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## Introduction

In the early to mid-2000s, something new began to happen in online forums in China. Increasingly, contentious events were capturing widespread public attention, sparking heated discussion and even protests and other forms of collective action. Chinese citizens were coming together not only to converse and debate with one another, but also to challenge a government infamous for censorship and political control. One after another, these contentious events, or what Chinese people began to call “public opinion incidents,” came and went, like waves hitting the rocks.

In 2003, for example, Sun Zhigang, a twenty-seven-year-old man in Guangzhou, died in police custody after being wrongly detained and beaten by officers. His death triggered strong criticism, online and off, of the Chinese government. The synergy between media and legal professionals and Chinese netizens (*wangmin*), or Internet users,<sup>1</sup> eventually led to the overhaul of unconstitutional detention regulations.

In 2008, the Chinese government ordered that all new computers be sold with preinstalled content-control software to prevent the viewing of pornography. Chinese netizens accused the state of infringing on their right to free communication, and the Chinese state decided to abandon the policy.

In 2012, the Propaganda Department of Guangdong Province interfered in the publication of *Southern Weekly*'s New Year special editorial. Published by the Southern Media Group based in Guangzhou, *Southern Weekly* is considered one of the most outspoken newspapers in China, despite being affiliated with the Guangdong provincial government. The original editorial, titled “Dream of China and Dream of Constitutionalism,” promoted notions of freedom, liberal democracy, and constitutionalism. Guangdong propaganda officers bypassed ordinary editorial practices to impose significant revisions. After journalists

disclosed this intervention, intellectuals, lawyers, media professionals, students, entrepreneurs, celebrities, and ordinary citizens protested vigorously against the censorship and voiced support for *Southern Weekly*. The original editorial publicly circulated online, as protesters, explicitly identifying themselves as citizens (*gongmin*), demonstrated outside *Southern Weekly*'s headquarters. Their protest banners and signs unequivocally demanded democracy, constitutionalism, freedom of speech, and freedom of the press.

I give these examples not to suggest the complete victory of public opinion in China. Indeed, the *Southern Weekly* protests ultimately led to the government tightening its control of the Southern Media Group in 2013. My point, rather, is to highlight the novelty and vibrancy of political communication, contention, and participation in and beyond China's public sphere that emerged during this period. I am far from a naïve observer of China's politics; nonetheless, the emergence of a contentious public sphere in China was a revelation to me because it defied the conventional image of political and civic life in an authoritarian country. China is arguably one of the more "politically closed" authoritarian regimes today, as it is one of the few without multiple political parties or national elections (Diamond 2002). Furthermore, international organizations that monitor and rank political freedom, such as Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders, consistently rate China as one of the countries with the least freedom of press and freedom of speech<sup>2</sup> and one of the top "enemies of the Internet."<sup>3</sup>

Authoritarian states, by definition, undermine civil society—the basis on which the public sphere is built—thus conventional wisdom tells us that the conditions for political life and a public sphere in such contexts are likely to be quite bleak and suffocating (Habermas 1996, 369). Yet, when I looked at what was going on in China, I saw lively political discussion, contention, and engagement—in short, the emergence of a vibrant public sphere, against all apparent odds. Moreover, this public sphere did not look much different from the one I'd grown up with in Taiwan, a young liberal democracy, or the one in the United States, where I have been living for more than a decade—an ostensibly advanced liberal democracy. These seeming similarities deeply perplexed me. Common indices used by social scientists to measure levels of freedom and to classify political regimes, such as Freedom House's Freedom in the World Index, suggest that civil and political liberties have remained static in China since the 1989 Tiananmen incident, but such indices fail to capture a profound political, social, and cultural transformation that has occurred in the absence of regime change.

