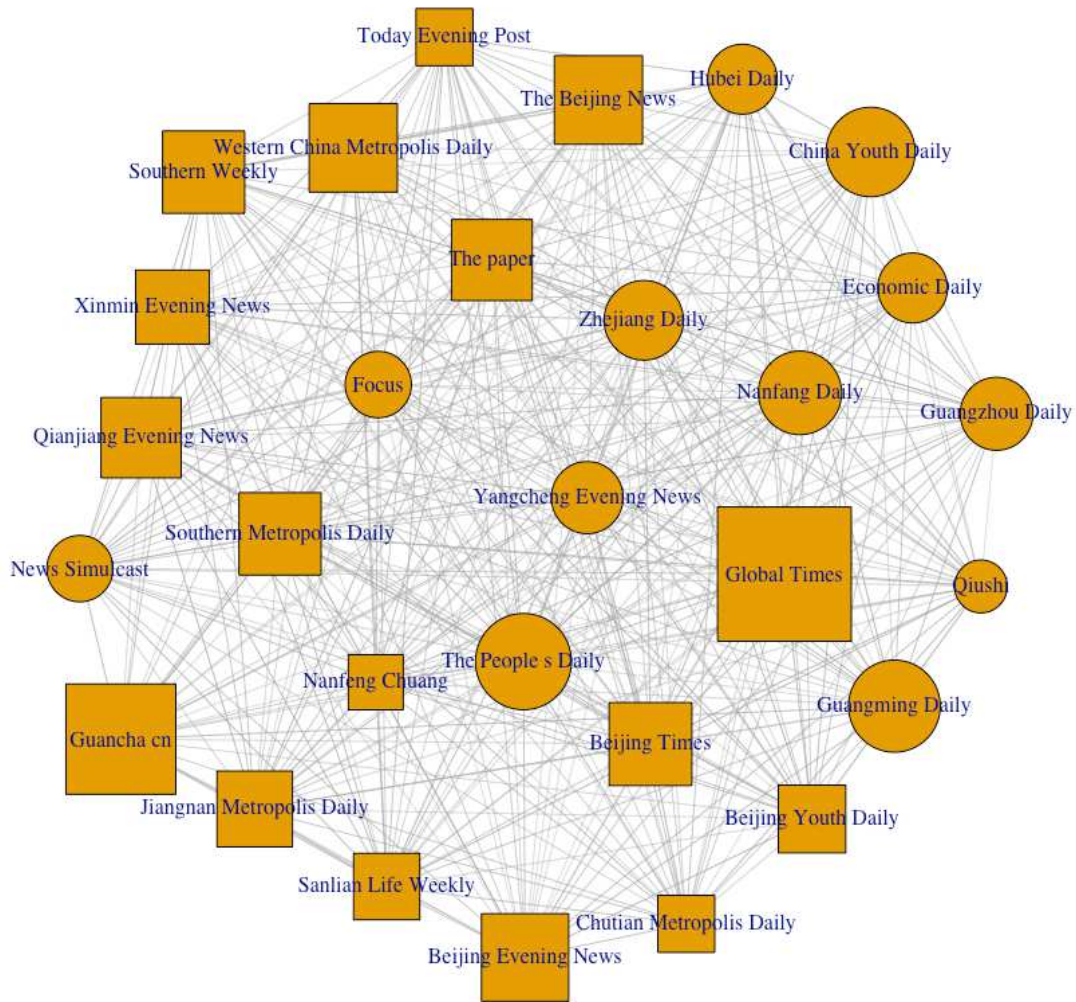
### *Sovereignty and territorial integrity*

Sovereignty and territorial integrity is considered a sensitive issue in China and is closely related to nationalism (Gries, 2004; Wang, 2014). The independence movements in Tibet, Xinjiang, and Taiwan, as well as the territorial disputes over Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands and the South China Sea have always been heavily censored topics (e.g., MacKinnon, 2009). During recent years, as tensions have risen between Mainland China and Hong Kong, especially after the 2014 Umbrella Movement (also known as the “Occupy Central Movement”), pro-independence movements in Hong Kong also became a highly controlled topic (Kou, Kow, Gui, & Cheng, 2017; Tsui, 2015). The Chinese party-state has also extended the concept of “sovereignty” to cyberspace and proposed the idea of “Internet sovereignty,” which argues for the central role of the nation state in Internet governance, and the necessity of blocking “harmful” foreign websites and services (Jiang, 2010; Zeng, Stevens, & Chen, 2017).

How do news media in China cover and discuss this issue? As shown in Figure 7, the general structure of the news landscape is almost identical to that for the issue of party



ideology, suggesting a heavily controlled (or at least centralized and homogeneous) environment. All the media outlets quote from the same group of experts who actively defend China's sovereignty and national interests. The most cited experts include: a professor at Xiamen University's South China Sea Institute, who cites historical documents to support China's territorial claims in the South China Sea; a researcher at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore, who appears in Chinese media to question the validity of the South China Sea Arbitration brought by Philippines against China; a researcher at the People's Liberation Army's Naval Research Academy, who frequently criticizes American, Japanese, and other countries' "aggressive policies and moves"; a researcher of Taiwan history at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, who argues that Taiwan independence movement is against the historical trends and the founding father of the Republic of China Sun Yat-sen's will; and an economist at China International Capital Corporation, who cites economic statistics to "prove" that the Umbrella Movement has caused severe damage to Hong Kong's economy and social welfare.



**Figure 7 The ideological landscape of the issue: Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity**

Note: Circle = party media; square = commercial media. The size of the nodes are proportional to the log-transformed amount of expert citations in each outlet.

However, there is a key difference between this landscape and that for coverage of party ideology—commercial outlets do not shy away from this issue. They are actually more likely to cover the sovereignty issue (53.1 quotations on average) than party media (31.2 quotations on average). It is not surprising that the nationalistic *Global Times* and *Guancha.cn* publish a large number of articles on this topic, given that sovereignty and

national interests are the central issues of nationalism. Notably, the other commercial outlets, including those that are generally more critical, also cover this issue heavily and feature the same voices as the orthodox party outlets. My interviews suggest two factors behind this phenomenon: political considerations and commercial interests. Publishing these opinions is not only a favorable gesture to signal compliance to the party-state, but also a strategy to attract more readers. After all, nationalism sells. It echoes with previous studies on the commodification of nationalism in Chinese media (Schneider, 2018), and provides another example of the convergence between state regulation and audience demand (Stockmann, 2013).

It is also notable that 84.5% of the citations on sovereignty and territorial integrity in the critical publications appear in the years 2014 and 2016, indicating that although the network structure remains the same after Xi took power, the size of the critical news outlets in this issue network grows significantly larger after 2012 (12.1 quotations in the Xi era as compared with 3.1 quotations in the pre-Xi era). It confirms the findings on the longitudinal changes of the general landscape presented in the previous chapter—critical outlets cite more nationalistic sources and move closer to nationalistic publications.

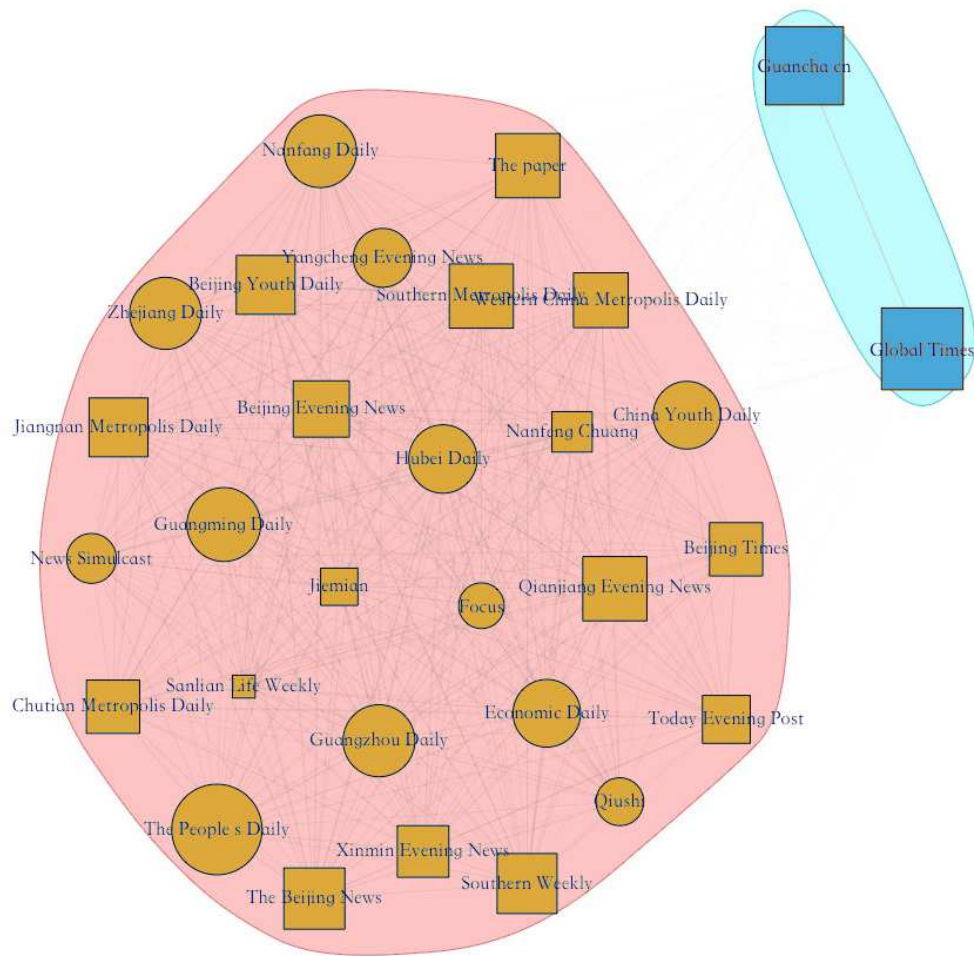
### *China's International Presence*

The rise of China as a military and economic power has changed the global balance of power among nations, and given birth to both the “China threat theory” and the pessimistic prediction that military conflict between China and the U.S. is inevitable (Broomfield, 2003; Mirilovic & Kim, 2017). The Chinese party-state firmly rejects this perception and proposes a more peaceful vision of its increased global influence. However, this debate is

far from settled, especially as China expands its global influence by investing in and providing significant financial aid to African countries (Brautigam, 2009), strengthens the Shanghai Cooperation Organization which covers three-fifth of the Eurasian continent (Chung, 2006), and implements the ambitious “Belt and Road Initiative” (Huang, 2016). Interviews with media executives suggest that the “China threat theory,” the controversies over China’s “neo-colonialism” in Africa, and the Belt and Road Initiative are considered highly sensitive topics for the Chinese media to cover critically. As one interviewee noted, the reason for this is fear that “hostile foreign forces would pick up any opinions featured in Chinese media that are not consistent with the government’s standpoints and use them to attack the official policies of the Chinese government.”<sup>40</sup> My analyses largely support this notion, with the ideological landscape on the issue of China’s international presence being quite homogenous. Nonetheless, there is still a small, separate cluster, suggesting the existence of some different views (see Figure 8).

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<sup>40</sup> Interview 25.



**Figure 8 The ideological landscape of the issue: China’s International Presence**

Note: Circle = party media; square = commercial media. The size of the nodes are proportional to the log-transformed amount of expert citations in each outlet.

For the large cluster in this graph, the majority of Chinese media turn to similar experts on international relations for comments on China’s international presence. The views of these experts largely restate the Chinese government’s talking points: China’s rise is and will be peaceful; the economic interdependence of China and the U.S. is so important that no substantial conflict is possible; China mainly wants to contribute to global economic development and the development of specific regions such as Africa;

China will contribute to globalization in a way that is win-win for all. It is notable that the economic factor is prominently emphasized, while the political element is downplayed. For example, a researcher of Southeast Asian affairs at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences who appears in nearly all the publications in the sample, claims that the Belt and Road Initiative solves a key problem in the growth of global economy by investing in infrastructures. Another example is a headline in *Guangzhou Daily*: “The key to smash the theory of China threat is economic diplomacy.”<sup>41</sup>

However, the nationalistic duo—*Global Times* and *Guancha.cn* promote a more hawkish vision and often talk about the possibility of war. For example, a professor at Guangdong Ocean University and the Director of the University’s Ocean Politics and Strategy Research Center, frequently appears in these two media outlets and claims that “we shouldn’t have our hands tied by the idea of peaceful development, and it’s totally legitimate to use military force when necessary.” He also argues that “the China-Japan friendship is only wishful thinking, because we have never been friendly to each other for the past two thousand years.” *Global Times* even interviewed University of Chicago professor John Mearsheimer to highlight his opinion that “China won’t rise peacefully.”<sup>42</sup> It is important to note that the statements that China could and even should use military force is based on the argument that the U.S. and its allies will not allow China’s rise. Therefore, the two outlets are promoting the idea that the international environment is so hostile to China that the Chinese government will have no choice but to use military force. This viewpoint is clearly different from the mainstream dovish, economy-based opinion

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<sup>41</sup> See [http://news.ifeng.com/mainland/detail\\_2010\\_12/18/3574402\\_0.shtml](http://news.ifeng.com/mainland/detail_2010_12/18/3574402_0.shtml).

<sup>42</sup> See <http://opinion.huanqiu.com/1152/2012-05/2759003.html?agt=61>.

that aligns with the government's stance. An interview with a journalist familiar with *Global Times* and *Guancha.cn* suggests that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs sometimes complains about the hawkish voices expressed in these two nationalistic outlets because they cause trouble in foreign relations.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, users in the comment section on these two outlets' websites often criticize the diplomats as having "calcium deficiency," i.e., they are not strong and tough enough to fight against the "hostile" countries. This case demonstrates that opinions expressed in Chinese news media that are deviant from the official Party stance are not always or only progressive ones.

For the changes in the landscape after Xi took power, data indicate that media outlets in both clusters have increased the amount of quotations on this issue. In the years 2010 and 2012, each outlet contain 7.1 quotations on average, less than half of the amount in the years 2014 and 2016 (15.3 quotations). A closer look at the quotations in 2014 and 2016 suggests that the change largely results from intensive coverage on the Belt and Road Initiative, which was proposed in 2013 by Xi.

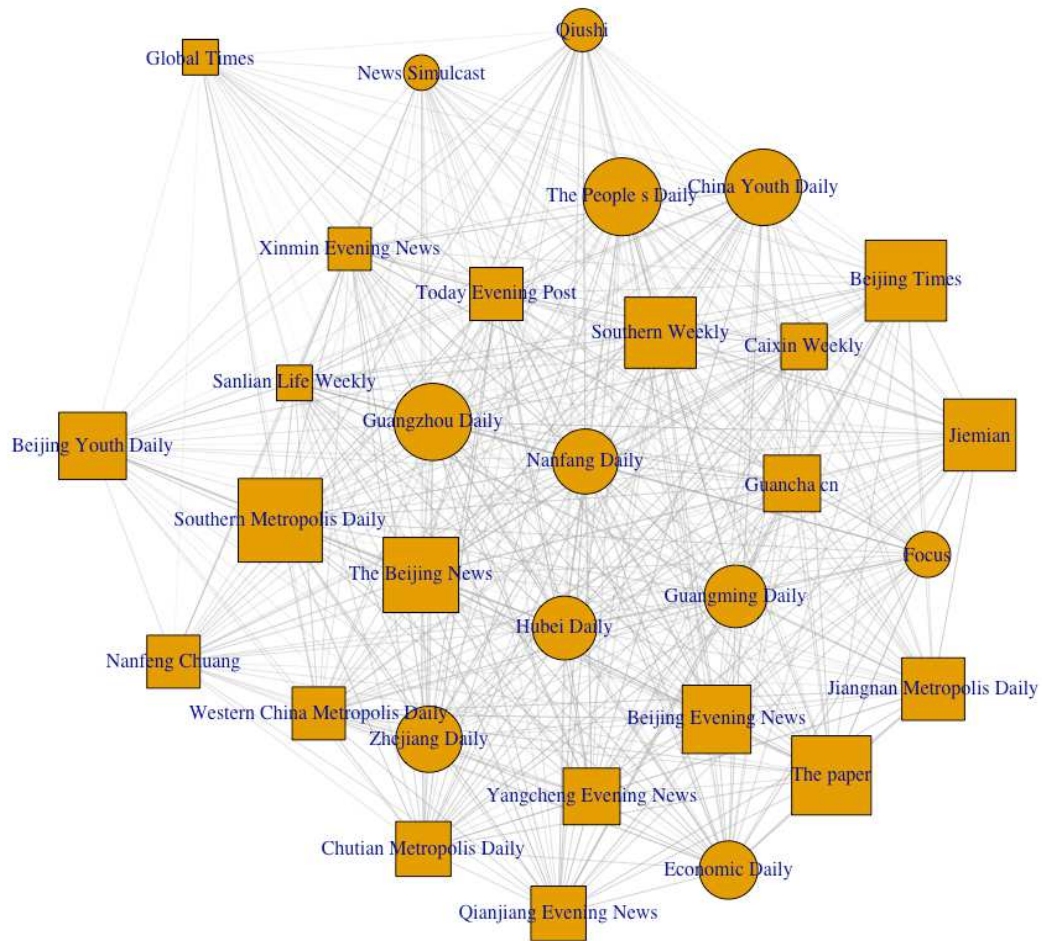
### *Corruption*

We now turn to domestic politics. Corruption is a widespread problem in China that draws both public concern and government responses. Since President Xi Jinping took power, he has launched a far-reaching anti-corruption campaign that took down more than 100 high-ranking officials (known as the "tigers") and more than 100,000 other officials (known as the "flies") (Yuen, 2014). The campaign has been hugely popular among the

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<sup>43</sup> Interview 23.

general public and became a key feature of Xi's political brand, but it also draws criticisms that Xi uses this campaign to selectively crack down on his political rivals and solidify his own faction (Li, 2016). Then, are there any conflicting opinions expressed in media outlets? The answer is no.



**Figure 9 The ideological landscape of the issue: Corruption**

Note: Circle = party media; square = commercial media. The size of the nodes are proportional to the log-transformed amount of expert citations in each outlet.



