

Intergovernmental Conflict and Censorship: Evidence from China's Anti-Corruption Campaign

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Motivation

- The press is not free in a majority of countries. [map](#)
- Autocratic regimes use the media to maintain stability and support.
- Media systems and government hierarchies in autocracies are complex.
- Does potentially sensitive media content vary systematically within autocracies?
- Can local governments control information flow within their region, counter the interests of higher levels of government?
Does this have implications for local government accountability?

This paper

- China: world's largest autocracy and ranks 177/180 in press freedom index.
- Chinese government exports media strategy and role model to other regimes. Examples of Chinese influence
- Wide-ranging anti-corruption campaign run and publicised by central government.
- I collect over 40,000 newspaper articles to study how *local* Chinese newspapers report about individual corruption cases from their own relative to other areas.
- Possible hypotheses:
 - *Central media strategy*: no difference in reporting
 - *Demand-driven reporting*: more reporting about corruption in own area
 - *Local censorship*: less reporting about corruption in own area

Preview of results

- Newspapers write *fewer* articles about *high-level* corruption in their own province.
- Newspaper articles about local corruption are shorter, less negative in tone and feature “boring” headlines.
- Mechanisms: more underreporting of high-level corruption within the same province
 - when newspapers are more dependent on local governments &
 - when officials are more influential.
- Newspapers report *more* about *low-level* corruption scandals from the same province; except when a newspaper belongs to the same municipality as an official.

Interpretation and implications of results

- Local governments control the media in their area to underreport stories that are potentially unfavourable to them.
- Evidence against alternative explanations:
 - Demand by newspaper readers.
 - Strategic overreporting by neighbouring provinces.
 - Centralised censorship strategy.
- When levels of government have divergent preferences, government-controlled media have different reporting bias.
- Principal-agent problem within an autocratic regime.
- Local censorship breaks information transmission and monitoring for principal.
- Suggestive evidence that local censorship reduces local government accountability and effectiveness of anti-corruption campaign.

Related literature

- Principal-agent problems within a government hierarchy
 - Empirical examples of misaligned incentives in China: [Fisman and Wang \(2017\)](#), [Jia and Nie \(2017\)](#), [Dutronc-Postel and Zhuang \(2020\)](#)
 - Media as monitoring device for autocrats: [Lorentzen \(2013\)](#), [Egorov, Guriev and Sonin \(2009\)](#), [Qin, Stromberg and Wu \(2017\)](#)
 - [Pan and Chen \(2018\)](#) show how officials conceal citizen complaints from superiors in one Chinese city
- Media control in non-democracies
 - Censorship and propaganda on Chinese social media: [King, Pan and Roberts \(2017, 2014, 2013\)](#)
 - Propaganda vs. profit in Chinese newspaper markets: [Qin, Stromberg and Wu \(2018\)](#)
- Economics of media bias
 - Demand vs. supply-side explanations: [Gentzkow and Shapiro \(2010\)](#), [Enikolopov, Petrova and Zhuravskaya \(2011\)](#)

Outline

Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign

- Xi Jinping's major domestic policy, since coming to power in 2012.
- Public rationale: increase Chinese Communist Party (CCP) legitimacy. Corruption will “doom party and state”.
- 1.3 million officials punished: “Tigers” and “Flies”
- Investigated officials removed from power, but local corruption networks may remain.
- Campaign relies on local information and citizens' complaints.

Media in China

- Coverage of anti-corruption campaign in central state media: People's Daily website, officials' confessions, popular TV dramas
- Majority of Chinese newspapers are local, i.e. only circulated in local area.
- Local newspapers answer to a local propaganda bureau, which answers to local government/party and central propaganda bureau.
- Government control of media through propaganda guidelines and ex post sanctions. [Guidelines](#) [Sanctions](#)

Outline

Data I

Individual officials under investigation

- All officials named on CCDI website from end-2012 to end-2014 from 14 provinces
- 408 officials in total, including all “Tigers”
- Source: Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) [example](#)

Sample of newspapers

- All newspapers archived on Wisenews from 2011 to 2015: 99 newspapers in total
- Representative of large metropolitan areas; 14 out of 31 provinces
- Sources: Wisenews, Chinese Journalism Yearbooks, State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television

Summary statistics

Data II

Newspaper articles

- 41,378 articles about each official by each newspaper from 2 years before to 1 year after CCDI announcement
- Source: Wisenews