When I say that a nationwide contentious public sphere has emerged in China, I am referring to an unruly sphere capable of generating issues and agendas not set by the Chinese state, as opposed to a sphere mostly orchestrated and constrained by said state. Over time, China's contentious public

sphere has been increasingly recognized by the Chinese state as a force to be reckoned and negotiated with. Starting around 2010, official media of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), such as the *People's Daily*, began to warn of a threatening public sphere mediated by cell phones, the Internet, and even some unruly voices within state-controlled media.<sup>4</sup> The state's awareness of these developments is precisely why I am careful not to overstate the stability or permanence of the newly emerged contentious public sphere. Indeed, this provocative public arena has encountered serious opposition and setbacks, particularly since 2013. Seeing the rise of such a sphere as a threat to national security and an indication of ideological struggle between the West and China, the Chinese state has taken comprehensive and combative measures to contain it. These measures include enhancing censorship and surveillance, attacking key actors, upgrading propaganda, and asserting China's cyber-sovereignty. The scale and intensity of crackdowns on public opinion leaders, lawyers, journalists, activists, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and media are immense.

### **The Book's Central Questions and Arguments**

In this book I aim to demonstrate as well as understand these political, social, and cultural transformations. How can we explain the formation and development of China's contentious public sphere, particularly in light of ongoing state control and repression? How did a political culture of contention emerge and extend to various social groups? And how durable is China's emergent and contested public sphere? I argue that the rise of China's contentious public sphere was an unintended consequence of the Chinese state's campaign of authoritarian modernization. The government desperately needed to modernize in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. To do so, the state institutionalized the double-edged instruments of modern law, marketized media, and the Internet. It sought to utilize but also contain these instruments, recognizing the potential risk each posed of empowering professionals and citizens and destabilizing political control. Nonetheless, the state's choices set in motion complex and interconnected processes beyond its control. Building legal and media institutions and adopting information technologies, paired with political fragmentation and marketization, increased the capabilities of citizens and professionals, encouraged the formation of multiple overlapping social networks of collaboration, engendered widespread legal and rights consciousness, and created a space for contentious politics. Through everyday practices and the production of so-called public opinion incidents (*yulun shijian*), media and legal professionals, public opinion leaders, activists, NGOs, and netizens translated individual grievances into collective contention—and in so doing, facilitated the rise of a contentious public sphere.

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The future of this sphere remains unclear. Inadequate institutional protection means the state can still use the law, media, and information technologies for punishment, surveillance, and propaganda. How different political and social forces will work together—in creative, possibly even unexpected ways—over the years to come, in a changing global context, will shape the adversarial public space and determine its future.

My perspective departs from that of most research on the public sphere in that I accentuate and trace the connection between multiple institutional processes—the building of legal and media institutions and the adoption of information technologies—as well as the relationship between these processes and a broader historical and global context of modernization. Studies of the public sphere in different contexts tend to focus on the role of the media—mostly a specific type of media, such as television and, increasingly, the Internet—in mediating the public experience (e.g., Calhoun and Yang 2007; Dahlgren 1995; Papacharissi 2002; Shirky 2011). Few studies consider institutional processes in the legal field or the connections between different institutional processes. After studying this issue for more than a decade, however, I have become convinced that to understand China's contentious public sphere, one has to weave together analytical strands usually kept separate by scholars in different disciplines, and then situate them in relation to China's modernization in a global context. I argue that the oft-neglected connections between different institutional processes—namely, the development of a legal system, the marketization of media, and the adoption of information technologies—are key to understanding China's contentious public sphere. These connections explain how contentious culture and practices emerged and spread across social groups and boundaries. Understanding the broader historical and global context of China's modernization is also crucial to understanding how various actors—from the Chinese state to political elites and ordinary citizens—participated in these institutional processes.

Briefly, there are four major components to my argument. The first two concern China's modernization project and its constituent institutional processes, as well as their effects on the contentious public sphere. The final two components concern the mechanisms and conditions that have mediated boundary transgressions and the connections between institutional processes.