As shown in Figure 9, this is again a densely-connected network with no separate clusters, suggesting a similar group of interviewees for all the media outlets. The most frequently cited experts are all scholars of anti-corruption based in Chinese public universities and research institutes: Ren Jianming (任建明) of Beihang University, Ni Xing (倪星) of Sun Yat-sen University, Li Chengyan (李成言) of Peking University, Lin Zhe (林喆) and Xin Ming (辛鸣) of Central Party School, and Huang Weiting (黄苇町) of *Qiushi* Magazine's research center. Their opinions are featured across all the publications, with no clearly discernible differences. The general tone is that corruption is a severe problem, that the top leaders have been working very hard in fighting against it, and that they have made great progress in terms of both specific cases and institutional reforms. One journalist at a commercial newspaper who covers anti-corruption shares that “we all know that corruption is the result of unchecked power, so anti-corruption is ultimately about holding power accountable. However, there is a clear red line: you cannot talk about constraining Xi's power, though you can certainly talk about constraining other officials' power. In fact, constraining other officials' power is what Xi wants for his paramount leadership.”<sup>44</sup> This quote could largely explain Chinese media's homogenous opinions on corruption: no one is allowed to propose checking Xi's power, and everyone is interested in checking other officials' power—it is politically desirable, commercially attractive, and also aligns with some outlets' more critical stance towards the party-state. The party and commercial media pay equal attention to this issue (18.3 quotations on average for party media and 18.7 quotations on average for commercial media).

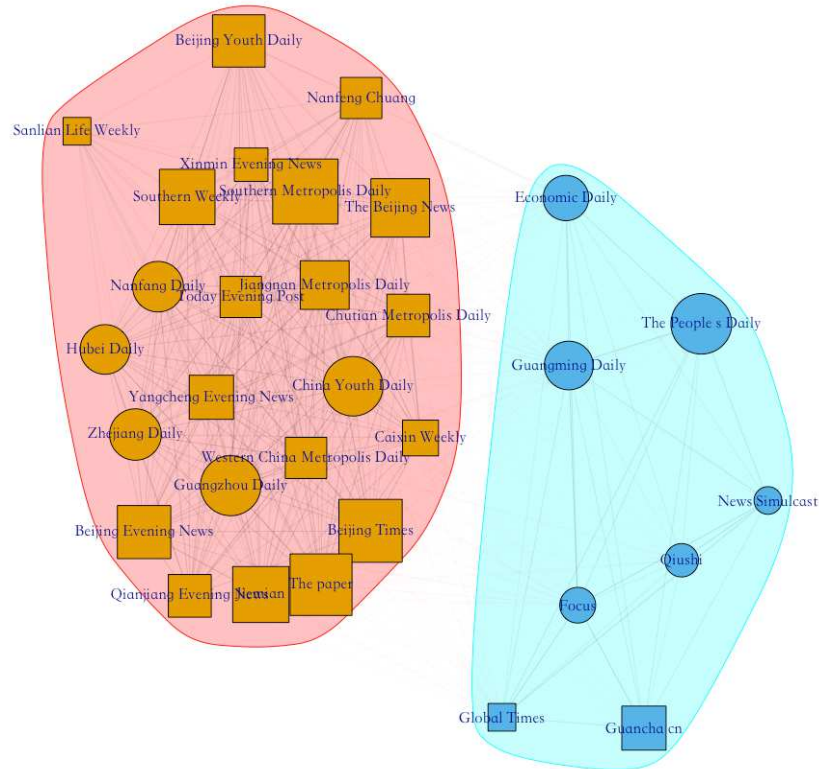
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<sup>44</sup> Interview 2.

A longitudinal analysis on this issue suggests that all of the media outlets in the sample have significantly increased their coverage of corruption after 2012, suggesting the central role of this issue in Xi's governance. In the years 2010 and 2012, one publication on average contains only 6.5 quotations on this issue, whereas in the years 2014 and 2016, the amount has significantly increased to 12.1. The general structure of the landscape remains unchanged.

#### *Government accountability*

A related issue is government accountability, especially the extent to which media and the public can hold the government accountable. While all the publications acknowledge the necessity and importance of government accountability, the opinions featured in them are somewhat different, as shown in the two clusters in Figure 10.



**Figure 10 The ideological landscape of the issue: Government Accountability**

Note: Circle = party media; square = commercial media. The size of the nodes are proportional to the log-transformed amount of expert citations in each outlet.

The larger cluster on the left includes provincial party dailies, commercial dailies, and the publications that are more critical towards those in political power. They overwhelmingly cite political scientists and legal scholars to argue for an accountable government and protection of “*yulun jiandu*,” which refers to media supervision in a partially open environment (Repnikova, 2017b). Some also talk about the impact of “social media supervision” and argue that Weibo and WeChat could be useful in holding the government (mostly local government) accountable. In contrast, the smaller cluster on the right of the graph proposes different opinions. This cluster consists of the orthodox party

outlets and the two nationalistic commercial outlets. They cite expert opinions that on the one hand support the idea of government accountability, but on the other hand make it clear that this does not mean learning from the Western political system. For example, Wu Minsu (吴敏苏), a professor at the Communication University of China, argues that media supervision and positive propaganda can actually be integrated, and the integration is the major feature of “Marxist news values” instead of “Western news values.”<sup>45</sup> Another example is Ou Shujun (欧树军), a professor at Renmin University of China, who cites American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington to argue that the pursuit of government accountability and good governance does not mean the change of the political system.<sup>46</sup> In sum, this cluster is characterized by the affirmation of China’s one-party rule—holding the government accountable without challenging the ruling party. There is no significant changes in the landscape after 2012.

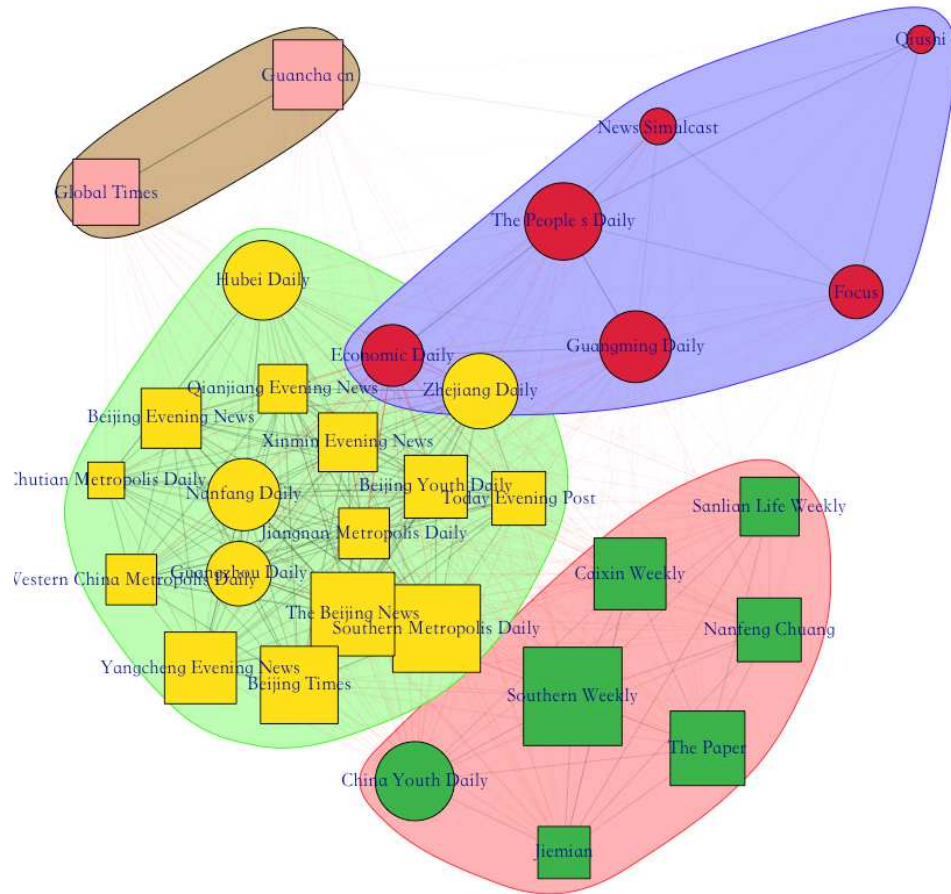
### *Rule of Law*

China has been promoting the idea of “law-based governance” (*yi fa zhi guo*) in recent decades and has given “rule of law” (*fazhi*) a more important place in official rhetoric under Xi Jinping’s rule than his predecessors (Delisle, 2015). However, there are debates about whether the actual approach taken by the Communist Party is truly the liberal notions of legality or simply “rule *by* law” under the guise of “rule *of* law” (Keith, 1994; Turner, Feinerman, & Guy, 2015). The analysis of expert opinions featured in different media outlets reveals different understandings of this issue.

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<sup>45</sup> See <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0419/c1003-28285438.html>.

<sup>46</sup> See [https://www.guancha.cn/OuShuJun/2012\\_11\\_01\\_107136.shtml](https://www.guancha.cn/OuShuJun/2012_11_01_107136.shtml).



**Figure 11 The ideological landscape of the issue: Rule of Law**

Note: Circle = party media; square = commercial media. The size of the nodes are proportional to the log-transformed amount of expert citations in each outlet.

As shown in Figure 11, the four-cluster network of this issue resembles the overall ideological landscape of Chinese media before Xi became the president (Figure 3). A closer look at the quotations suggests that the central-level party outlets (red circles in the figure) closely follow the party line and mainly interview scholars very close to the party who introduce recent developments in building the legal system with Chinese characteristics. Frequently cited prominent figures include: Han Dayuan (韩大元), a

professor of constitutional law and the Dean of Renmin University of China Law School, and also the President of the official organization Chinese Constitutional Law Society, who comments on the development of China's legal system; Ma Huaide (马怀德), a professor and Vice President of China University of Political Science and Law, who has been invited to a top-level meeting on social science research chaired by Xi in May 2016 and provided his opinions on China's legal scholarship and legal reforms; and Li Buyun (李步云), former editor-in-chief of *Chinese Journal of Law* and former head of Department of Jurisprudence at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, who was the first scholar to propose the idea of "law-based governance" and offers his congratulatory opinions on the achievements of China's legal developments on party media.

Expert sources cited in the more critical outlets (green in the figure) provide a different view of rule of law in China. They often point out the problems in the legal system and the need for political reform in order to achieve rule of law. These scholars include professors He Weifang, Jiang Ping, and He Bing, all of whom were outspoken intellectuals mentioned in the previous chapter. Frequent commentators in this cluster also include Zhang Qianfan (张千帆), a law professor at Peking University, who is also an activist promoting general political and judicial reforms in China; Liu Renwen (刘仁文), a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, who is vocal about demolishing the death penalty in China; and Cai Dingjian (蔡定剑), a professor at China University of Political Science, who passed away in late 2010 but still has an important part in the dataset for his influential arguments on constitutionalism and democratic reforms. My interviewees suggest that this group of legal scholars become increasingly marginalized in

media after 2012 due to stricter ideological control, though they are not totally blacklisted. Data show that the critical outlets on average contain 40.4 quotations on this issue in the years 2010 and 2012, but the amount has significantly reduced to 14.2 in the years 2014 and 2016. The other clusters do not see significant longitudinal changes.

In sharp contrast to the this group of legal scholars who are generally in favor of liberal notions of legality, experts unique to the nationalistic cluster (pink in the figure) reject Western ideas and argue for Chinese style rule of law, which is characterized by the absolute leadership of the Communist Party. These scholars include: Yang Xuedong (杨雪冬), Vice Director of the China Center of Comparative Politics and Economics, who maintains that the implementation of rule of law should be based on each country's unique political systems, thus rule of law in China should never be the same as that in the West; Zhi Zhenfeng (支振锋), a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, who also asserts that the Communist Party should define the rule of law in the Chinese context and not be influenced by Western concepts; and Jiang Shigong (强世功), a professor at Peking University, who argues for the Chinese way of constitutionalism and is also a key figure in rejecting the pro-democratic movements in Hong Kong by citing legal documents. The key difference between this cluster and the orthodox party outlets is that these two nationalistic outlets cite few official scholars that are tasked with interpreting the legal developments. Instead, they are more likely to cite scholars who heavily criticize and reject the so-called “Western” liberal notions of rule of law.

Lastly, the largest cluster consists of provincial party and commercial dailies (yellow in the figure). These outlets tend to cite experts of all stances—official, liberal, or

nationalistic, suggesting no clear and coherent ideological position on this issue. To put it in another way, the “internal diversity” of opinions of this cluster is high in terms of accommodating expert sources with conflicting viewpoints.

### *Social Conflicts*

Although China is an authoritarian regime that is generally intolerant towards collective actions, it is not rare to see protests or the so-called “mass incidents” (*qunti xing shijian*). Since the economic reform in the late 1970s, especially during the recent two decades, social conflicts fueled by economic or social grievances have been rising (Cai, 2008; Tong & Lei, 2010). It has been estimated that “[a]s many as 180,000 social protests may take place in China every year” (Lagerkvist, 2015, p. 137). Interviews with journalists and media executives suggest that coverage on this issue is largely in the “grey” area—it may or may not get censored, depending on the nature of the topic, the sensitivity of opinions expressed in the stories, and the general political climate at the time of publication. Network analysis shows that the ideological landscape on this issue is very much similar to that on rule of law, as illustrated in Figure 11. To avoid repetition, the network graph of this issue is shown in Appendix III rather than in the main body of the manuscript.

The orthodox party outlets do not shy away from talking about the conflicts in the society, though they have their own framings of the problem—social conflicts, according to the prevalent opinions featured in these central-level party outlets, are problems of local-level governance. The most frequently cited scholars in this cluster include: Wang Yukai (汪玉凯), a professor at China National Academy of Administration; Hu Jianmiao



(胡建淼), the Dean of the Law School at China National Academy of Administration; and Wang Xixin (王锡铎), a professor of administrative law at Peking University. As reflected in the scholars' expertise in public administration and administrative law, their approach in discussing the issue of social conflicts is depoliticized and reducing them to administrative issues. In this way, the problem is kept far away from hurting the legitimacy of the party's rule and the political system.

The experts unique to the more critical outlets express different opinions. They include: Yu Jianrong (于建嵘), a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and a prominent critic of the government's practices to ensure social stability; Sun Liping (孙立平), a professor of sociology at Tsinghua University and the scholar who estimated the amount of mass incidents in China; and Guo Yuhua (郭于华), a professor and Sun Liping's colleague at Tsinghua University's sociology department, who is also an outspoken intellectual on social problems in China. Their general claim is that social conflicts in China are a symptom of larger and deeper problems that are rooted in the system. Yu Jianrong even proposed a "10-Year Outline of China's Social and Political Development" to solve the problems (Tatlow, 2012). Not surprisingly, Yu's proposal did not get a response from the party-state, and their voices are increasingly less heard from on these media outlets after the year 2012—quotations in this cluster reduce from 12.4 on average in the pre-Xi era to 7.3 in the Xi era.

For the nationalistic publications, the focus of their featured opinions is on two aspects. First, they tend to downplay the conflicts between citizens and the government, and highlight the ethnic conflicts involving Tibetans and Uyghurs. Although ethnic

conflict is even more sensitive than other types of conflicts, they are in the safe zone because they feature opinions calling for heavier crackdowns on potential terrorists and separatists, which arguably aligns with the nationalist sentiment among Han ethnic Chinese. For example, an often cited expert is Turgunjan Tursun (吐尔文江·吐尔逊), a researcher at the Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences, who defends the sharply increasing expenses for maintaining social stability in Xinjiang and Tibet. The second aspect is that, when discussing the conflicts between citizens and the government, these media outlets tend to criticize the wrongdoings of citizens. For example, Chen Baifeng (陈柏峰), a professor at Zhongnan University of Economics and Law, argues that many petitioners in China suffer from paranoid personality disorder and the government should not be responsible for this group of people.<sup>47</sup> It is clear that the nationalistic leaning of these publications are accompanied by a call for a strong and authoritative government that could crack down on both hostile forces in other ethnic groups and trouble makers among the public.

These tough voices are not seen in provincial party and commercial dailies. Instead, they feature a combination of expert sources found in orthodox party outlets and those in the more critical outlets.

### *Civil Society*

The same four-cluster pattern is also seen in the ideological landscape of the last political issue I examine: civil society (see Appendix III). Interviews with multiple journalists

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<sup>47</sup> See [https://www.guancha.cn/ChenBaiFeng/2016\\_11\\_29\\_382177.shtml](https://www.guancha.cn/ChenBaiFeng/2016_11_29_382177.shtml).

suggest that the phrase “civil society” (*gongmin shehui*) became blacklisted since 2012, due to its alleged connection with the global “color revolution,” which involves foreign forces sponsoring civil society for regime change.<sup>48</sup> The data I collected confirm this claim—the phrase “civil society” appeared in 2010, but has become absent since 2012. In the later years, this issue is largely discussed under the phrases of “social organization” (*shehui zuzhi*) and “public welfare” (*gongyi*).

“Social organization” is the official language to refer to non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The party-state has issued multiple guidelines on the development of social organizations (Hildebrandt, 2013). Experts cited in the orthodox party outlets overwhelmingly endorse and interpret these guidelines. For example, Chu Songyan (褚松燕), a professor at China National Academy of Administration maintains that the fundamental principle for social organizations to develop in China is to uphold the party’s leadership and build party branches within these organizations. To put social organizations, including foreign non-governmental organizations operating in China, under the party’s absolute control is the recurring theme seen in this cluster of publications.

In contrast, expert sources in the more critical cluster try to argue for more equal power dynamics among the party-state, the market, and the society. At least before 2012, scholars, including Zhu Jian’gang (朱建刚), a professor at Sun Yat-sen University and the Director of the University’s Institute for Civil Society; Jia Xijin (贾西津), a professor at Tsinghua University and the Deputy Director of the University’s Institute of Philanthropy; and Shao Jian (邵建), a professor at Nanjing Xiaozhuang College and a prolific columnist,

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<sup>48</sup> Interviews 2, 4, 11, and 15.

mainly suggest that social organizations should be an independent force in China, which works with the government and the market for a better society. Their voices have been diminishing since 2012. Data show that there are on average 13.6 quotations on this issue in each critical outlet in 2010 and 2012, but the number has reduced to 5.6 in the years 2014 and 2016.