Newspapers' social media posts about high-level officials example

- 2,397 posts about high-level officials name post-announcement by 59 newspapers with official active Sina Weibo accounts
- 30,334 available comments on Sina Weibo posts and characteristics of users API restriction example

Internet search data

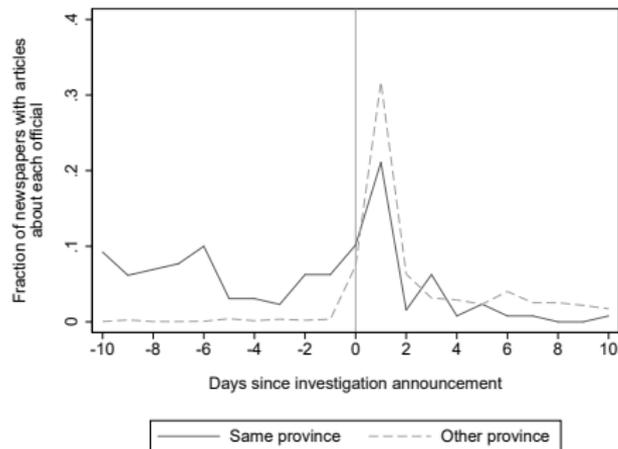
- Province-day panel of internet searches about individual corrupt officials and official anti-corruption campaign citizen complaint website from Baidu

Summary statistics

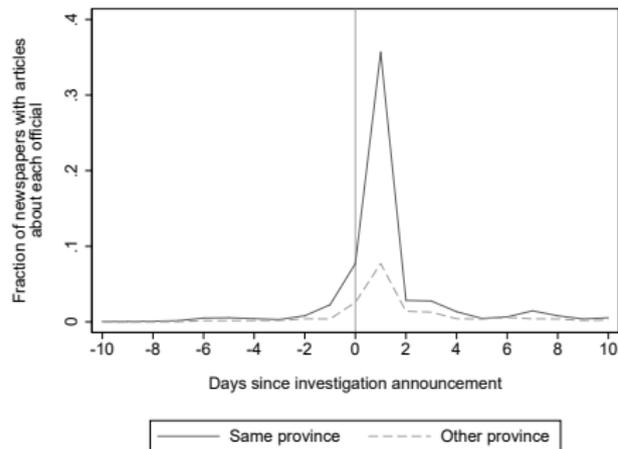
Outline

Fraction of newspapers with articles about corrupt officials

A. High-level officials

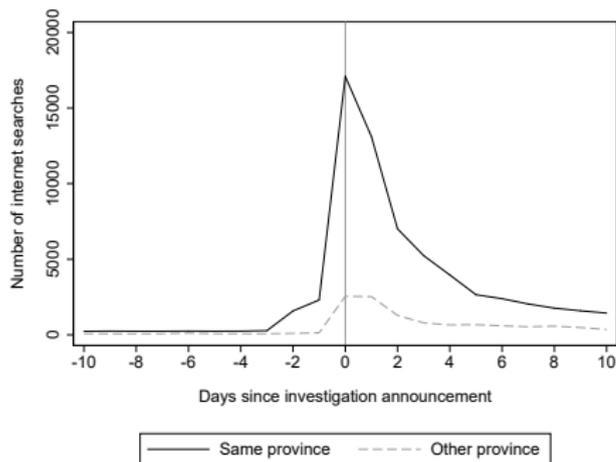


B. Low-level officials

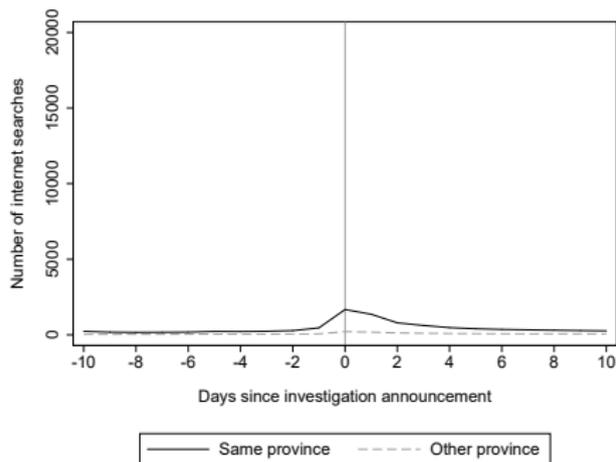


Internet searches for corrupt officials

A. High-level officials



B. Low-level officials



Empirical strategy

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Article}_{o,n,t} = & \beta_1(\text{Post}_{o,t} \times \text{High}_o) + \beta_2(\text{Post}_{o,t} \times \text{SameProvince}_{o,n} \times \text{High}_o) + \\ & \beta_3(\text{Post}_{o,t} \times \text{Low}_o) + \beta_4(\text{Post}_{o,t} \times \text{SameProvince}_{o,n} \times \text{Low}_o) + \\ & \mathbf{X}'_t \delta + \theta_{n,t} + \gamma_{o,n} + \epsilon_{o,n,t} \end{aligned}$$