#### CHINA'S MODERNIZATION PROJECT AND THE AUTHORITARIAN DILEMMA OF MODERNIZATION

Situating the development of China's contentious public sphere in relation to the Chinese state's post-Cultural Revolution project of modernization is critical. Although Jürgen Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, analyzing the development of the classical bourgeois public sphere

in Europe, offers little discussion of the state, several scholars have since pointed out the need to examine the state's role in the development of the public sphere, especially the role of the state beyond suppression (Eley 1992; Schudson 1994). In Paul Starr's book on the creation of media communications in the United States, he argues that the developmental path of the American media and public sphere was shaped by cumulative and branching "constitutive choices," by which Starr means "choices that create the material and institutional framework of fields of human activity" (Starr 2004, 1–2). His narrative shows that the state was a key player in making these constitutive choices—an argument highly relevant to the Chinese context.

The Chinese state likewise made constitutive choices, which must be understood in relation to the Chinese state's pursuit of modernization in a global context. In J. P. Nettle and Roland Robertson's work on globalization, they argue that societies engaged in modernization often compare themselves with other societies. Using Meiji Japan as an example, Nettle and Robertson show that "latecomers" to the project of modernization tend to encounter difficulties deciding which images of modernity should guide them and where they should look for inspiration. These difficulties are further intertwined with issues related to national identity (Nettle and Robertson 1966; Robertson 1992). In the case of China, globalization provides a critical context that has influenced the state's understanding of modernity and how it has acted to achieve that end—especially the state's adoption of and engagement with ideas, institutions, and cultures from elsewhere. Modernization in China was a defensive reaction to imperialism, initiated by nationalist elites to preserve the Qing dynasty state. Following a series of military defeats by the West and Japan, intellectuals and officials within China began to see their country as a latecomer to development, and they started looking to the West and Japan as major reference points. At first, modernization focused on learning Western science, technology, and education, but it eventually extended to include the adoption of Western legal and political institutions (Zarrow 2016).

China's pursuit of modernization, despite being interrupted by revolutions, regime changes, wars, and other upheavals, has continued in the People's Republic of China (PRC) era. Pursuit of socialist industrialization and elimination of exploitation and poverty were written into the preamble of the PRC's first constitution, enacted in 1954. China amended its constitution in 1982. The amended preamble makes clear the nation's most critical task: to "concentrate its effort on socialist modernization along the road of Chinese-style socialism"; in addition, the Chinese people are enlisted to "develop socialist democracy, improve the socialist legal system, and work hard and self-reliantly to modernize industry, agriculture, national defense, and science and technology step by step to turn China into a socialist country with a high level of culture and democracy." Like China's modernization projects in the late Qing

and republican periods, the PRC's modernization project has also involved interacting with and even partially adopting ideas and institutions from other parts of the world, particularly the Soviet Union and increasingly the West, such as modern law that acknowledges the concept of rights. In addition, in the PRC state's pursuit of political and economic goals, it has had to open itself to certain transnational institutions. For instance, to profit from international trade, the Chinese state subjected itself to the rules of the World Trade Organization (WTO) when building domestic institutions (Bhattasali, Li, and Martin 2004; DeWoskin 2001; Lee 2003; Lin 2004; Pangestu and Mrongowius 2004; Wang 2001; Zhao 2008).

Despite influence from the West and transnational institutions, however, PRC's modernization project is clearly still very much an authoritarian one (Atabaki and Zürcher 2004; Gel'man 2016). The project's goals include a high level of socioeconomic development through rapid economic growth, as well as improved efficacy of governance through legal and political institution building—but all under the political monopoly of the CCP. And the ultimate goal of pursuing modernization and developing what leaders have termed “socialism with Chinese characteristics” is to strengthen the CCP's legitimacy and secure its authoritarian rule.