The nationalistic outlets' standpoint on this issue is close to but still different from the orthodox party outlets. Their focus is on the threats posed by foreign NGOs. For example, Ni Feng (倪峰), a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Institute of American Studies, claims that American NGOs are in fact in close connection with the American government—they either receive funding from the U.S. government, or hire retired government officials. Such claims are used to support the broad claim that civil society organizations are used as a tool to subvert the Chinese regime, and therefore should be seen as a potential threat to China.

Again, the provincial party dailies take a more “middle-of-the-road” position and accommodate more internal diversity on this issue. While they rarely feature the nationalistic voices, these dailies carry opinions from both state-endorsing experts and those who tend to promote more liberal ideas. In general, the ideological landscapes of the issues of rule of law, social conflicts, and civil society are very similar, with central-level party media closely aligning with the party line, critical publications pushing for more liberal notions (and such voices become less frequently heard after 2012), nationalistic outlets highlighting the threats from foreign forces, and provincial dailies showcasing

more diversified opinions. This pattern is also seen in the ideological landscapes of multiple economic issues, which I discuss in the next section.

## **Economic Issues**

### *The Role of the Government in Economy*

My examination of the ideological landscape of Chinese media on economic issues starts with an issue that is directly related to political power—the extent to which the government should intervene in the market. As mentioned above, China started its economic reform in the late 1970s and built the “socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics.” There are different opinions regarding the actual nature of China’s economy under this official title. Some argue that it is already a capitalist economy, some argue that the market is still tightly controlled by the government and therefore it does not qualify as a market economy, and some name it “state capitalism” (Long, Herrera, & Andréani, 2018; Naughton & Tsai, 2015). The attitudes towards this issue also vary across media outlets, and the general landscape follows the four-cluster pattern discussed above. The network graph is included in Appendix III.

The orthodox party outlets generally laud the achievements of the socialist market economy. For example, *Qiushi* Magazine quoted the President of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Wang Weiguang (王伟光)’s arguments that “the socialist market economy is the key to the success of China” and that “the socialist market economy is not simply a combination of socialism and market economy, rather, it requires innovative practices to

solve the specific questions that were not solved by other socialist countries.”<sup>49</sup> Wang suggests that the market should play “the determining role” in allocation of economic resources, while the government should play “a better role.” Similarly, an interview with Xu Zhengzhong (许正中), a professor at China National Academy of Administration, published in *The People’s Daily* also claims that the government should play “a better role” and should not “act arbitrarily,” but no concrete policies are discussed to specify the general principles. This kind of empty language is repeatedly seen in official party media, suggesting a highly pragmatic approach in the official economic policy: there is no claim for an exact role of the government; it will be determined in a case-by-case manner.

Both the critical and nationalistic media outlets take a clearer stance on this issue than the orthodox party outlets, and their views are in sharp contrast to each other. The critical publications frequently cite the proponents of free market and deregulation, including two of China’s most influential economists Wu Jinglian (吴敬琏) and Mao Yushi (茅于軾), Peking University professor Zhang Weiyong (张维迎), China Europe International Business School professor Xu Xiaonina (许小年), and Yale University professor Chen Zhiwu (陈志武). They usually attribute problems in China’s economy to overregulation and the government’s intervention for its own interests. It is also notable that the Anglo-Austrian economist Friedrich A. Hayek, a prominent critic of socialism and government intervention and author of *The Road to Serfdom*, makes frequent appearances in this cluster. From the opposite standpoint, the two nationalistic outlets cite experts to question the free market and call for more government regulations. Notably, their major

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<sup>49</sup> See [http://www.qstheory.cn/zxdk/2014/201402/201401/t20140114\\_312573.htm](http://www.qstheory.cn/zxdk/2014/201402/201401/t20140114_312573.htm).

strategies are to highlight the cases of market failure in the U.S. and Europe, and to directly cite (and distort to some extent) the market critics in the West. For example, in an article on Guancha.cn, Tsinghua University professor Cui Zhiyuan (崔之元) claims that the U.S. has suffered severely from the 2008 financial crisis and wants to learn from China's socialist market economy, which is characterized by the nationalization of key assets.<sup>50</sup> Another example is that *Global Times* cites American economist and *The New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman's critique of Reaganomics as a supporting argument for "big government and small society."<sup>51</sup> Here we see an interesting dynamic: *The New York Times* is generally considered as a progressive and anti-nationalism publication in the U.S., but some of its arguments on the necessity of government intervention and regulation get picked up by more conservative and nationalistic outlets in China calling for a stronger government. This reversed alignment of issue attitudes is due to the different nature and history of the regimes.

For the provincial party and commercial dailies, they cite both the pro-free market economists and the scholars endorsing the official line. The expert sources cited in nationalist outlets are rarely absent in those dailies, suggesting a generally pro-market environment in Chinese media, which will be confirmed in the analysis of the following issues.

Longitudinal analysis indicates that there is no significant changes between the pre-Xi and Xi eras.

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<sup>50</sup> See [https://www.guancha.cn/CuiZhiYuan/2012\\_10\\_17\\_104173.shtml](https://www.guancha.cn/CuiZhiYuan/2012_10_17_104173.shtml).

<sup>51</sup> See [http://opinion.huanqiu.com/opinion\\_world/2014-08/5103912.html](http://opinion.huanqiu.com/opinion_world/2014-08/5103912.html).

### *State-owned and private enterprises*

An issue closely related to the role of the government in the market economy are the state-owned enterprises (SOEs), especially the controversies over the alleged unfair advantage and lower efficiency of SOEs as compared with private enterprises. The share of the private sector in the economy significantly increased during the 1980s and 1990s, but since the 2000s there has been a trend known as *guojin mintui* (“the state advances as the private sector retreats”), which refers to the resurgence of SOEs and the decline of private enterprises especially in the more lucrative industries (Huang, 2011). There has been constant worries among business owners about state economic policy. The most recent example was in October 2018, when concerns were so great that President Xi Jinping had to write an open letter to private business owners to sooth their fears amid wavering economic growth. The letter, published in State News Agency Xinhua, confirmed the “indelible” contribution of the private sector to China’s economy and promised to continue supporting the development of private business (Zhou, 2018).

The network graph, which includes four clusters, is included in Appendix III. Similar to the previous issue, central-level party media mainly cite scholars close to the government to laud and interpret the policies on SOEs and private enterprises. The most frequently seen experts include: Li Jin (李锦), the principal researcher at the Institute of Chinese Enterprises affiliated with the official organization China Enterprises Confederation; Wen Zongyu (文宗瑜), the Director at the Institute of Fiscal Science under the Ministry of Finance; and Xu Baoli (许保利), a researcher at the Research Center under the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council.



Their general argument is that both SOEs and private enterprises are important and should be upgraded to better serve the development of the economy. In the year 2016, the government pushed several major mergers among SOEs. And scholars cited in this cluster of publications argue that efficiency has been boosted thanks to the mergers, and that this is great for Chinese enterprises ability to compete in the global market.

The two clusters of more unorthodox outlets are once again opposing each other on this issue. The more critical publications frequently quote experts who are skeptical about SOEs' contribution to the economy and passionate in promoting further privatization. These experts include the aforementioned economists Zhang Weiyong, Chen Zhiwu, and Xu Xiaonian, as well as Sheng Hong (盛洪), Executive Director of the non-governmental think tank Unirule Institute of Economics, who was cited in *Southern Weekly* that SOEs enjoy unfair advantages such as tax breaks and free lands offered by the government.<sup>52</sup> They also frequently criticize the monopoly of SOEs in lucrative industries such as energy and telecom. In contrast, the nationalistic publications overwhelmingly quote intellectuals who are defenders of the SOEs, including Chen Ping (陈平), a researcher at Fudan University's China Institute, who maintains that SOEs are key to social stability in China and act as an important player to reduce the harm brought by multinational corporations to China; Guo Songmin (郭松民), a prominent Maoist academic and commentator, who claims that SOEs have been demonized by news media and the narrative is conspired by multinational corporations who want to eliminate China's SOEs;<sup>53</sup> and Zhou Zhanqiang (周战强), a professor at Central University of Finance and Economics, who argues that

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<sup>52</sup> See <http://finance.sina.com.cn/review/fxzs/20100304/11077499081.shtml>.

<sup>53</sup> See [http://opinion.huanqiu.com/opinion\\_china/2014-05/4995481.html](http://opinion.huanqiu.com/opinion_china/2014-05/4995481.html).

SOEs play an important role in providing public goods, which makes it irreplaceable by private business. Interestingly, foreign experts are again quoted in this cluster of media outlets. For example, *Global Times* quotes Nicholas R. Lardy, an economist at the Peterson Institute for International Economics in the U.S., who suggests that the role of SOEs in China has been exaggerated and that China's economy should not be seen as state capitalism.<sup>54</sup>

The standpoint of provincial dailies on this issue is a mixture of orthodox party outlets' and critical outlets' views. They give significant spaces to both interpreters of the state policies and the pro-privatization economists. Longitudinal analysis does not reveal any significant difference before and after 2012.

#### *Tax and Financial Revenue (state vs. citizens)*

We now turn to the discussions on economic equality. Two issues are at the center: the divide between the state's and citizens' fortune, and the disparity between rich and poor. China has seen a steady, fast growth for the past four decades, becoming the world's second largest economy in 2010. However, there are controversies over whether ordinary people in China have gotten their fair share of the growing cake, and whether the state becomes wealthy whereas the people remain relatively poor.

We see the four-cluster network structure again on this issue—the same outlets cluster together in a similar way, though they are citing different groups of experts depending on the issue (see Appendix III for the graph). There is plenty of coverage of this

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<sup>54</sup> See <http://oversea.huanqiu.com/article/2014-09/5134153.html>.

issue in the orthodox party outlets. *The People's Daily* and *The Economic Daily* discuss the increased rate of household income every quarter since 2014, when the National Bureau of Statistics started to publish the numbers. Experts affiliated with the central government are frequently quoted to provide their analysis and offer an optimistic prediction. They include: Liu Shangxi (刘尚希), President of The Research Institute for Fiscal Science affiliated with the Ministry of Finance; Bai Jingming (白景明), Vice President of the same institute; and Yao Jingyuan (姚景源), a researcher at the Counselor's Office of the State Council. A vivid example was that in the first half of 2016, when the increase in the rate of household income was lower than the GDP growth rate, the party newspapers published lengthy articles and quoted extensively from those official scholars to argue that the increase rate of household income in China was still higher than any other country in the world, and that continued high increase rates in future would be guaranteed because the government had been working very hard on ensuring higher income for all.

Instead of lauding the current policies and projecting a rosy future, the critical outlets focus on the more disturbing aspects of the situation and call for tax cuts and other reforms. The aforementioned Yale economist Chen Zhiwu frequently appears in this cluster of publications for his estimations on the growth rate of the government's financial revenue. For example, he estimated that in 2011, the government's financial revenue was 26.8% higher than in 2010—that is triple the growth rate of GDP of that year. These numbers are often cited as evidence that the government has accumulated too much fortune and left too little for the people. Economists Cao Yuanzheng (曹远征), Li Weiguang (李炜光), and Xu Xiaonian are also heavily cited by these publications for their call on structural

tax reduction and “giving back the wealth to the people” (*huan fu yu min*). For them, ensuring the people a larger share of the wealth not only contributes to the economic development by boosting consumption, but also matters for equality and justice in the market economy.

For the nationalistic publications, they again take a more statist approach by citing experts who affirm the importance of state financial revenue. For example, Tsinghua University professor Hu Angang (胡鞍钢) argues that the growth in financial revenue ensures the ability of the central government to macro-control the economy and to maintain equality among different provinces by transferring payments; i.e., getting more revenue from the richer provinces and transferring part of their revenue to the poorer ones. The overall amount of coverage on this issue by these two publications is relatively small (9.4 quotations on average as compared with 20.1 quotations on average for other outlets).

In a now familiar pattern, the provincial party and commercial dailies feature both the more critical voices calling for tax cuts and a larger share of wealth for the people, and the champions for official policies as in central-level party outlets. No significant longitudinal changes are identified on this issue.

### *Inequality (rich vs. poor)*

Concerns about economic inequality in China are not only about how the government may have taken an oversized share of the economy, but also about how the income gap between rich and poor, as well as between urban and rural residents, may have significantly widened. It has been estimated that China’s income inequality, driven by the rural-urban

gap and regional disparities, ranks among the highest in the world, with the Gini coefficient in the range of 0.53–0.55<sup>55</sup> (Xie & Zhou, 2014).

There are four clusters of media outlets in the landscape of this issue (see Appendix III for the graph). The Chinese government seldom publishes the official numbers of the Gini coefficient. As reflected in the quotations in central-level party outlets, the only official statistic that could regularly infer income inequality is the average income for urban and rural residents. Zhang Yansheng (张燕生), a researcher and Secretary-general at the Academic Committee of the National Development and Reform Commission, suggests in an interview with *The People's Daily* that the urban-rural income gap has decreased from 2009 to 2015. Similarly, other expert sources cited in the party outlets, including Renmin University professor and member of the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> National People's Congress Standing Committee Zheng Gongcheng (郑功成) and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences rural economics researcher Li Guoxiang (李国祥), mainly talk about achievements in reducing inequality, and the key role of the government in continuing to alleviate the problem.

More discussions about the darker side of the Chinese economy, and calls for systematic reforms, are seen in the cluster of critical news outlets. The most frequently and uniquely cited experts in this cluster include: Wang Xiaolu (王小鲁), a professor at the Economic Research Institute of China Reform Foundation, who suggests that the income gap could only be solved by political reforms and public supervision of the government; Li Shi (李实), a professor at Beijing Normal University and the Executive Director of

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<sup>55</sup> A Gini coefficient larger than 0.4 is considered a warning of income inequality, and above 0.5 means severe inequality.

University's Institute for Income Distribution and Poverty Studies, who has been studying income inequality in China for decades and published his own calculations of the Gini coefficient; and Xu Xiaonian, the aforementioned pro-market economist, who challenges the official statistics and once argued that "even fairy tales wouldn't dare to write in this way [to understate the inequality in China]."<sup>56</sup>

Opposite to these harsh critiques, the nationalistic outlets provide opinions from another group of experts who defend China's situation in two ways. First, income equality is a worldwide problem, and some Western countries have even wider gaps between rich and poor. For example, Ding Yifan (丁一凡), a researcher at the Development Research Center of the State Council, argues that globalization has widened the global income gap. French economist Thomas Piketty, author of *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, has also been frequently quoted to demonstrate the problem on a global scale. Second, state capacity and strong government is once again emphasized as a solution to the problem of inequality. In an interview conducted by *Global Times* with Thomas Piketty, his alleged argument that economic equality should be ensured by state power is emphasized by the paper.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, He Xuefeng (贺雪峰), a professor of rural governance at Wuhan University, appears frequently in these two publications with his statement that the problem of urban-rural divide should not be solved by the privatization of rural lands, which is a proposal supported by many pro-market economists.

As for the provincial dailies, they again feature a relatively diverse group of expert interviewees, the majority of whom appear either in the cluster of orthodox party outlets, or

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<sup>56</sup> See <http://www.infzm.com/content/9812>.

<sup>57</sup> See <http://world.huanqiu.com/exclusive/2014-10/5160343.html>.

the cluster of critical outlets. In other words, they feature both opinions that lauding the achievements in reducing the inequality and experts that point to the problems in the income inequality in China.

No significant longitudinal difference is identified in the analysis.

### *Housing Price Regulation*

Housing price is a widely discussed issue in China, not only because it is deeply important to everyone's life, but also because of the exceptionally rapid growth rate—by the end of 2017, the 100 City Price Index in China rose from USD\$134 per square foot in 2010 to USD\$202, which was 38% percent higher than the medium price in the U.S. (Balding, 2018). Different media outlets, however, attribute the phenomenon to different factors and provide different solutions. The graph of the landscape is included in Appendix III.

The orthodox party outlets continue to stick to the official line, which is quite inconsistent and torn. On the one hand, high housing prices could potentially lead to social unrest and create an unfavorable views of the ruling party among the public, especially among the grassroots. On the other hand, real estate is a major driver of China's economy, and the government does not want to risk slowing down the economy, which would also lead to serious social problems. One journalist at a central-level party newspaper commented in my interview that the government has been paying lip service to housing price regulations. "We constantly cover the new regulations and interview experts who say that the price will be stabilized, but the actual price has been surging with only a few

occasional bumps.”<sup>58</sup> For them, the key is to show that the authority is concerned about this situation, and government does issue new regulations from time to time. However, as a key driver of the economy, the real estate sector has never been in actual decline during past two decades. The experts arguing that the government has met its responsibility in regulating housing prices and providing their optimistic predictions include: Ren Xingzhou (任兴洲), a researcher and the former Director-general at the Institute for Market Economy under the Development Research Center of the State Council; Liu Hongyu (刘洪玉), a professor at Tsinghua University and the Director of the University’s Institute of Real Estate Studies; and Yi Xianrong (易宪容), a researcher at the Financial Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

While also covering those regulations, the critical outlets frequently cite a group of experts who point out that regulations would not solve the problem unless they touch on two issues. First, the “land finance” (*tudi caizheng*) model, which refers to “the generation of revenues for local governments through land sales or transfers, land taxes, and leases” (Zheng, Wang, & Cao, 2014, p. 130). For example, pro-market economist Li Yining (厉以宁) argues in multiple publications that housing prices will continue to rise as long as local governments rely on selling the lands for higher and higher prices to generate financial revenues. The second issue is the over-issuing of currency, which causes inflation and reduces the purchasing power of money. The aforementioned economist Wu Jinglian holds this view and his opinion is also featured in multiple news outlets in this cluster.

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<sup>58</sup> Interview 11.



Neither ending the land finance model nor fixing the currency over-issuing problem is the suggested solution by expert sources in the nationalistic outlets. For them, public housing is the ultimate solution. For example, Su Wei (苏伟), a professor at Chongqing Party School, has been cited for his promotion of the “Chongqing Model,” which includes building a large amount of public rental houses.