$\text{Article}_{o,n,t}$ - dummy whether at least one article published

$\text{Post}_{o,t}$ - dummy for period following the CCDI announcement

High_o - dummy for high-level official

Low_o - dummy for low-level official

$\text{SameProvince}_{o,n}$ - dummy whether official is from same province as newspaper

\mathbf{X}'_t - seasonal controls: fixed effects for day-of-week, month, year, major holidays and major national CCP events

$\theta_{n,t}$ - fixed effects for major provincial CCP events

$\gamma_{o,n}$ - official-newspaper pair fixed effects

$\epsilon_{o,n,t}$ - two-way clustered standard errors at newspaper and official level

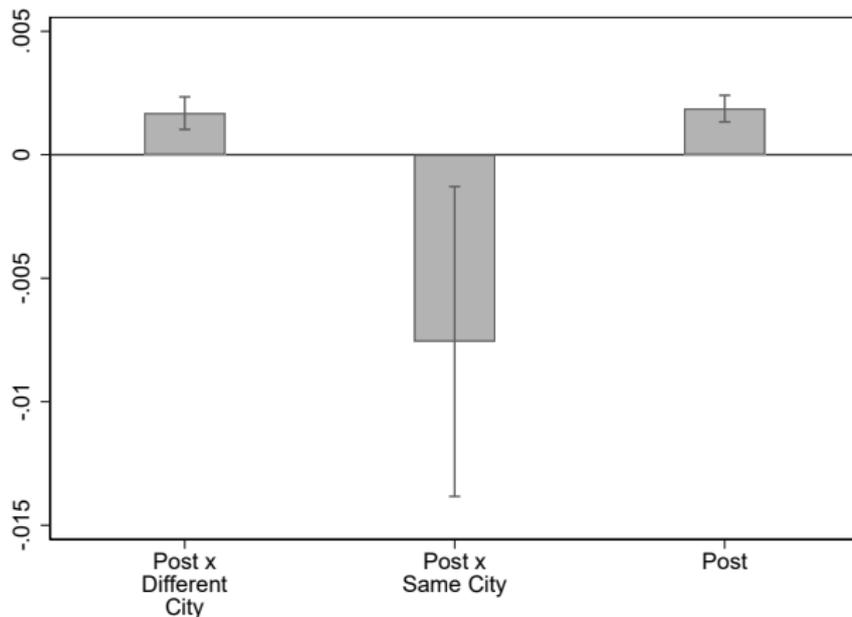
Outline

Newspapers underreport corruption in their own province

Dependent Variable: Dummy for whether an article was published

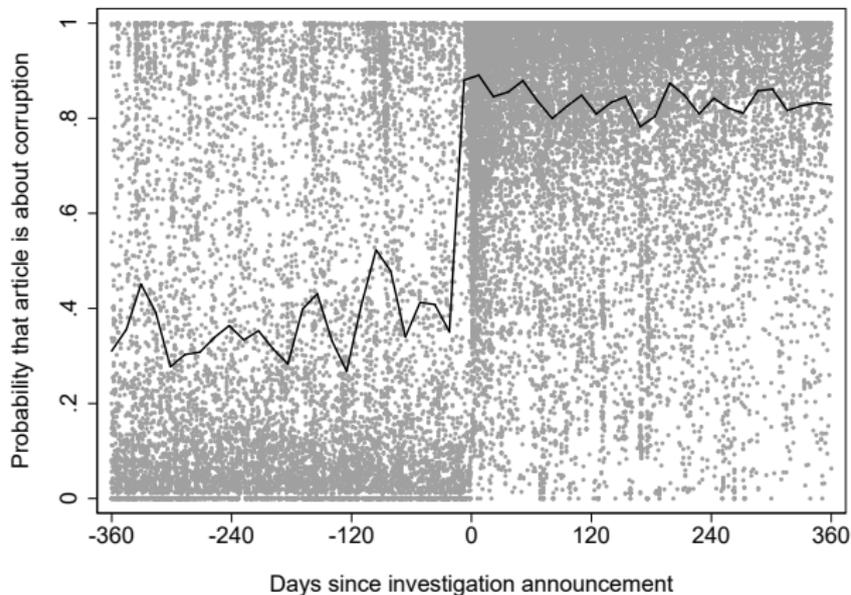
High-level official x Post-scandal x Same province	-0.057*** (0.013)	-0.057*** (0.013)
High-level official x Post-scandal	0.0078*** (0.0013)	0.0090*** (0.0014)
Low-level official x Post-scandal x Same province	0.0024*** (0.00052)	0.0023*** (0.00063)
Low-level official x Post-scandal	0.00086*** (0.00012)	0.0023*** (0.00030)
Seasonal FE		✓
No. of obs.	39,941,975	39,941,975
No. of clusters (officials)	408	408
No. of clusters (newspapers)	99	99
R-squared	0.045	0.045
Mean dep. var.	0.0012	0.0012