Yet the Chinese state's authoritarian modernization project has encountered what I call an “authoritarian dilemma of modernization.” On the one hand, the state has to build economic, legal, and political institutions to pursue socioeconomic development. The state also needs capable professionals and citizens to make institutions work, produce economic growth, and ultimately achieve the goal of modernization. These capable agents need to be educated and have knowledge, information, and even some autonomy to participate in the tasks designated by the state. For instance, to have a functioning legal institution, the state needs capable legal professionals as well as citizens who have at least some basic legal knowledge. To collect information about governmental problems on the ground, the state must create institutions to inform citizens about what they should understand as “problems” as well as enable citizens to communicate with the state or media (Lorentzen 2014).

On the other hand, institution building and the creation of capable agents can be politically risky. When the state attempts to emulate successful examples of development, it tends to look to those found in liberal democracies. Adopting institutional designs associated with liberal democracies, even selectively, can have undesirable consequences for the maintenance of political monopoly. In addition, expansion of capability enlarges citizens' freedom to choose among different ways of living (Sen 2008). When agents become more capable, the state has more difficulty controlling their thinking and actions. Capable agents can identify loopholes in institutions and use knowledge, information, technology, institutions, and other resources for their own ends. They

can participate in and influence the state-initiated modernization project in ways that potentially contradict the state's interests (Starr 2004). In addition, political elites, such as legal and media professionals, can promote their own versions of modernity that compete with the state's version, often challenging the state's ideal political and social order in the process. Of course, while expanding individual capability, the state can always seek to minimize such negative consequences, but the outcome remains uncertain. A vast literature debates the various political consequences of modernization, especially the relationship between modernization and democratization (Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Inglehart and Welzel 2010; Lipset 1959; Przeworski and Limongi 1997; Welzel 2006; Welzel and Inglehart 2008). I discuss my findings in relation to this literature in the concluding chapter.

### **MEDIA AND LAW AS DOUBLE-EDGED SWORDS**

The Chinese state's institution building in the media and legal fields demonstrates the state's authoritarian dilemma of modernization. As part of the PRC state's authoritarian modernization project, building media and legal institutions had profound consequences for the development of China's contentious public sphere. The state wanted to use media and the law to achieve its goals, but it was unable to prevent other actors from using the same tools to achieve other purposes. Understanding how this happened requires considering the double-edged nature of media and the law—specifically, in what ways and under what conditions do these institutions serve alternately as tools of empowerment and emancipation or as tools of control and suppression?

Many studies have pointed to the media influence on the development of the public sphere. In the Western context, scholars have repeatedly argued that economic power has entrenched media institutions, contributing to depoliticized public communication and politically alienated citizens (Boggs 2000; Bourdieu 2001). Yet research also suggests that when the media is able to mediate the discussion of fundamental societal problems, it can help to produce a more critical political culture and facilitate an effective public sphere (Gurevitch and Blumler 1990; Habermas 1989, 1996, 2006; Peters 2008). In the Chinese context, scholars have studied the political consequences of the state's media policy. In the past, newspapers in China were fully subsidized by the state and expected to serve as mouthpieces of state propaganda. Faced with financial difficulty, the Chinese state began to substantially withdraw funding for the media starting in 1992, forcing newspapers to rely on advertising and sales to survive. Media marketization became an integral part of the state's economic reform agenda. As a result of this process, newspapers remain state agencies responsible for propaganda, but they are also now market actors that must attract readers to survive. Scholars have studied the political implications

of this process, yet most studies have not found the expected liberalizing effects (Hassid 2008; Lee 2000; Zhao 1998, 2004, 2008).

In a similar vein, existing studies also consider whether and how information communication technologies (ICTs), especially the Internet, can positively or negatively affect the public sphere (Benkler 2006; Shirky 2011; Dahlgren 2000; Dahlgren 2005; Downey and Fenton 2003; Papacharissi 2002; Sunstein 2007). Technocrats in China embraced ICTs to pursue modernization despite the potential political risks (Tai 2006). Some scholars argue that opening the country to the Internet has had democratic effects (Lei 2011; Tai 2006, 289; Tang 2005, 87, 98; Yang 2009; Zheng 2008), but others find no democratizing consequences, contending that the Internet has remained primarily a playground for entertainment and is still under the control of the state (Kluver et al. 2010; Peters 2002; Yang 2009, 10). Still other, middle-ground arguments reflect ambivalence about the Internet's impact (Zhao 2008; Zhou 2006).