The provincial dailies again feature a more diverse group of expert interviewees. They include the interpreters of the official policies, the more critical voices of the deeper problems, as well as a unique group of economists who predict the real estate market without giving any normative judgement. This group of economists include director of the E-house China Research and Development Institution Yan Yuejin (严跃进), China International Capital Corp's (CICC) chief economist Ha Jiming (哈继铭), and Hong Kong Exchanges and Clearing Limited chief China economist Ba Shusong (巴曙松). This group is the largest in provincial dailies (around 75% of quotations are from them), suggesting a relatively non-opinionated approach towards the housing price issue by these papers.

For the longitudinal analysis, no significant change in the network between the pre and post Xi era emerged.

### *Interpretation of Key Economic Statistics*

Housing prices could be seen as an important economic statistic, and there are several other key statistics that are frequently covered in Chinese media: GDP (Gross Domestic Product), CPI (Consumer Price Index), PMI (Purchasing Managers Index), and two major stock market indexes—SSE Composite Index and SZSE Component Index. One might suspect

that different media outlets would provide distinct interpretations of these statistics. However, network analysis shows that all media outlets in my sample share very similar interviewees on this set of issues. The graph is very similar to Figure 9, and is included in Appendix III. And there is no significant difference between the pre-Xi and Xi eras.

The most cited experts commenting on key economic statistics are chief economists at various banks and other financial institutions. They largely give technical analysis on the latest figures. For example, how the global economic recovery, the anti-corruption campaign in China that reduced luxury consumption, and the severe winter weather conditions have worked together to influence the performance of CPI. Unlike previously discussed issues, deeper analysis related to the structural factors is rarely provided in any of the outlets. My interviews with journalists suggest that a working routine has been formulated in covering these numbers, which are reported on a regular basis. The routine includes interviewing the regularly quoted economists, who are used to providing technical analysis. One journalist at a provincial commercial daily shared that “when major quarterly and yearly economic statistics are announced, I always call the same two economists, and they always provide quotable analysis. Sometimes they send in their analysis even before I contact them.”<sup>59</sup> This phenomenon suggests the influence of journalistic routines on interviewee selection.

### *Currency*

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<sup>59</sup> Interview 10.

The alleged manipulation by the Chinese government of its currency (Renminbi) is an issue that has drawn global attention and became a talking point in Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. How do Chinese domestic media cover this issue? Analysis shows that the expert sources appearing in the media outlets are quite similar, resulting in a one-cluster network (see Appendix III). The most cited experts are economists based in banks and other financial institutions, as in the previous issue. They provide technical analysis of the ups and downs in the currency exchange rates on a regular basis, without touching the more sensitive issue of currency manipulation.

There is also another significant group of expert interviewees across all media outlets whose major argument is to defend China against the criticisms from the U.S. Interestingly, this group mainly consists of high-profile non-Chinese economists, including Joseph E. Stiglitz, a professor at Columbia University and a recipient of the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences; Pieter Bottelier, a senior adjunct professor at the Johns Hopkins University and former Chief of the World Bank's resident mission in China; and Fred Bergsten, a researcher and Director emeritus at the Peterson Institute for International Economics. They are frequently quoted in Chinese media for their arguments that China is not a currency manipulator and that changes in currency exchange rates won't help solve the problem of U.S. trade deficit. Interviews with multiple journalists suggest that the controversies over currency manipulation is considered highly sensitive and subject to heavy censorship. For example, a media executive at a party newspaper suggested that they received a large amount of orders from the propaganda department

regarding this issue, and were granted little freedom in coverage.<sup>60</sup> The nature of this issue is similar to that of sovereignty and national interests as discussed in the previous section.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, there are two major reasons contributing to the homogeneity in expert sourcing patterns on the issue of currency: working routines that lead journalists to seek out economists who in turn regularly give technical analysis of the currency exchange rates, and political sensitivity of this issue that sharply narrows the pool of potential interviewees.

There is no significant longitudinal change identified in the analysis.

## **Social & Cultural Issues**

### *Gender equality*

I now turn to the realm of social and cultural issues. Gender equality, women's rights, and LGBTQ rights are globally significant issues. In Chairman Mao's China (1949-1977), the party-state, following the Marxist ideology, promoted the idea that "women can hold up half the sky." Although there were significant limitations in this "state feminism" approach, China did well in terms of women employment rates (Wang, 2005). The market reform after Mao has changed the situation by bringing more freedom to women but at the same time creating more inequality in the job market and introducing consumerism to women in China (Cao & Hu, 2007).

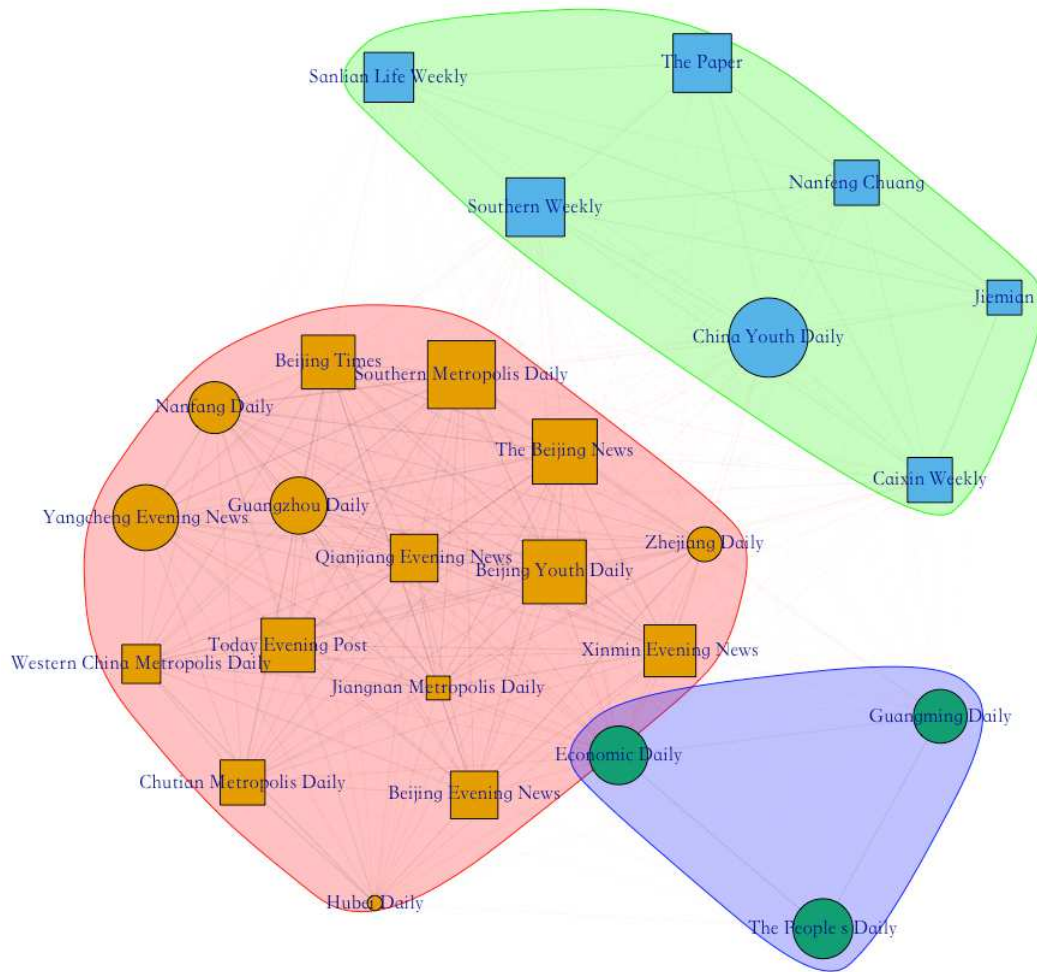
Figure 12 shows the ideological landscape of Chinese media on the issue of gender equality. The most significant difference between this graph and previous graphs is that the

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<sup>60</sup> Interview 8.

<sup>61</sup> Interviews 6, 11, and 29.

two nationalistic outlets are absent, and half of the orthodox party outlets are also missing (*News Simulcast*, *Focus*, and *Qiushi*), suggesting that these outlets are not interested in discussing gender issues.



**Figure 12 The ideological landscape of the issue: Gender equality**

Note: Circle = party media; square = commercial media. The size of the nodes are proportional to the log-transformed amount of expert citations in each outlet.

The remaining three central-level party newspapers tend to frame the issue as a public policy problem, as indicated by expert interviewees who mainly come from the law

and policy sector. A frequently quoted expert is Sun Xiaomei (孙晓梅), a professor at China Women's University and a deputy to the National People's Congress. She has been vocal in fighting against gender-discrimination in employment and against domestic violence. As a lawmaker in the national legislature, her main approach is to call for laws and regulations that could protect women's rights. Liu Xiaonan (刘小楠), a professor at the China University of Political Science Law, also appears in this cluster of media outlets to provide the comparison between anti-discrimination laws in China and in the West, as well as to suggest possible legislation.

Rather than focusing on law and policy, the critical media outlets emphasize the social construction of gender norms. Sociologists and sexologists Li Yinhe (李银河) and Fang Gang (方刚) are frequently cited in these publications for their arguments that China should pay more attention to how social norms suppress women's rights. Li Yinhe is also a prominent advocate for LGBTQ rights in China, and she often talks about this topic in the critical media outlets. In contrast, the orthodox party outlets do not talk about LGBTQ at all, mainly due to the sensitivity of this issue, as suggested by an interviewee at a party newspaper. He shared that "our newspaper keeps silent on this issue because the government holds rather ambiguous attitudes towards sexual minority groups: it neither explicitly recognizes their rights, nor openly criticizes them."<sup>62</sup>

As with previously discussed economic issues, provincial party and commercial media also feature a diverse group of expert interviewees on gender equality. They include law and policy experts like Liu Xiaonan, women's rights advocates like Li Yinhe, and also

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<sup>62</sup> Interview 21.

a group of “men’s rights advocates.” The most prominent figure in the last group is Sun Yunxiao (孙云晓), a researcher at the China Youth Research Center, who argues that China is experiencing a “masculinity crisis” and calls people to “save the boys.” The crisis, according to Sun, is evident because boys are now less assertive and perform worse than their girl classmates. Another example is Peking University sociology professor Zheng Yefu (郑也夫), who argues that men are born to be strong whereas women are born to be weak. Zheng’s stereotypical opinion is cited in multiple provincial dailies. In sum, these balanced outlets feature a diverse range of opinions regarding gender equality.

No significant longitudinal changes were found in my analysis.

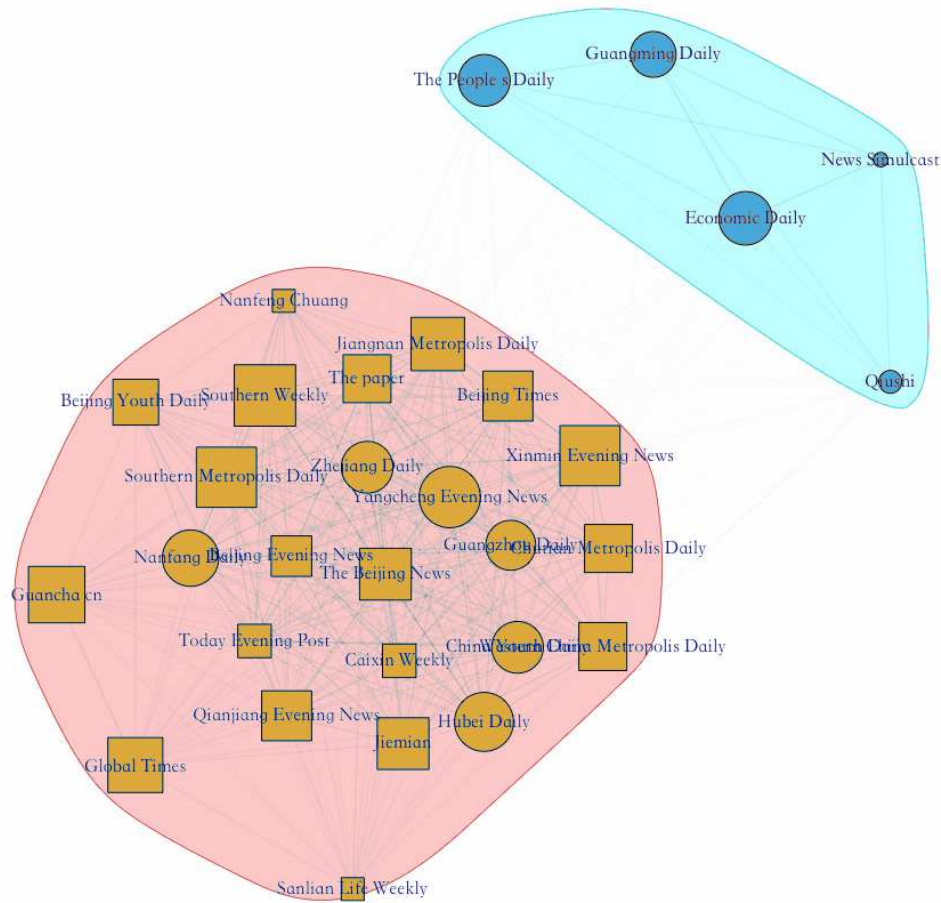
### *One-child Policy*

China started its one-child policy in the 1980s and allegedly prevented 400 million births (Parkinson, 2015). The policy was abolished in late 2015, after years of criticism both from abroad and home. In China, the major concern is that the policy has been changed too late—China is aging rapidly and there might be a workforce shortage soon. Some even argue that in order to boost the fertility rate, which is already too low, the government has to encourage couples to give birth to more than two babies.

One of the most prominent critics of the one-child policy is Yi Fuxian (易富贤), a scientist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, who wrote the book *Big Country with an Empty Nest* to highlight the problem. Yi claims that China’s future situation will be worse than Japan today, and that China will never overtake the U.S. economically because of the declining economic vitality doomed

by low fertility rates (Yi, 2019). Yi is one of the most frequently cited experts on this issue in most of the media outlets in my sample—except the orthodox party outlets. As shown in Figure 13, there is a clear divide between central-level orthodox party media and other publications. Yi’s name is never mentioned in the central-level party media. Similarly, experts who make frequent appearances in publications other than central-level party media also include Tsinghua University professor Wang Ming (王名), Renmin University professor Liu Shuang (刘爽), and Stanford University PhD and Ctrip former CEO Liang Jianzhang (梁建章), all of whom are critics of the one-child policy and have been calling for abolishing the policy for years before 2015. It is notable that the critical outlets and the nationalistic outlets have reached rare “agreement” on this issue by citing a similar group of expert interviewees.





**Figure 13 The ideological landscape of the issue: One-child policy**

Note: Circle = party media; square = commercial media. The size of the nodes are proportional to the log-transformed amount of expert citations in each outlet.

In contrast, the orthodox party outlets tend to cite experts who endorse the timing of the state policy, including Zhai Zhenwu (翟振武), Dean of the School of Sociology and Population Studies at Renmin University of China, who argues that we don't need to worry about the fertility rate, which is underestimated and does not represent the actual situation; and Zhang Xuying (张许颖), a researcher at China Population and Development Research

Center, who also suggests that the abolishment of the one-child policy is not late and gives optimistic estimations about the future fertility rate.

Although China changed the policy in 2015, there is no significant longitudinal changes in terms of expert opinions featured in media outlets—they hold on to their stances regardless of the changes in official policy.

### *Environmental Protection*

China's rapid economic growth is accompanied by severe environmental pollution and degradation, which causes social and health problems (Xie, 2012; Xu, Chen, & Ye, 2013). In response to the problems, the party-state has made promises to create an “ecological civilization.” President Xi Jinping maintains that “green mountains and clear water are equal to mountains of gold and silver,” and has doubled down on his support for the low-carbon energy transition of China and the UN climate accord (Geall, 2017). The orthodox party outlets, as in a number of issues discussed above, mainly cite expert sources singing the praises of the government's policies. The most frequently cited experts include: He Jiankun (何建坤), a professor and the Director of Low Carbon Economy Lab of Tsinghua University and the Deputy Director of National Expert Committee on Climate Change, who suggests that China's natural environment will be improved as long as the policies are implemented and that the transition to low-carbon economy could be an opportunity for China; Gao Shiji (高世楫), a researcher and the Director-General of Institute for Resources and Environment Policies at the Development Research Center of the State Council, who argues that the Communist Party has incorporated environmental

protection into China's modernization project, which will benefit the people and the whole world; and Su Yang (苏杨), a researcher at the Development Research Center of the State Council, who claims that there is misinformation involved in people's concerns about pollution and that more education on the public's scientific literacy is needed.

In the four-cluster ideological landscape on this issue (shown in Appendix III), the critical outlets tend to cite voices that point to the problems and call for actions. These expert sources include: Wang Canfa (王灿发), a professor at the China University of Political Science and Law and the founder and Director of the Center for Legal Assistance to Pollution Victims, who often criticize the lack of legal protection on pollution victims as well as the lack of transparency in government information about pollution; Shan Guangnai (单光鼐), a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, who argues that massive incidents caused by environmental pollution combined with the government's ineffective responses is a serious social problem in China; and the aforementioned economist Wu Jinglian, who posits that the degradation of China's natural environment has not stopped and that the only solution is the total transformation of China's growth model, which is now largely based on the unsustainable exploitation of the natural world.

In contrast, the solution provided by scholars cited in the nationalistic publications follows a distinct approach: the problem will gradually be solved as China's economy continues to develop. For them, pollution is an inevitable problem on the road to a developed economy, and things will get better once China's development reaches a certain stage. Therefore, it is not a good strategy to ask the government to slow down the economy for environmental considerations. The scholars include: Tsinghua University professor

Wang Shuxiao (王书肖), Deputy Director of the Beijing Academy of Ecocivilization Jia Weilie (贾卫列), and the aforementioned pro-government economist Justin Yifu Lin.

The provincial party and commercial dailies again feature a combination of the three groups of expert interviewees discussed above, making up the fourth cluster in the ideological landscape. No longitudinal changes is identified in the four clusters.