City-level newspapers underreport corruption in their own city.



Newspapers report relatively more about corrupt low-level officials from their home province relative to other provinces. City-level newspapers underreport corruption in their own city relative to other cities within the same province.

Probability of “Corruption” topic increases post-announcement



Newspapers downplay corruption in their own province

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Log words	Sentiment	Complaints	Article headline: Corruption	Campaign
Share of high-level OF from same province	-152.6** (64.7)	5.53*** (1.36)	-0.056*** (0.015)	-0.055*** (0.019)	-0.025* (0.014)
Share of low-level OF from same province	49.2 (48.0)	1.06 (0.69)	0.010 (0.011)	0.016 (0.012)	-0.014*** (0.0041)
Share of high-level PF	126.3** (48.9)	-2.67*** (0.84)	0.036*** (0.012)	0.029** (0.014)	0.0073 (0.011)
No. of obs.	17,839	17,839	17,839	17,839	17,839
R-squared	0.26	0.19	0.24	0.16	0.16
Mean dep. var.	1122.8	3.44	0.12	0.22	0.048

Sentiment analysis chart

Outline

Interpretation of results

Local governments pressure newspapers within their area to suppress or deemphasise unfavourable news. More underreporting when

- officials are well connected
- newspapers are directly owned and financed by local governments
- newspapers are from the same level of government as the official.

No evidence for alternative explanations, e.g. reader demand, centralised censorship strategies, overreporting by local rivals.

Implications of results

Local censorship can reduce local government accountability:

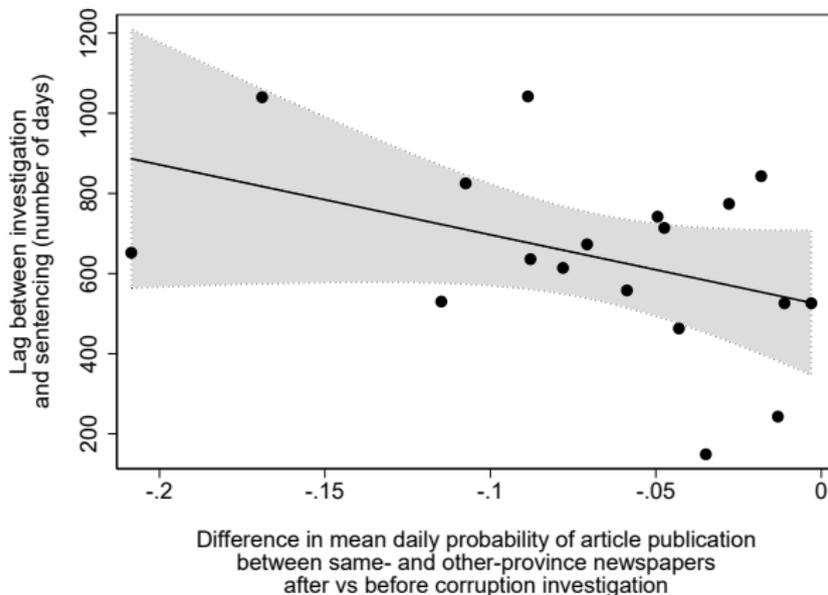
- In China, citizens can only hold local officials accountable by appealing to higher levels of government.
- Underreporting and deemphasising local corruption scandals reduces likelihood of citizen complaints about local officials.
- Less information for central government to about officials currently under investigation and potential other corrupt local officials.