In addition to the media, I emphasize the role of legal institutions in the development of the public sphere. The law is rarely discussed in the literature, but it must be incorporated into analysis of China's contentious public sphere for two reasons. First, while the media can reach various social groups, the law can provide a culturally integrative interface under certain conditions. As Habermas (1996, 353–54) points out, law provides a common cultural medium and language for citizens to use in identifying and talking about problems across different spheres of life. To be sure, Habermas's statement depends on many factors, such as the existence of a legal tradition and state efforts to diffuse law to citizens. In many authoritarian countries, legal principles and texts remain unknown to citizens and irrelevant to everyday life. Yet when law does penetrate society, it can serve as a common cultural medium.

Second, although the law is an instrument of domination, it can also be a symbolic resource for challenging the state's power (Bourdieu 1987; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 112; Bourdieu 1994), and this has critical implications for explaining how resistance, contention, and opposition are possible in a politically restrictive environment. Given its institutional characteristics, the law is a resource that can be used against the state. Using codified law to govern is a form of symbolic domination through which the state imposes a common set of coercive norms (Bourdieu 1987; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 112; Bourdieu 1994). The dilemma facing the state is that it cannot reap the benefits of this domination without at least appearing to subject itself to the order of law (Bourdieu 1987; Bourdieu 1994). Existing studies show that when authoritarian states begin to use the law to govern the populace and to recognize citizens' rights, citizens respond by learning how to mobilize the law themselves to negotiate and contend with the state (Lee 2007; Moustafa 2007; O'Brien and Li 2006). Furthermore, law's cultural characteristic as a plastic medium enables actors to develop alternative discourse and thus facilitates political contention

(Balkin 2009; Somers 1993). Legal reasoning is often indeterminate because the processes of fact finding, applying legal doctrines, and interpreting law are rife with opportunities for innovation and contestation (Balkin 2009). Citizens are not necessarily bound by the state's interpretation of legal texts or principles. Of course, whether ordinary citizens are able to use the law as a resource against the state hinges on many factors, particularly support from legal professionals.

## INSTITUTIONS, INDIVIDUALS, NETWORKS, AND CIVIL POWER

Another major component of my argument is that the linkage between different institutional processes in China's modernization project played a key role in the development of China's nationwide public sphere and the formation of "the public." I argue that the *conjunction* of institutional processes in the legal and media fields not only led to individual transformation and empowerment but also gave rise to crosscutting, boundary-crossing social networks, which helped to spread contentious culture and practices across social groups. Collaboration across media and legal professionals, market mechanisms, and ICTs aided the creation of overlapping social networks. In short, sociologically speaking, institution and network mechanisms contributed to the social bases and formation of "the public" as a collective social entity.

The current literature suggests that a thriving public sphere depends on a favorable organization of citizenry (Calhoun 1993, 276). Habermas (1996, 369) contends that without a supportive civil society, the public sphere cannot discipline the political authority. In addition, the capacities of a public to identify, interpret, and present society-wide problems are rooted in "the voluntary associations of civic society and [are] embedded in liberal patterns of political culture and socialization" (Habermas 1996, 359). In Habermas's (1989) narrative, the conjugal family that emerged in the transition to capitalism produced rational agents who believed in the autonomy of the market and their own independence, while also coming to value the noninstrumental aspects of life (Habermas 1989, 46).<sup>5</sup> Other scholars focus on how socialization in voluntary associations produces capable agents. For instance, generalizing from social histories in Europe, Geoff Eley (1992, 296–97) points out that voluntary associations were key sites in and through which people expressed opinions, formed identity, and developed a political culture.