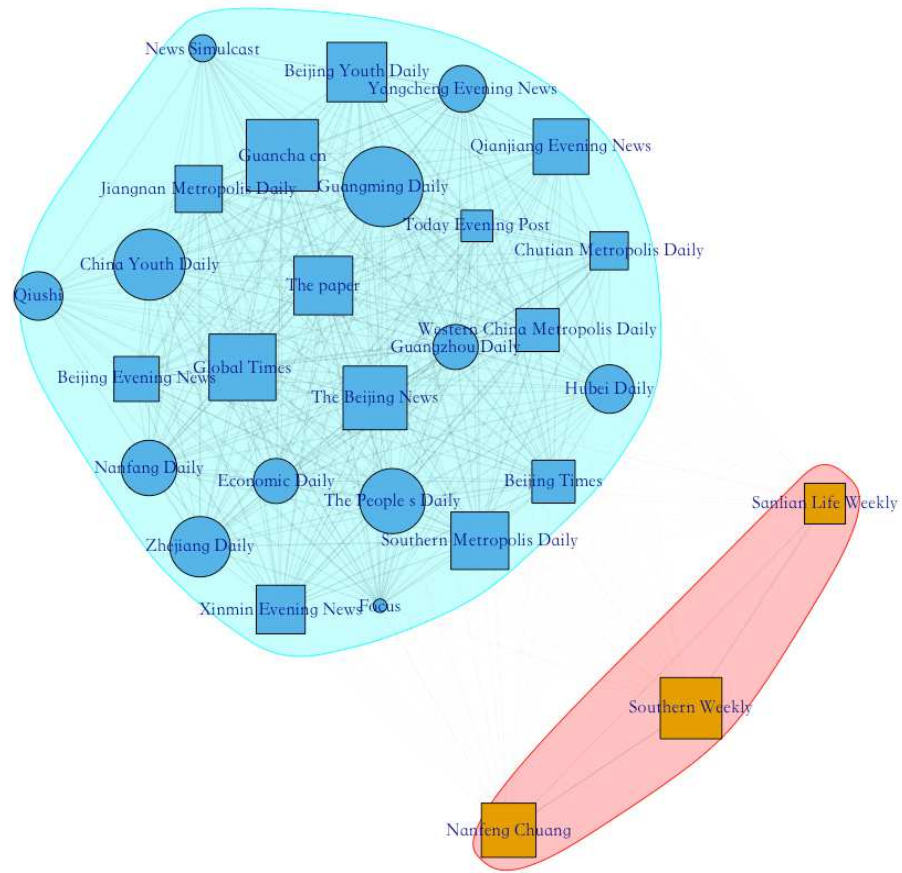
### *Traditional Culture*

Lastly, we examine the positions of Chinese media on the issue of traditional culture. China observers have noticed the recent revival of traditional culture and argue that Confucianism, classical literature, traditional Chinese clothing, traditional Chinese medicine, and other traditional cultural elements have been promoted by the party-state as a tool to boost national pride and resist Western culture and political ideas (Page, 2015).

Network analysis shows that most media outlets—except for a few critical publications—share similar expert sources on this issue. A closer look at the sources reveals that they are mostly proponents of traditional culture. The most frequently cited scholars include: Tu Weiming (杜维明), a Harvard professor emeritus and Chair Professor of Humanities and Founding Director of the Institute for Advanced Humanistic Studies at Peking University, who is one of the most prominent Confucian of the 20th and 21st centuries; Zhang Liwen (张立文), Dean of the Institute of Confucian Study at Renmin University, who uses Confucianism to interpret Xi Jinping's thoughts on governance; and Chen Lai (陈来), Dean of Tsinghua University's Academy of Chinese Learning, who is also active in connecting Confucianism with the current regime and has been invited to

give lectures on Chinese traditional culture and patriotism to top leaders including Xi Jinping.

While Tu Weiming and some other figures of “neo-Confucianism” also make appearances in the more critical outlets, their opinions also get challenged to some extent in these publications. Scholars, including Sun Yat-sen University professor Yuan Weishi (袁伟时) and Beihang University professor Gao Quanxi (高全喜), argue that traditional culture should be examined within the framework of universal values written in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international documents. They are generally in doubt about the current revival of traditional culture in China. However, it should be mentioned that there are only three outlets in this critical cluster—*Southern Weekly*, *Sanlian Life Weekly*, and *Nanfeng Chuang*. *Jiemian* and *Caixin Weekly* have no coverage on this issue, and *China Youth Daily* does not feature the more critical voices on this issue, suggesting a tighter control on this issue for party newspapers. In terms of longitudinal analysis, no significant difference between the pre-Xi and Xi eras is found.



**Figure 14 The ideological landscape of the issue: Traditional culture**

Note: Circle = party media; square = commercial media. The size of the nodes are proportional to the log-transformed amount of expert citations in each outlet.

### Summary

The ideological clusters of the media outlets on the twenty issues are summarized in Table 6. There are nine issues that follow the four-cluster pattern as in the overall structure of ideological landscape in 2010 and 2012. In addition, there is only a single cluster on five issues, reflecting either tight censorship or the influence of journalistic working routines as discussed in this chapter. The structure of network varies on the other six issues.

**Table 6 Ideological clusters on major issues**

| <b>Issues</b>                                    | <b>OPO</b> | <b>PPD</b> | <b>PCD</b> | <b>Cri</b> | <b>Nat</b> |
|--|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Overall  |            |            |            |            |            |
| Overall (2010 & 2012)                            |            |            |            |            |            |
| Overall (2014 & 2016)                            |            |            |            |            |            |
| <b>Political</b>                                 |            |            |            |            |            |
| Adherence to party ideology                      |            |            |            |            |            |
| The “China Model”                                |            |            |            |            |            |
| Sovereignty and territorial integrity            |            |            |            |            |            |
| China’s international presence                   |            |            |            |            |            |
| Corruption                                       |            |            |            |            |            |
| Government accountability                        |            |            |            |            |            |
| Rule of law                                      |            |            |            |            |            |
| Social conflicts                                 |            |            |            |            |            |
| Civil society                                    |            |            |            |            |            |
| <b>Economic</b>                                  |            |            |            |            |            |
| The role of the government in economy            |            |            |            |            |            |
| State-owned and private enterprises              |            |            |            |            |            |
| Tax and income distribution (state vs. citizens) |            |            |            |            |            |
| Inequality (rich vs. poor)                       |            |            |            |            |            |
| Housing price regulation                         |            |            |            |            |            |
| Interpretation of key economic statistics        |            |            |            |            |            |
| Currency   |            |            |            |            |            |
| <b>Social &amp; Cultural</b>                     |            |            |            |            |            |
| Gender equality                                  |            |            |            |            | N/A        |
| One-child policy                                 |            |            |            |            |            |
| Environmental protection                         |            |            |            |            |            |
| Traditional culture                              |            |            |            |            |            |

Note: 1. Each color indicates one cluster. For example, on the issue of “adherence to party ideology,” there is only one cluster; on the issue of “rule of law,” there are four clusters.

2. OPO: Orthodox party outlets; PPD: Provincial Party Dailies; PCD: Provincial Commercial Dailies; Cri: unorthodox outlets with more critical stances; Nat: unorthodox outlets with more nationalistic stances.

In Appendix IV, I give details of these issue networks by providing statistics including the size, density, distribution of edge weights, and the modularity score of each network.

Table 7 summarizes the changes in media’s issue attitudes after Xi Jinping took power. There is no discernable overtime changes in network structures in the 20 issues. However, 7 of these issues show changes in node size. And all of these 7 issues are in the political arena. The general direction is moving towards increasing the party line and reducing critical voices. All of the media outlets devote more attention to China’s international presence (with the Belt and Road Initiative at the center) and Xi’s anti-corruption campaign. The critical publications have increased their citing of nationalistic opinions, and reduced voices that highlight the problem of social conflicts and call for rule of law and civil society development. In addition, all commercial outlets have increased opinions that adhere to party’s official ideology.

**Table 7 Longitudinal changes (pre-Xi era vs Xi era) on certain issues**

| <b>Change</b>                           | <b>Issue</b>                          |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| All media increased coverage            | China’s international presence        |
|   | Corruption                            |
| Critical media increased coverage       | Sovereignty and territorial integrity |
| Critical media reduced coverage         | Rule of law                           |
|   | Social conflicts                      |
|   | Civil society                         |
| All commercial media increased coverage | Adherence to party ideology           |



In the concluding chapter, I will integrate the findings presented in this and the previous chapters to provide a more comprehensive picture of media bias in China, and discuss implications for our understanding of Chinese media and for future research.

## **CHAPTER 5. Summary, Discussion, and Conclusions**

The empirical study of media diversity and bias in non-Western and/or non-democratic regimes has lagged behind that of their counterparts for conceptual, substantive and methodological reasons. In this dissertation, I have attempted to address these shortcomings by developing a source-driven, multi-method approach to mapping media landscapes and measuring media bias, and applying this approach to the contemporary Chinese media landscape. In this concluding chapter, I summarize my approach and findings, followed by a discussion of their implications for both Chinese media studies and research on media bias more broadly. Lastly, I discuss the limitations of the current project, and suggest some possible directions for future research.

### **Summary of Findings: Mapping Media Bias in China**

My argument in this dissertation is built upon three interrelated observations. First, that little is known about the ideological and structural biases that exist in the contemporary Chinese media landscape. Second, that existing conceptualizations and measures of media bias are inappropriate for understanding the media systems of non-Western regimes such as China. And third, that the use of quoted expert sources and mentioned top political leaders as indicators of media bias provides a valid, ground-up, and context-independent means of mapping media landscapes.

Drawing on four years of data comprised of 31 media outlets, over 8,700 expert sources, and 192 Communist Party leaders, I used computational social science techniques,

supplemented with interviews with Chinese journalists and media executives in China, to provide answers to five research questions and two specific hypotheses.

*Research Question 1: What does the media landscape of contemporary China look like, and how do the biases found in this landscape comport with the distribution of ideological perspectives and structural control found in China?*

The general landscape of contemporary Chinese media is visualized in Figure 4, which includes two major dimensions. On the ideological dimension, three clusters (or four, depending on which years we are looking at, see the following discussions on RQ4) are identified. It is not a binary, let alone homogenous, landscape, as many observers and previous scholarship presume. It also indicates that the party/commercial divide has limited use in determining the ideological bias of media outlets.

In contrast, the party/commercial divide is apparent on the structural dimension—party media outlets mention top political leaders significantly more than commercial media, suggesting that the stricter control on party media is mostly evident in exerting structural power, rather than in shaping ideological orientations.

*Research Question 2: What are the major clusters of media bias in China and which media outlets are there in each cluster?*

I have identified four clusters of media outlets in terms of ideological orientations. Note that two of the clusters have “merged” in the Xi era, which is to be discussed later. The first cluster, which I name the “orthodox party outlets,” consists of party media on the central level. They are important organs within the party-state system, and generally

operate as the propaganda arm of the Communist Party. The opinions featured in this cluster are heavily controlled by the party and usually seen as the official positions. Analyses on the orthodox party outlets' standpoints on various issues reveal that they closely follow the party line, and mainly cite scholars within or close to the party-state system to laud and interpret government policies. Although there are occasionally more critical stances towards local governments and officials, it is very unlikely for this cluster of media outlets to question and challenge official policies issued by the central party leadership.

The second cluster, named as the "balanced outlets," are provincial and municipal level party dailies and commercial dailies. Against the conventionally known party/commercial divide, these two kinds of newspapers are actually very similar in terms of choosing expert interviewees, thus demonstrating similar ideological orientations. On the politically sensitive issues such as the party ideology and sovereignty, this cluster of media outlets follows the party line. On other issues, they generally accommodate a combination of experts who approve and interpret the official policies, and experts who are in favor of free market, deregulation, and liberal notions of law and civil society. It should be noted that I only included the most circulated provincial dailies in my sample, which concentrate on the more affluent coastal provinces. Results should not be directly generalized to the less developed and more politically sensitive provinces such as Tibet and Xinjiang.

The third cluster consists of media outlets that are more critical towards the party-state and official policies. They are mostly commercial publications that are known for in-depth reporting and critical analysis, but also include a unique central-level party

newspaper—*China Youth Daily*. Media outlets in this cluster tend to cite experts that support liberal notions of law and civil society, argue against government intervention in economy, and favor progressive ideas on gender and environmental issues. I choose not to label this cluster as “liberal” or “progressive,” mainly because their positions on economic issues do not fit into the “liberal” or “progressive” camp in the Western context. It should also be noted that their positions on politically sensitive issues do not differ from those of orthodox party media, suggesting the limitations of opinion plurality in Chinese media.

The fourth cluster includes two nationalistic publications: the commercial newspaper *Global Times* and the commercial website Guancha.cn. They tend to cite experts who heavily criticize the U.S. and other Western countries, warn against the danger that the Western world might bring to China, and emphasize the importance of a strong government under such hostile international environment. Although this kind of narrative could potentially boost public support for the Communist Party, it does not always align with the official positions, which are generally more dovish. Therefore, one should not simply consider this cluster as a more extreme version of the orthodox party outlets.

As discussed in the first chapter, each of the clusters presents biased content that could potentially influence public opinion on various issues. For instance, the “orthodox party outlets” have the potential to boost public support in official policies and the Communist Party’s rule in general. If we take the readership, perceived importance, and other factors into consideration, the actual influences are expected to vary. But in this study, I only focus on the relative position of the outlets, rather than calculating their actual influence.

*Research Question 3: What are the major dividing issues among these clusters of media outlets?*

In general, the ideological alignment of issues in Chinese media is much messier than that in liberal democracies. There are multiple, divergent opinions on certain issues, but more homogenous opinions on others. It suggests that the “cluster view” as adopted in this study is indeed a more appropriate approach to understand the ideological positions of Chinese media.

The major dividing issues among the four clusters include the less sensitive political issues, most of the economic issues, and some of the social and cultural issues. For political issues, media outlets take distant positions on government accountability, rule of law, social conflicts, and civil society. Generally speaking, the orthodox party outlets closely follow the party line; the critical outlets emphasize liberal notions that resemble Western liberal democratic ideas; the nationalistic outlets actively defend China’s system and warn against the danger that Western liberal ideas might bring to China; and the provincial dailies feature a diverse combination of those opinions.

In the economic arena, the dividing issues include the role of the government in economy, state-owned and private enterprises, tax and income distribution, inequality, and housing price regulation. The orthodox party outlets mainly laud China’s economic achievements. The critical outlets point to the problems in China’s economy and call for further deregulation and the retreat of the government from economy. The nationalistic outlets take a more statist approach on emphasize the importance of a strong government in assuring continuous economic growth. The provincial dailies contain a mixed group of the opinions from the other three clusters.

For social and cultural issues, the major dividing issues are gender and environmental protection. The orthodox party outlets frame the gender issue as a public policy problem, whereas the critical outlets point out the structural sexism in the Chinese society. The nationalistic outlets do not talk about gender issues. And the provincial dailies feature a diverse group of experts, including law and policy experts, women's rights advocates, and also "men's rights advocates." In terms of environmental protection, the orthodox party outlets generally praise the official policies. The critical outlets tend to highlight the environmental problems in China and call for actions. The nationalistic outlets promote the idea that economic growth will solve the problems. The provincial dailies again feature a combination of these three groups of expert interviewees.

It should be noted that five of the twenty issues examined, most of which are political issues, tend to form a single cluster due to strict censorship.

*Research Question 4: How has Chinese media's ideological landscape changed after 2012?*

The diversity of the ideological landscape shrank and there are only three clusters present in the years 2014 and 2016. The major reason is that media outlets in the critical cluster have reduced their critical edge by quoting fewer scholars with critical opinions on political issues, and have featured more nationalistic voices since Xi Jinping took power. The increase or decrease in the amount of coverage on specific issues result in a structural change of the overall landscape, i.e., the merge of the critical cluster and the nationalistic cluster.

*Research Question 5: How has Chinese media's structural bias changed after 2012?*

Comparing the years before and after Xi took power, I find that all the media outlets, no matter party or commercial, have significantly increased their coverage and use of top leaders after 2012. The significant difference between party and commercial media remains under Xi's rule. Findings for the last two research questions confirm that media has been under stricter control under Xi's leadership.

**Implications for Research on Chinese Media**

The findings of this project add to our understanding of Chinese media, demonstrating both the extent of and limitations to media diversity across outlets, issues, and time. The findings also offer a new and more nuanced conceptualization of the Chinese media landscape. Previously, studies on the landscape of Chinese media were from several separate approaches. The political economy approach highlights the importance of ownership and especially the party/commercial divide, or the party line/mass line/bottom line categorization proposed by Zhao (1998). The study by Stockmann (2013) examines the seemingly contradictory but actually convergent goals of commercialization and authoritarian rule. Her approach provides an analysis of the similarities among the provincial dailies. Another approach emphasizes the agency of journalists (Repnikova, 2017a; Svensson et al., 2013) and shows that critical content is possible to a certain extent. Lee et al.'s (2007) and Lei's (2016) studies demonstrate the impact of locality on media performance. Results of the current project could synthesize and extend these previous approaches and findings. The political economy argument is still useful since we do see clear difference between a group of central-level publications and other commercial outlets,



but it has its limitation in explaining the case of *China Youth Daily*. The convergence of commercialization and authoritarian rule argument is also largely confirmed in this project, and the scale of research has been significantly widened. The journalists' agency could explain the diversity found in the landscape, especially for those critical outlets. The locality argument also largely holds true because daily newspapers in the same province tend to be quite similar to each other in terms of expert sourcing. While these previous approaches are useful, none of them are built on systematic empirical analysis of media outlets, and none provide a detailed analyses of how ideological and structural bias and constraints differ across issue areas. Therefore, the current project makes important contribution to our understanding of media bias and landscape in China.

In addition, this study differentiates between bias that structurally favors certain actors (top political leaders in the context of the current study) and the bias that reflects divergent attitudes towards certain issues. It shows that these two types of media bias are not necessarily correlated with each other, and so should be treated as different types of constraint. This phenomenon is most evident in the case of *China Youth Daily*, which previous studies have found to be intriguingly unique (Wang et al., 2018). The current project provides an explanation on why *China Youth Daily* could sometimes behave as other party outlets, while at other times like a critical commercial newspaper—it is because structural bias and ideological bias can operate independently from each other.