Newspaper coverage affects citizen complaints

Baidu searches for non-anonymous complaint process

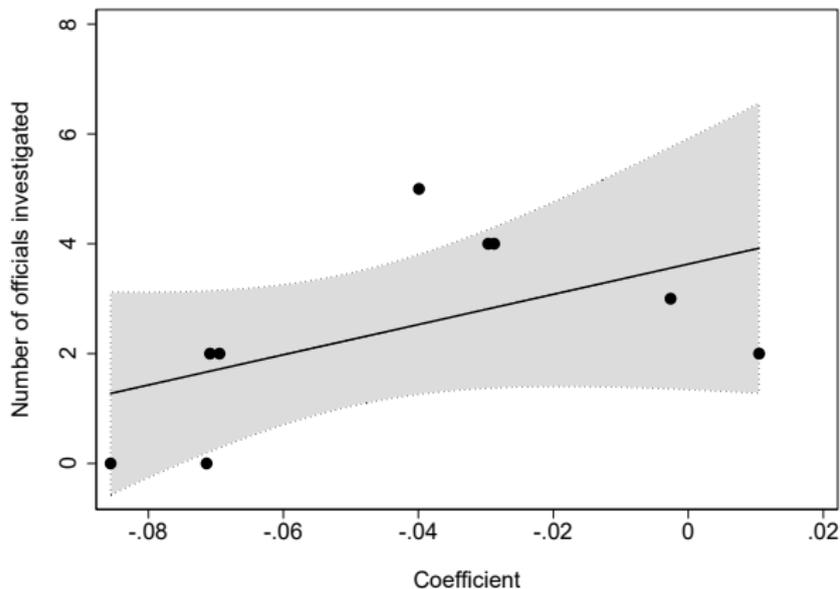
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Number of high-level officials from same province investigated	13.3*** (3.86)	13.3 (9.11)	13.0 (9.21)	13.3 (9.30)	13.2 (9.28)
Number of low-level officials from same province investigated	3.11*** (0.70)	-0.021 (1.56)	0.16 (1.61)	0.26 (1.55)	0.27 (1.55)
...High-level officials from same province		-7.99 (8.04)			
...Low-level officials from same province		12.0*** (3.87)			
...High-level officials from other provinces		5.87** (2.45)			
...Low-level officials from other provinces		7.44** (3.13)			
Fraction of own-province newspapers publishing articles with...					
...references to citizen complaints			15.3*** (5.79)		
... "Corruption" in headline				8.93** (3.63)	

Lag between investigation announcement and sentencing date



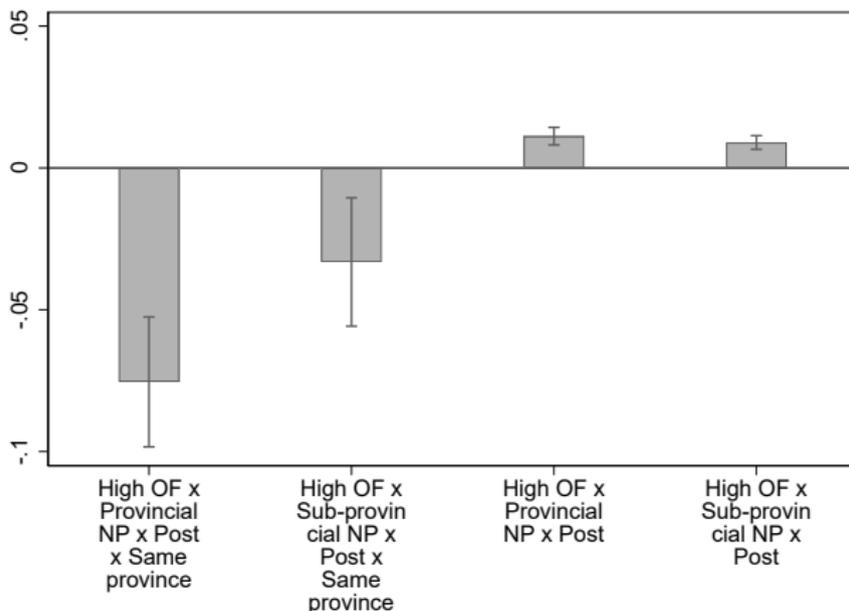
Underreporting increases the lag between investigation announcement and sentencing - potentially due to increased difficulty in gathering information about corrupt local officials from the local population.

Future investigations into high-level corruption



More severe underreporting of local high-level corruption scandals is associated with fewer future high-level corruption cases in the same province. Local censorship may undermine the anti-corruption effort.