Together, the literature I discuss above underscores the need to explain how a public emerged in China. The Chinese state uses a technique of "divide and rule" to prevent social groups from joining and potentially becoming organized social or political forces (Perry 2007). Any explanation of the emergent public sphere thus needs to address the constituent processes of identify formation, capability development, politicization, and the establishment of social

relations among individuals and within and between social groups (Calhoun 1992; Dahlgren 1995, 2005; Fraser 1990).

Drawing from the sociological literature on networks and institutions, I analyze the coevolution of individuals, networks, and institutions to understand the emergence of a public (Owen-Smith and Powell 2008; Padgett and Powell 2012a, 2012b). Specifically, my analysis highlights the connections and forms of feedback between three processes: (1) the development of legal and media institutions, (2) the transformation of individuals, and (3) the emergence and overlapping of multiple networks. I contend that these coeval processes led to the genesis and expansion of a public by breaking down existing boundaries. Essentially, through tracing the coevolution of individuals, networks, and institutions, I am able to explain the development of China's contentious public sphere and link historical processes that unfolded at and across multiple levels.

#### FRAGMENTED AND ADAPTIVE AUTHORITARIANISM

The final component of my argument concerns the conditions for the formation of crosscutting social networks and political contention. I argue that the fragmentation of the Chinese state opened a space for various actors to form overlapping social networks and to use the law and the media for contention. This argument builds on the fragmented authoritarianism model of Chinese politics. Instead of seeing the state as a monolithic entity, the fragmented authoritarianism model notes that government agencies across levels and localities may have different interests and political goals. The complex and sometimes conflicting relationships between government agencies shape bargaining and negotiation between levels and sectors and can influence policy implementation (Lieberthal 1992). In fact, each state agency often has its own problems with which it must cope. As such, research in this area sees the fragmented nature of China's political regime as a weakness of the state. Political fragmentation can open a space for policy entrepreneurs, such as peripheral local government officials and media, to participate in and influence politics (Mertha 2009). The fragmentation of the Chinese state has thus made implementing its modernization project uncertain.

Nonetheless, the Chinese state has been adapting itself to address the problem of fragmentation. As Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth J. Perry (2011) argue, the Chinese state's adaptive governance explains how the CCP has managed to endure in a drastically changing environment when many other regimes have failed. They contend that the CCP's long revolution contributed to "guerrilla-style policy-making," characterized by continual learning, experimentation, and transformation to cope with uncertainty and challenge. While Heilmann and Perry focus on policy adaptation, other scholars highlight the

Chinese state's adaptability in making formal and informal institutions (Nathan 2003; Tsai 2006). The bottom line is that Chinese state agencies are able to troubleshoot continuously and respond to individual problems.

But the Chinese state's adaptability can also increase fragmentation along temporal and ideological dimensions. Top leaders in the Chinese state initiate adaptations to address various problems at different points of time, often coming up with new ad hoc policies, theories, and practices, without formally repudiating or revising previous ones. As a result, contradictory policies, theories, and practices can be enacted, creating opportunities for capable agents to exploit such contradictions to pursue their own agendas. In short, I argue that the Chinese state's fragmentation and adaptivity have influenced the development of China's contentious public sphere by creating or closing opportunity structures available to various political and social actors.

### **A Note on Data and Research Methods**

Analyzing the development of China's contentious public sphere has been a daunting task. Given my training in sociology, I was well aware of the limitation of relying on a single research method or a single source of data. As such, I have employed multiple methods of analysis and triangulated various types of data. This strategy enabled me to gain a broader picture of the development of the contentious public sphere, while also helping me to understand various components of the historical process and their relationships to one another. Since most of my empirical chapters have their own distinct data sources and research methods, I describe data sources and research methods in detail in an appendix. Here, I briefly describe how I analyzed various data sources and what I gained from such analysis.