Methodologically, the findings provide important lessons for selecting Chinese media outlets for use in content analyses and experiments. Given the complexity of the Chinese media landscape, choosing representative media outlets is a vital step in ensuring the validity of such studies. In a previous project, I have reviewed 51 academic papers on

Chinese media that use content analysis and are published in 16 major journalism and mass communications journals during recent two decades (Fang, 2015). I find several problems in the sampling methods. First, there were not enough publications selected for analysis. More than half (52.9%) of the studies only sample one media outlet. On average, one article selected 2.43 media outlets for analysis. After excluding the two outliers (9 and 19), the average is only 2.03. Second, there is an apparent lack of diversity in sampled media outlets. *The People's Daily* has been studied by 23 papers (45.1%), followed by China Central Television and Xinhua News Agency (10 papers for each). Commercial media outlets altogether have been included in only 12 studies (23.5%), and important commercial publications such as *Caixin Weekly* and *Sanlian Life Weekly* have not been studied at all. Third, there is a lack of justification for the choice of media outlets. Even though many studies mention influence/circulation and the authority of party media as reasons for sampling specific media outlets, only a few of them have paid attention to ideological diversity. An exception is that He and colleagues (2012) consciously picked newspapers according to the political spectrum, including *Southern Weekly* and the *China Youth Daily* on the liberal side, *The People's Daily* on the conservative side, and *Guangzhou Daily* “in the middle of the political road.” However, their choices were based on speculations of the media landscape rather than systematic empirical analysis. Nevertheless, their selections fit into the findings of this study quite well—with the caveat that a nationalistic outlet should have been included, especially considering the fact that their study is on the image of the U.S. in the Chinese media.

Based on findings presented in this project, I suggest the following approach for the purposive sampling of Chinese media for content analysis. First, if a study aims to capture

the full landscape of Chinese media, it should include at least one media outlet from each cluster as identified above. If possible, I recommend also including one provincial party daily and one provincial commercial daily to capture the possible differences in covering the top officials among provincial dailies. I also recommend including *China Youth Daily* as a unique case that generally falls in the critical cluster but is more conformist on certain issues. Second, the choice of media outlets to include should be matched to the specific purpose of the study. For example, orthodox party outlets should be sampled if one wants to know the party line and official discourse on an issue, while critical outlets should be sampled if one wants to make sense of the boundary for Chinese media on certain issues. Third, as indicated in the findings, locality matters in determining the orientations of media content. Therefore, researchers are encouraged to include media outlets from different regions (developed vs. developing; coastal vs. inland; politically sensitive vs. normal; etc.) in their national-scale studies, so as to capture important differences.

Similarly, experimental research could also draw insights from this project. In her seminal work on Chinese media, Stockmann (2013) uses *Beijing Daily* and *Beijing Evening News* as experimental treatment to test if media labels influence the perceived credibility of a story published in that media. She finds that readers trust the commercial *Beijing Evening News* significantly more than the party media *Beijing Daily*, though content analysis shows that the ideological orientations of these two newspapers do not differ much. Future research could test the perceived credibility associated with media labels of the other three clusters: the orthodox party outlets, the critical publications, and the nationalistic outlets. Furthermore, experiments investigating selective exposure, political polarization, and other topics that involve the understanding of the ideological

landscape could build on findings of this project. It is recommended that when preparing the treatment materials, researchers select issues with divergent opinions (rather than those with homogenous standpoints such as sovereignty and territorial integrity) and media outlets from each cluster with different opinion orientations. By following this approach, the experiments are likely to achieve a higher level of validity.

### **Implications for Research on Media Bias**

This project also has implications for research on media bias in contexts other than China. First, it shows that the journalistic sourcing patterns of expert interviewees is a “context-free” method to measure media bias. The only circumstances in which such an approach would be inappropriate are the rare cases in which a media outlet does not follow the journalistic norm of citing experts in their coverage of issues and events. To validate this methodological approach in a specific context, researchers should conduct interviews with journalists to examine their sourcing practices.

Second, it provides a new perspective to understand and study the ideological landscape in regimes where a clear ideological alignment has not formed, is in flux, is unknown, or is complex and malleable. This is often the case in non-democratic, mixed, or transitioning regimes, where little or no formal competition between parties is allowed. As a result, there is no clear indication of the ideological alignments in society (even if such alignments exist or are forming), leading to a less clear understanding of it among the public, as well as also among the elites, the media, and researchers. To investigate this kind of “formative” ideological landscape, one could not rely on frameworks (such as the bipolar structure) developed in liberal democracies, where clearer ideological dimensions

are arguably—though not necessarily—already defined. Instead, researchers could adopt the data-driven approach as in this study and let clusters emerge in a network. Researchers could also select multiple issues as in this study and identify issues that are actually dividing the media outlets.

Finally, the two dimensions (ideological and structural) of media bias identified in this study also provides a general theoretical framework for future studies on this topic, and helps develop a more wholistic understanding of media bias rather than focusing on a few specific types of bias.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

As indicated earlier, this project is necessarily exploratory in nature. It provides important findings and implications, but also has some notable limitations. First, although I managed to include more than 30 media outlets in the analysis, some important ones are still missing due to the unavailability of full-text data, including *Reference News* 参考消息, one of the most widely read newspapers in China; *China Comment* 半月谈, another important party magazine; and *China News Week* 中国新闻周刊, a popular weekly news magazine. In addition, no radio programs are included in the sample.

More importantly, the online media landscape has grown rapidly during recent years, and many legacy media organizations have started to produce online-only content. For example, *The People's Daily* launched a well-received WeChat public account (similar to a Facebook Page) *Xiake Dao* 侠客岛, which provides analyses on politics and current affairs that are written in a more entertaining way. *Southern Weekly* also launched a

popular WeChat public account Zhidao 知道 to provide content that is not published in the paper. It is possible that with these emerging online channels, there are more internal heterogeneity within each media outlet. Future studies could explore whether Xiake Dao is closer to *The People's Daily* or to other clusters of outlets in terms of ideological orientation. Research on public opinion on social media could also draw insights from the methodological approach and findings of this study.

Another limitation of this study is about the measurement of structural bias. Although the bias in favor of top political leaders is arguably the most prominent structural bias in Chinese media, there are possibly other forms of structural bias. For example, there might be pro-business bias in commercial outlets, and a pro-Han ethnic group bias in most areas except those minority autonomous regions. This study has not tested these alternative forms of structural bias. It is encouraged that future studies could look into this issue.

Future studies could also build on this project and study the effects of media bias, which is a crucial area of study in media bias research. Surveys and experiments could be conducted to examine whether there is a causal relationship between the consumption of biased media content and specific issue attitudes of the consumers. Issues analyzed in this project could be used in those studies, as indicated above.

This project takes a media-centric view, which leaves room for future studies that could focus on the cited experts. One could follow a similar methodological approach and examine the cluster of scholars, or rank the visibility of scholars in media. These studies could provide important implications for our understandings of elite ideology in China.

An additional direction for future research is to develop a quantitative measurement of media bias in China; one that could be applied to media outlets not analyzed in this project. For the structural bias, it is relatively easy to operationalize it by comparing the frequency with which top political leaders are mentioned to those already analyzed here. For the ideological bias, the task is more difficult. One possible approach is to assign a set of values to the most unique sources in each cluster (in a ranked order) and calculate the total value of each media outlet for each cluster. For example, we assign 10 points to the most unique source in each cluster, 9 for the second most unique one, and 1 for the 10<sup>th</sup> most unique source. One media outlet that has not been studied before might end up getting more than 200 points for the “critical outlets” cluster because it cited the most unique source 10 times, the second most unique source 11 times, and several other unique sources in that cluster. It only gets less than 10 points for the other three clusters. We can then determine that this outlet belongs to the critical cluster, and we can compare it with other outlets in the same cluster by points. Following this approach, one could assign a media outlet to the landscape in a relatively easy and consistent manner. And our understanding of the landscape of media bias in China could be continuously expanded.

Finally, future research should apply the approach used here to the media systems in other nations, ideally in a way that allows for comparative research. This would be especially valuable for non-Western polities, which as mentioned are understudied and less amenable to the approaches developed for Western democracies. But it would also be valuable to apply in Western democracies, including the United States, both as points of comparison and for the real possibility that my approach might uncover general and

issue-specific clusters of media outlets that to date have been missed by assuming a simple, left/right or Democratic/Republican dimension.



## Appendix I. The Sampling Rationale

### A. Newspapers

The following 22 newspapers are included for one or two reasons:

| <b>Title (Chinese)</b> | <b>Title (English)</b>         | <b>Top 30 circulation?</b> | <b>Previously studied?</b> |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| 人民日报                   | The People's Daily             | Y                          | Y                          |
| 广州日报                   | Guangzhou Daily                | Y                          | Y                          |
| 南方都市报                  | Southern Metropolis Daily      | Y                          | Y                          |
| 钱江晚报                   | Qianjiang Evening News         | Y                          | N                          |
| 环球时报                   | Global Times                   | Y                          | Y                          |
| 楚天都市报                  | Chutian Metropolis Daily       | Y                          | N                          |
| 南方日报                   | Nanfang Daily                  | Y                          | Y                          |
| 华西都市报                  | Western China Metropolis Daily | Y                          | N                          |
| 南方周末                   | Southern Weekly                | Y                          | Y                          |
| 经济日报                   | Economic Daily                 | Y                          | N                          |
| 光明日报                   | Guangming Daily                | Y                          | N                          |
| 新民晚报                   | Xinmin Evening News            | Y                          | Y                          |
| 今晚报                    | Today Evening Post             | Y                          | N                          |
| 湖北日报                   | Hubei Daily                    | Y                          | N                          |
| 羊城晚报                   | Yangcheng Evening News         | Y                          | N                          |
| 浙江日报                   | Zhejiang Daily                 | Y                          | N                          |
| 江南都市报                  | Jiangnan Metropolis Daily      | Y                          | N                          |
| 北京晚报                   | Beijing Evening News           | Y                          | N                          |
| 中国青年报                  | China Youth Daily              | N                          | Y                          |
| 新京报                    | The Beijing News               | N                          | Y                          |
| 北京青年报                  | Beijing Youth Daily            | N                          | Y                          |
| 京华时报                   | Beijing Times                  | N                          | Y                          |

The following newspapers were also among the top 30 most circulated in 2016, but were excluded from the sample because no full-text data were available:

| <b>Title (Chinese)</b> | <b>Title (English)</b> |
|------------------------|------------------------|
| 参考消息                   | Reference News         |
| 新华每日电讯                 | Xinhua Daily Telegraph |

|       |                         |
|-------|-------------------------|
| 辽沈晚报  | Liaoshen Evening News   |
| 大河报   | Dahe Daily              |
| 河南日报  | Henan Daily             |
| 新华日报  | Xinhua Daily            |
| 潇湘晨报  | Xiaoxiang Morning Post  |
| 华商报   | Chinese Business        |
| 现代快报  | Modern Express          |
| 齐鲁晚报  | Qilu Evening News       |
| 扬子晚报  | Yangtse Evening News    |
| 半岛都市报 | Bandao Metropolis Daily |

## **B. Magazines**

There is no reliable data on the circulation of magazines in China. And there are very few previous studies that have examined magazines in China. Therefore, I initially selected two party magazines and five commercial magazines that are influential and representative to my knowledge of China's media landscape. The two party magazines were: *Qiushi* (求是) and *China Comment* (半月谈). The five commercial magazines were: *Caijing* (财经), *Caixin Weekly* (财新周刊), *China News Week* (中国新闻周刊), *Sanlian Life Weekly* (三联生活周刊), and *Nanfeng Chuang* (南风窗).

Three of the seven magazines did not have full-text data available. The final sample included the remaining four: *Qiushi*, *Caixin Weekly*, *Sanlian Life Weekly*, and *Nanfeng Chuang*.

## **C. Broadcasting**

The two most watched primetime news programs of China Central Television (CCTV)—*News Simulcast* (新闻联播) and *Focus* (焦点访谈) were selected.

The primetime radio news program by China National Radio—National News (央广全国新闻联播) was initially included but later dropped due to the lack of full-text data.

#### **D. Websites**

News portals (e.g., Tencent, Sina, and Sohu) and aggregators (e.g., Today's Headline) that only repost stories from other media outlets were excluded. I also excluded websites of traditional media because the content is repetitive of the first three categories.

*Pengpai* (澎湃) and *Jiemian* (界面) are two most prominent online-only news outlets in China (See Repnikova & Fang, 2019). Both of them were included in the sample.

Another online publication in the sample is *Guancha.cn* (观察者网), which is a popular news website (in terms of Alexa ranking) and a site that is known for opinionated content (See Fang & Zhao, 2014).

Fang and Zhao's (2014) study also included another influential and opinionated website—*Gongshi Wang* (共识网). Unfortunately, it was shut down by the Chinese government in 2016, and its previous articles were not accessible.

## Appendix II. Data Cleaning Process

The following types of data entries were picked up by algorithm but then removed by hand because the intellectuals were not cited for their opinions.

### **A. science and engineering scholars cited**

E.g., “Wuhan University Liu Jingnan, who is a member of Chinese Academy of Engineering, says that the double satellite system of GPS and BeiDou can increase the applicability and the accuracy of navigation (中国工程院院士、武汉大学教授刘经南说, GPS 加北斗的双卫星导航系统可以提高系统的可用性和导航精度).” *Economic Daily*, June 4, 2012.

### **B. political leaders visiting university campuses and meeting with professors**

E.g., “Before the performance, Politburo Standing Committee member Li Changchun visited exhibitions of Peking University’s developments and achievements. He also met with Wu Shuqing, Yuan Xingpei, Sha Jiansun, Ye Lang, and other senior professors and delegates of junior faculty and students (演出开始前, 李长春参观了北京大学发展概况展、人文社会科学成果展和“学雷锋树新风、加强校园文明建设”系列活动成果展, 与吴树青、袁行霈、沙健孙、叶朗等老教授和青年教师、学生代表亲切交流).” *News Simulcast*, May 4, 2012.

### **C. scholars winning awards**

E.g., “French economist Jean Tirole is the only laureate of the 2014 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences, breaking the U.S. monopoly of this prize (法国经济学家梯若尔独中诺贝尔经济学奖, 打破美国垄断).” *Pengpai*, October 14, 2014.

**D. scholars being appointed to political positions**

E.g., “Professor of Economics Georgios Zanias is appointed to the Minister of Finance, which is an vital position in Greece (对希腊来说至关重要的财政部长一职由经济学教授约戈斯·扎尼亚斯担任).” *Nanfang Daily*, May 18, 2012.

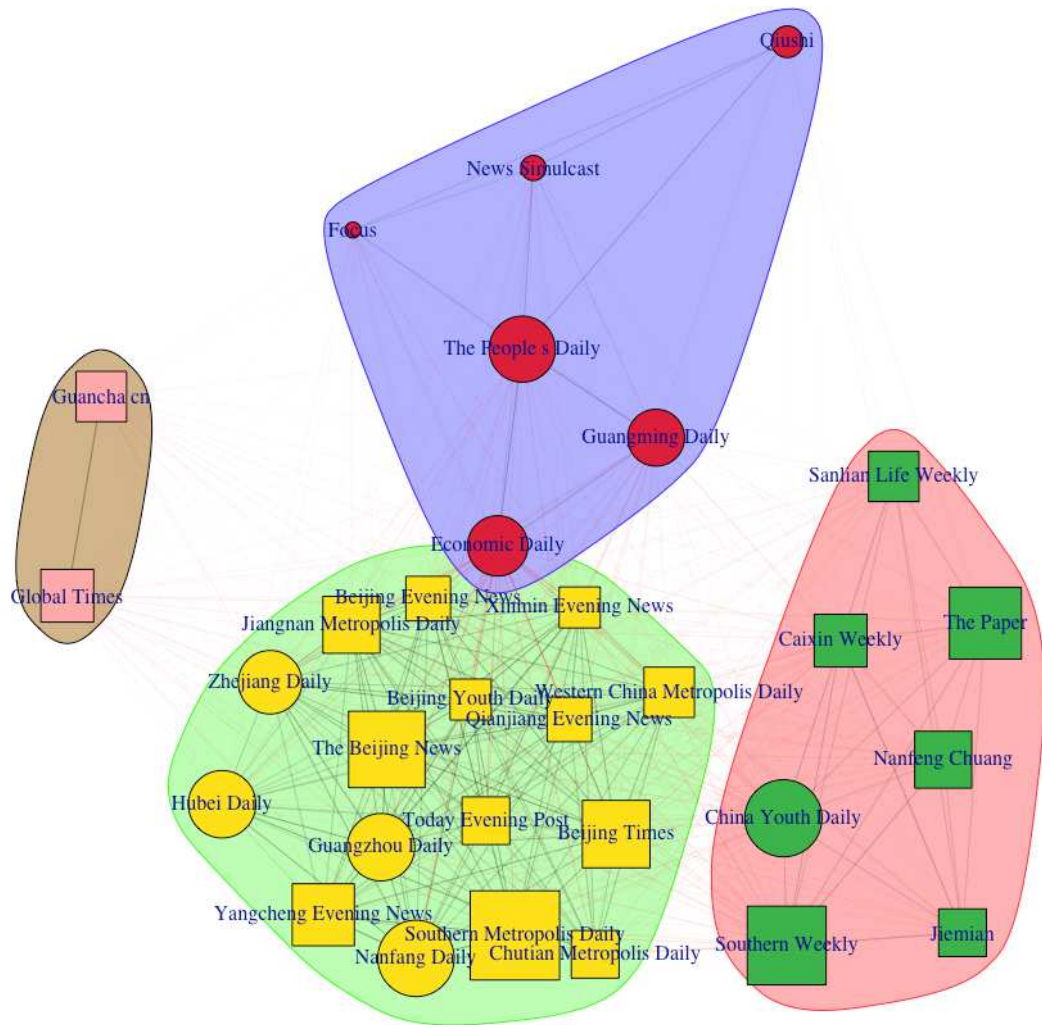
**E. intellectuals being the protagonists or the witnesses in a news story, rather than the ones providing analysis and opinions**

E.g. “Tsinghua University professor Wang Hui is accused of plagiarism, and dozens of scholars publish open letter to demand investigation (清华教授汪晖涉嫌剽窃，数十名学者发表公开信要求调查).” *Western China Metropolis Daily*, July 8, 2010.

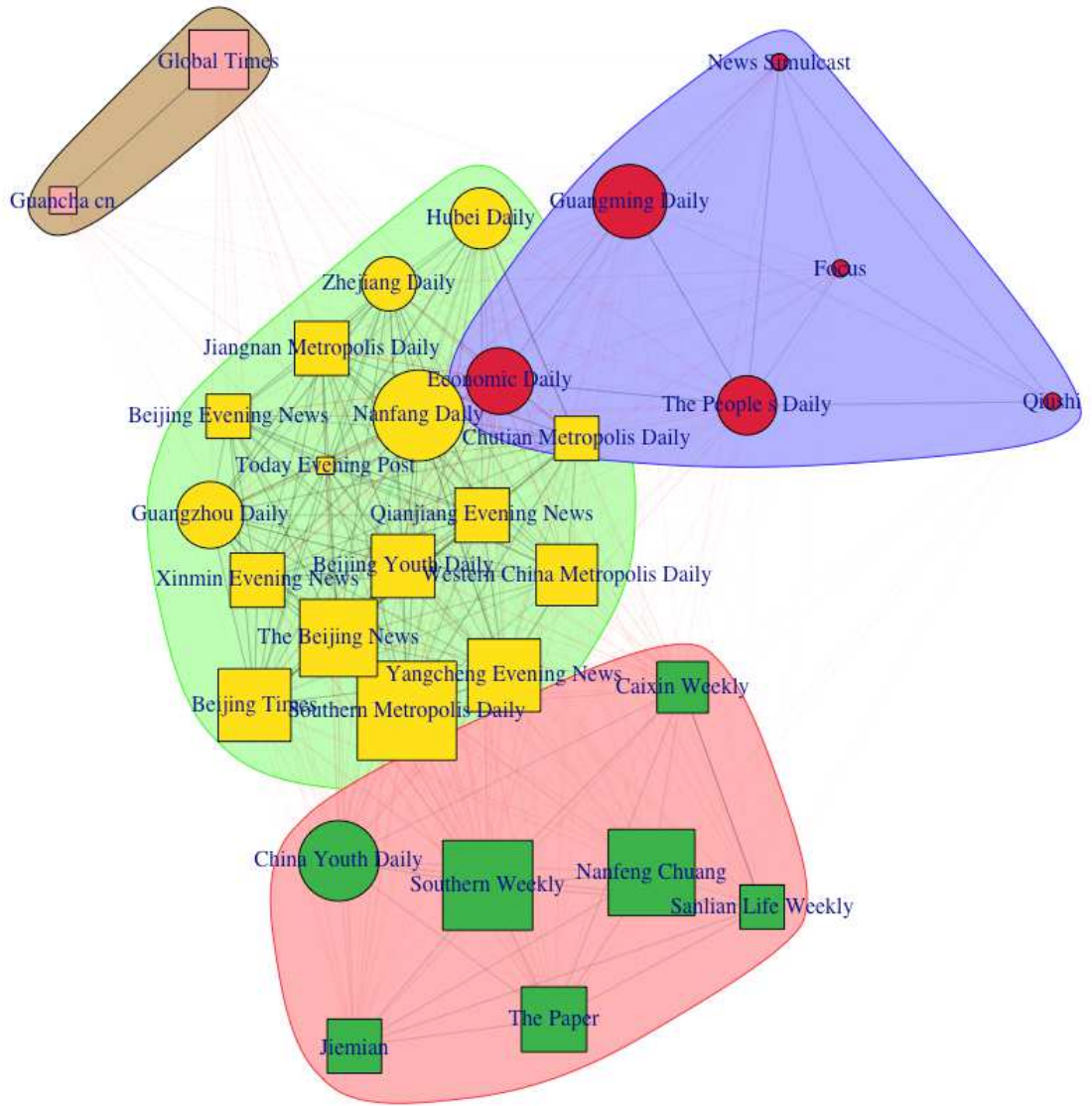
### Appendix III. The Ideological Landscape of Certain Issues

Some of the figures of issue landscape are not included in Chapter 4 due to a high degree of similarity. The figures are include here.

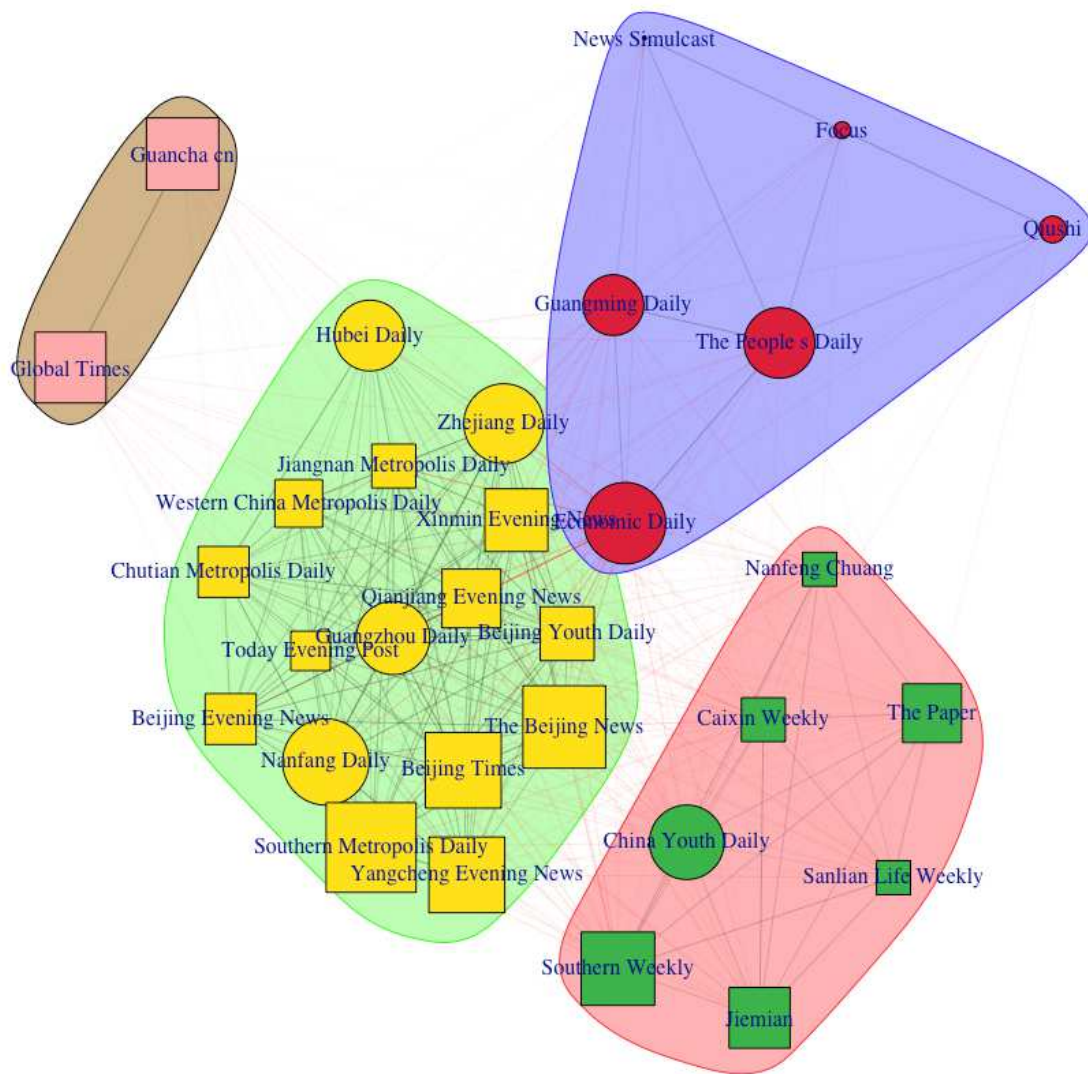
Circle = party media; square = commercial media. The size of the nodes are proportional to the log-transformed amount of expert citations in each outlet.