*Newspapers:* I analyzed the content of national and local newspapers published in China between 1949 and 2015 across localities. Newspapers analysis was particularly helpful in terms of detecting trends over time, such as patterns in reports on public opinion and the growth of rights discourse in China. By analyzing newspapers in different localities and different types of newspapers, I was also able to identify variation in news reports and moments of divergence between official discourse and alternative discourse.

*Yearbooks, laws and regulations, and other official documents:* I examined volumes of the *China Journalism Yearbook*, published between 1983 and 2014; the *Law Yearbook of China* for the years 1987–2014; gazetteers published by local governments; and Party Congress reports. Reading through these materials helped me to understand the Chinese state's modernization project and institutional processes in the media and legal fields. I also analyzed top Chinese leaders' speeches and writings to understand their rationales when making constitutive choices.

*Interview data:* Between 2009 and 2016 in China and in the United States, I conducted more than 160 in-depth interviews with ordinary citizens and informants, including media and legal professionals, local and central government officials, legal and communication studies scholars, public opinion leaders, grievants, and activists. Qualitative analysis of interview data allowed me to understand the thinking, decisions, and actions of actors who have participated in China's modernization project and shaped China's contentious public sphere. Interview data also helped me to uncover the formation of social relations between different actors.

*Online text in Internet forums and social media data:* I extracted textual data from web pages of online discussion forums in China from October 2007 to 2010, analyzing them both qualitatively and quantitatively. I drew on such analysis to understand the formation of contentious events, or public opinion incidents, as case studies. I also extracted data from Chinese social media, or Weibo. I drew on techniques of content analysis and social network analysis to identify the political orientation of and connections between public opinion leaders in China.

*Survey data:* I employed statistical techniques to analyze the 2002 Asian Barometer Survey, the 2008 Asian Barometer Survey, the 2003 AsiaBarometer Survey, 2006 AsiaBarometer Survey,<sup>6</sup> the 2005–2008 World Values Surveys, and the 2008 China Survey conducted by Texas A&M University. Because most of these data sets were nationally representative, they allowed me to succinctly describe the demographic background, social networks, political attitudes, and political behavior of Chinese netizens. My statistical analysis is complemented by my findings from in-depth interviews and analysis of online texts and social media data.

In short, the combination of multiple research methods and analysis of various data helped me to trace and understand the multifaceted and multilevel processes that have shaped the development of China's contentious public sphere. In my writing, I have put a heavy emphasis on evidence and chosen a more detached, impersonal voice to let the evidence speak for itself.

## Chapter Outlines

The chapters of the book systematically establish the empirical phenomenon to be explained, and then outline the multistage processes that constitute my explanation. In chapter 2, the first empirical chapter, I marshal evidence to establish my starting point: the rise of a nationwide contentious public sphere in China, a development I trace to the mid-2000s. Then, in chapter 3, I situate and explain the Chinese state's turn to the law and rights as part of the state's authoritarian modernization project, as well as the rise of legal and rights consciousness in a longer historical context. In chapter 4, I detail how the

state's use of media to disseminate law and report on certain local problems, paired with political fragmentation and the marketization of the press, provided conditions for certain media and legal professionals to build networks and collaborate. Such collaboration pushed the boundaries of critical news reporting and expanded the concept of rights beyond socioeconomic issues. In chapter 5, I show how the Chinese state's regulation of the press market unexpectedly elevated the importance of Internet companies as news providers and facilitators of public opinion, while also amplifying the influence of politicized, proliberal media and legal professionals. In chapter 6, I then demonstrate how critical culture and practices were extended from legal and media professionals to ordinary citizens through the diffusion of the Internet. I also demonstrate the rise of an opinionated, critical, and politically active online public, whose everyday practices and participation in public opinion incidents contributed to the rise of China's contentious public sphere. Finally, in chapter 7, I discuss how the Chinese state, particularly the Xi Jinping leadership, has strategically responded to a rising contentious public sphere in China. Throughout, I highlight the novelty and significance of these developments. The emergence of a contentious public sphere in China is a remarkable event—one that warrants further investigation precisely because its future remains so unclear.