a. The ideological landscape of the issue: social conflicts

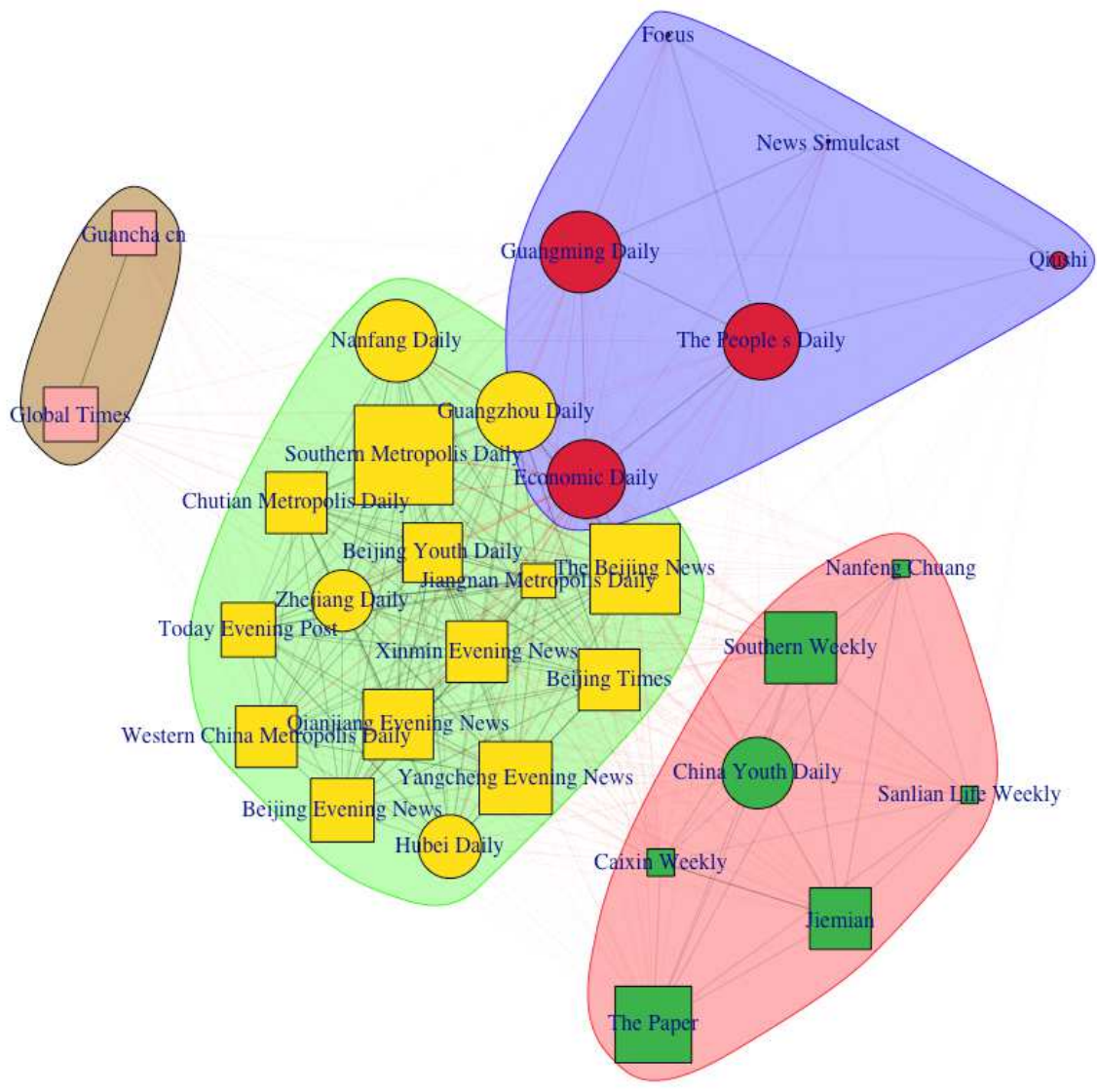


**b. The ideological landscape of the issue: civil society**

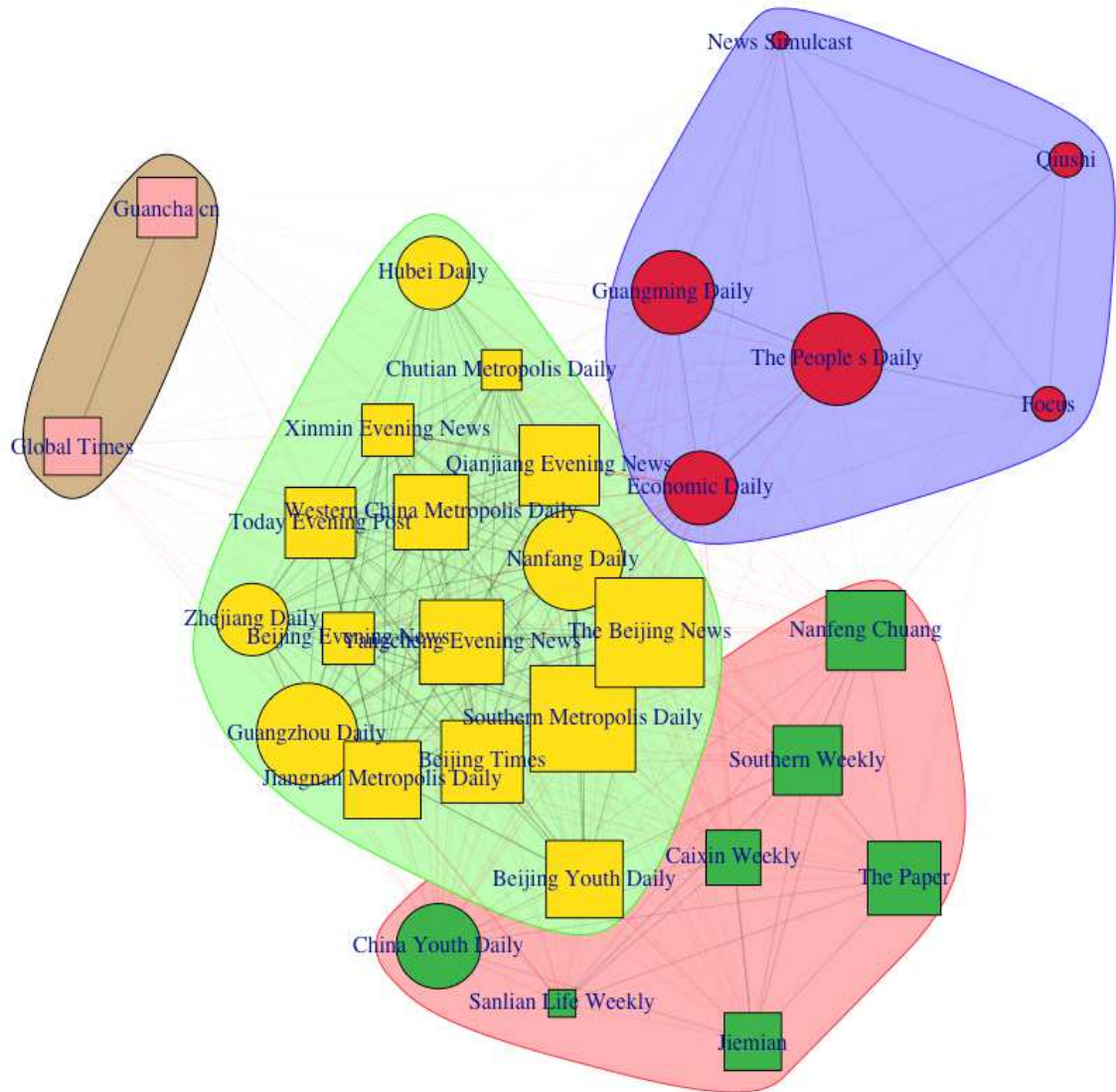


**c. The ideological landscape of the issue: the role of the government in economy**

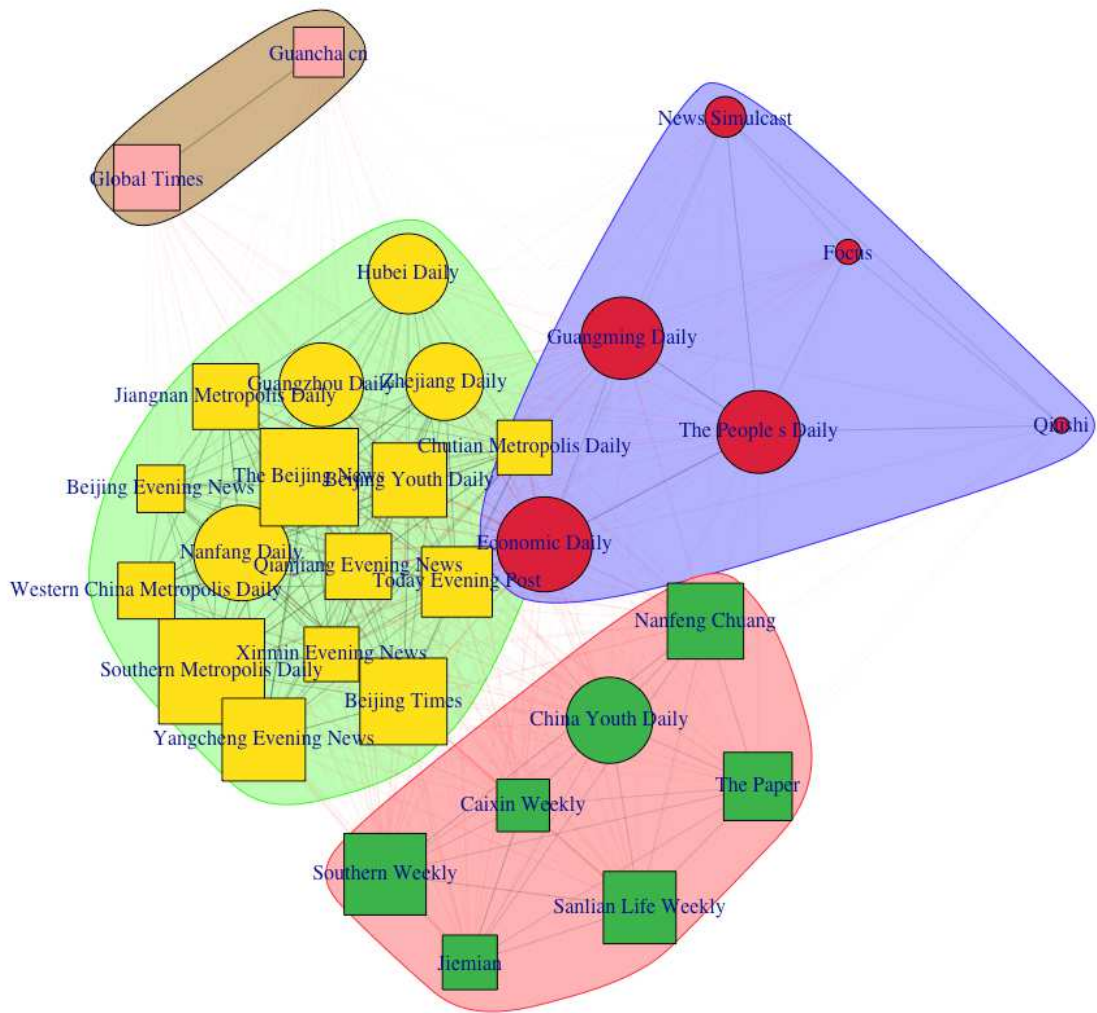




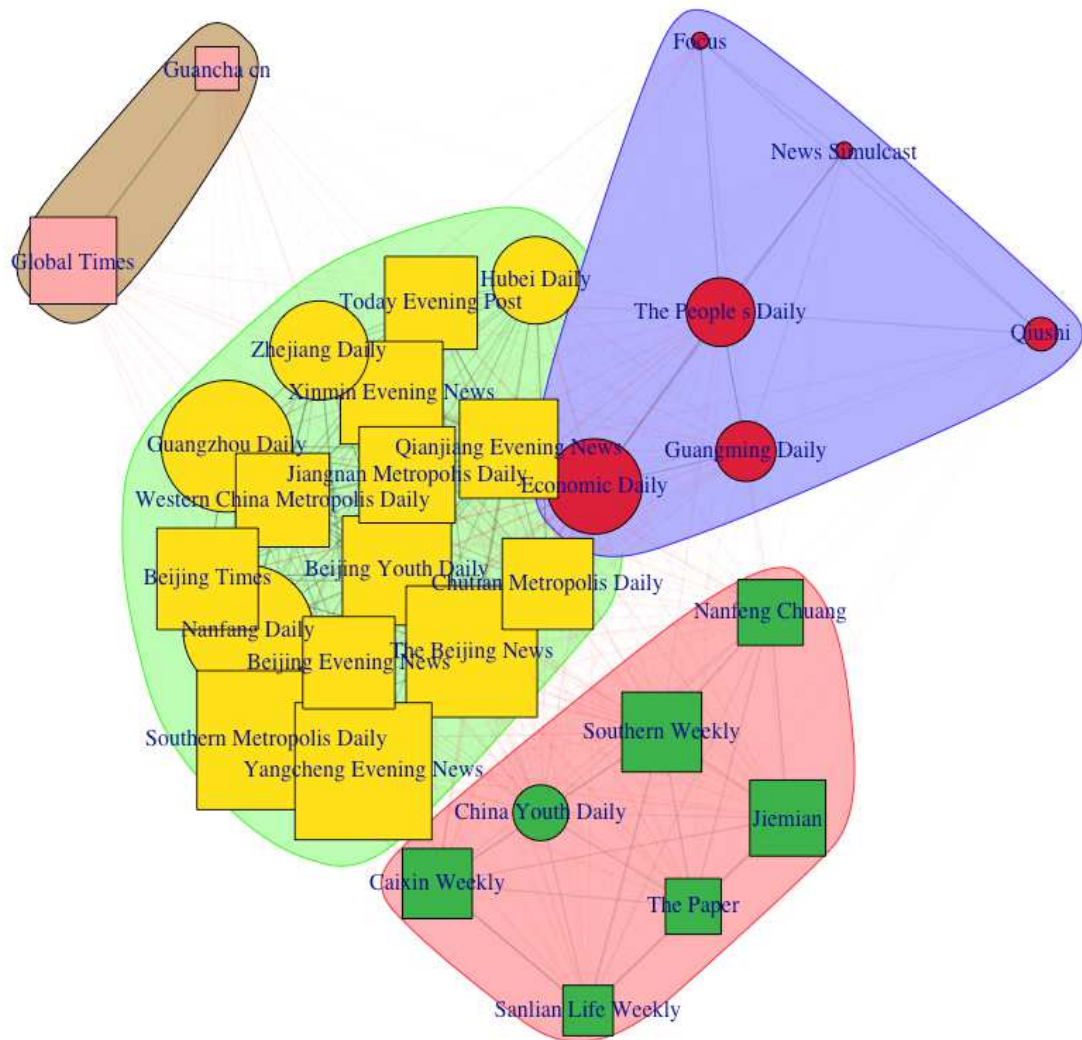
**d. The ideological landscape of the issue: state-owned and private enterprises**



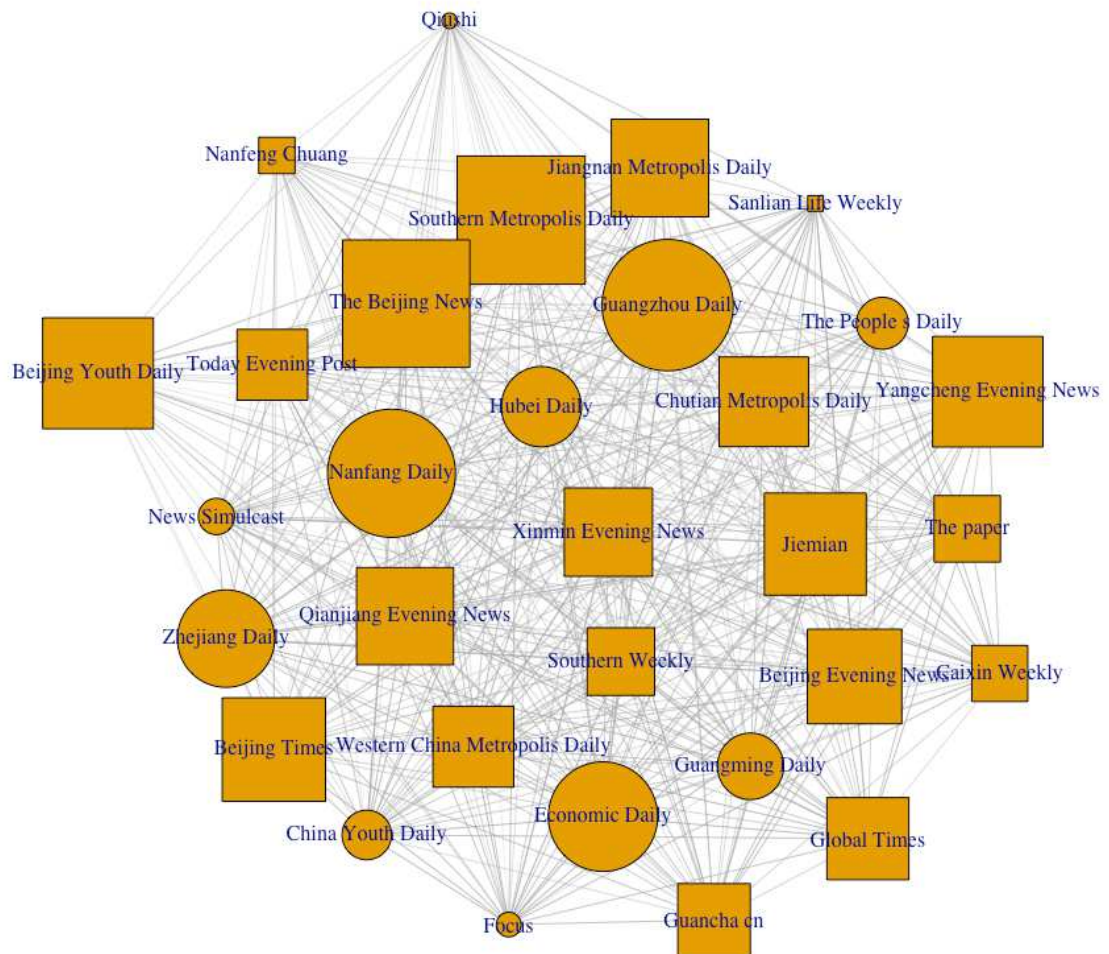
**e. The ideological landscape of the issue: tax and income distribution (state vs. citizens)**



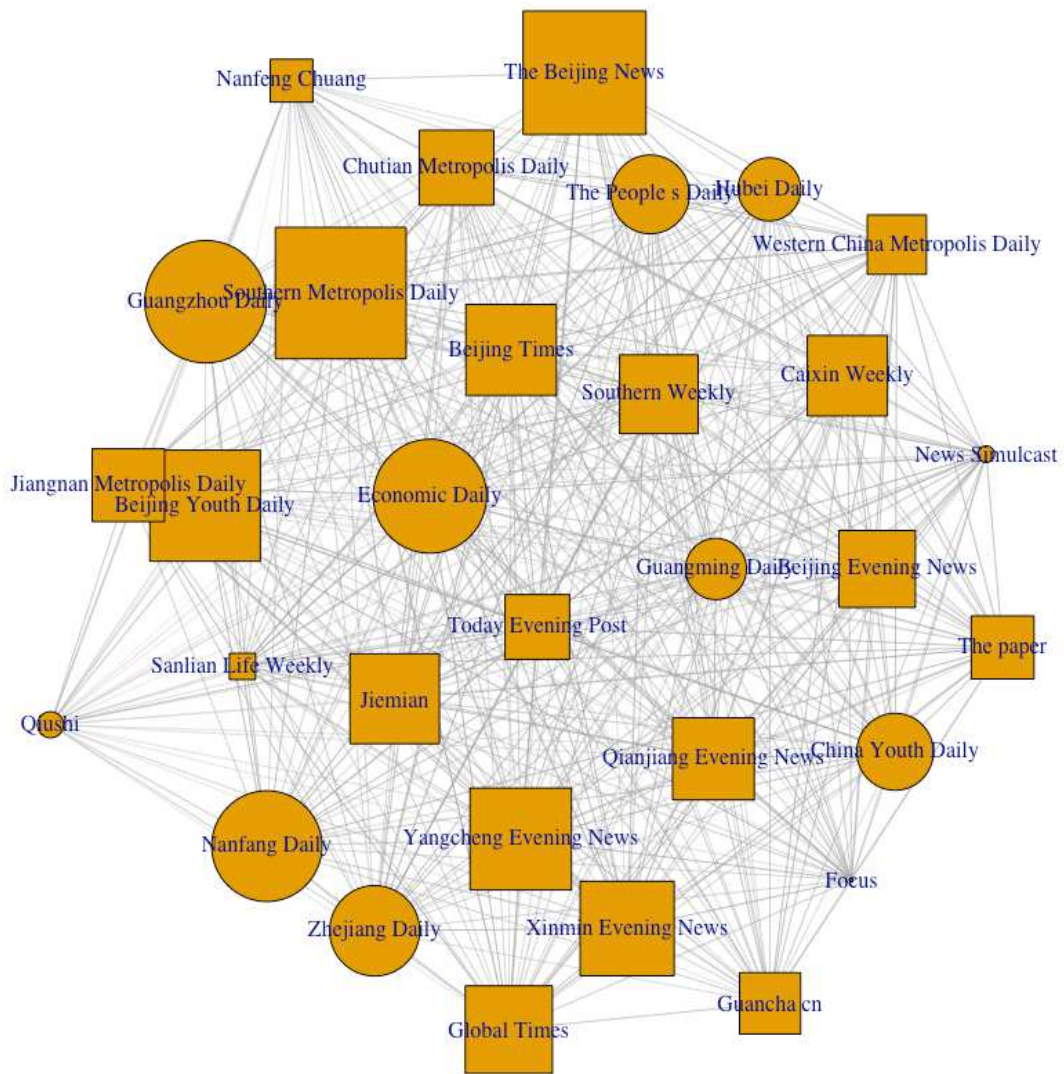
**f. The ideological landscape of the issue: inequality (rich vs. poor)**



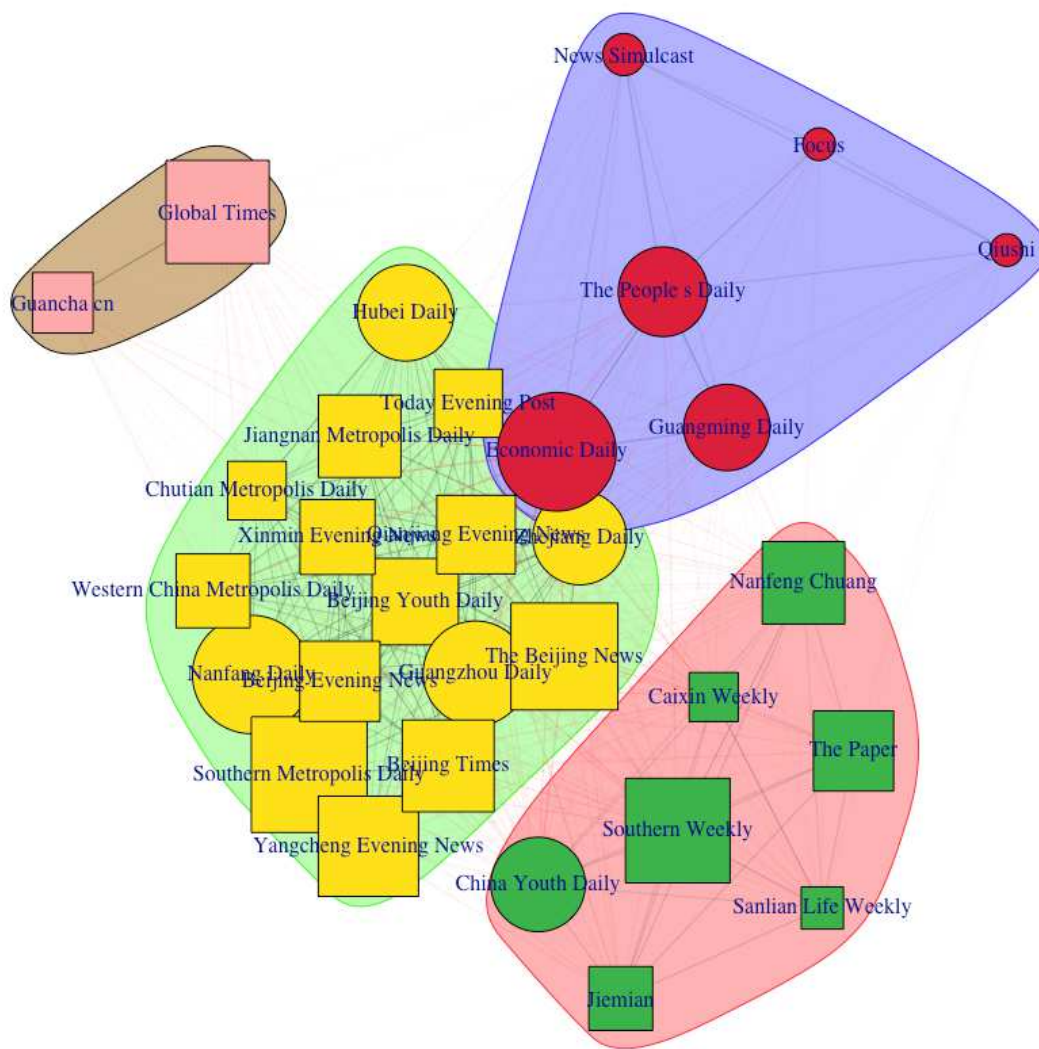
**g. The ideological landscape of the issue: housing price regulation**



**h. The ideological landscape of the issue: interpretation of key economic statistics**



**i. The ideological landscape of the issue: currency**



**i. The ideological landscape of the issue: environmental protection**

### Appendix IV. Statistics of the Issue Networks

| Issue  | Size | Density | Edge Weight |      |      |                    | Number of Communities | Modularity Score |
|--|------|---------|-------------|------|------|--------------------|-----------------------|------------------|
|  |      |         | Min         | Max  | Mean | Standard Deviation |                       |                  |
| Adherence to party ideology                      | 27   | 1       | .288        | .691 | .506 | .119               | 1                     | N/A              |
| The “China Model”                                | 29   | .983    | .010        | .786 | .426 | .271               | 3                     | .147             |
| Sovereignty and territorial integrity            | 29   | 1       | .295        | .722 | .497 | .122               | 1                     | N/A              |
| China’s international presence                   | 30   | .998    | .009        | .658 | .328 | .114               | 2                     | .113             |
| Corruption                                       | 31   | 1       | .127        | .790 | .526 | .164               | 1                     | N/A              |
| Government accountability                        | 31   | 1       | .008        | .653 | .370 | .249               | 2                     | .219             |
| Rule of law                                      | 31   | .987    | .001        | .802 | .243 | .194               | 4                     | .202             |
| Social conflicts                                 | 31   | .994    | .001        | .756 | .225 | .216               | 4                     | .157             |
| Civil society                                    | 31   | .987    | .003        | .773 | .208 | .186               | 4                     | .186             |
| The role of the government in economy            | 31   | .985    | .001        | .791 | .196 | .193               | 4                     | .142             |
| State-owned and private enterprises              | 31   | .989    | .002        | .714 | .189 | .247               | 4                     | .121             |
| Tax and income distribution (state vs. citizens) | 31   | .994    | .005        | .641 | .214 | .199               | 4                     | .145             |
| Inequality (rich vs. poor)                       | 31   | .987    | .009        | .733 | .198 | .212               | 4                     | .110             |
| Housing price regulation                         | 31   | 1       | .006        | .692 | .255 | .236               | 4                     | .129             |
| Interpretation of key economic statistics        | 31   | 1       | .192        | .788 | .487 | .141               | 1                     | N/A              |
| Currency   | 31   | 1       | .223        | .808 | .542 | .129               | 1                     | N/A              |



|                          |    |      |      |      |      |      |   |      |
|--------------------------|----|------|------|------|------|------|---|------|
| Gender equality          | 26 | 1    | .030 | .781 | .312 | .195 | 3 | .174 |
| One-child policy         | 30 | 1    | .010 | .759 | .372 | .245 | 2 | .156 |
| Environmental protection | 31 | .991 | .001 | .780 | .226 | .187 | 4 | .128 |
| Traditional culture      | 29 | 1    | .103 | .749 | .484 | .204 | 2 | .091 |

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