Sub-provincial newspapers underreport less about corruption within the provincial government

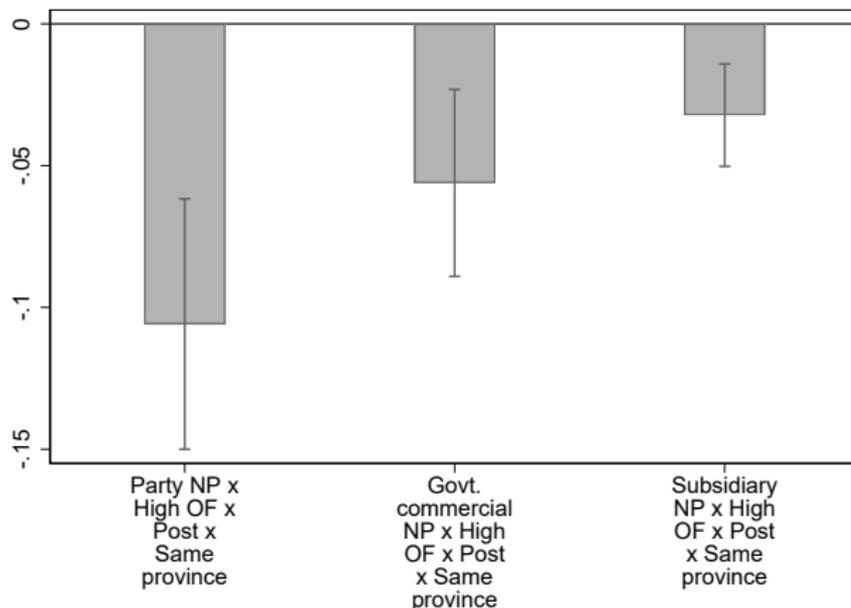


Within the same province, newspapers from sub-provincial levels of government underreport less about high-level corruption in the provincial government.

Types of local newspapers in China

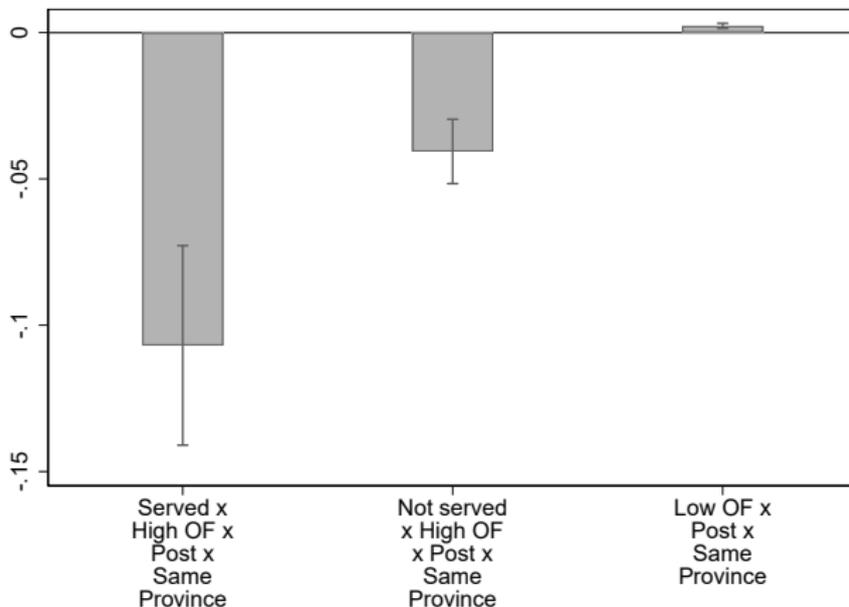
- *“Dailies”*: government-owned, party mouthpieces, financed through subsidies and public subscriptions
- *Government-owned commercial papers*: government-owned, more entertainment content, financed through advertising
- *Subsidiaries*: subsidiaries of other (government-owned) newspapers, in competition with government-owned commercial newspapers, financed through advertising

More financially dependent newspapers underreport more



Party newspapers underreport significantly more than either type of commercial newspaper.

Scandals of better connected high-level officials are underreported more



Connected officials served on the provincial party standing committee with the incumbent provincial party secretary, the highest official of a province.

Case Study: Wan Qingliang

Social media comments

	Number of comments		Time to first comment	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Post about high-level officials from same province	0.50** (0.25)	0.50* (0.25)	-22.7 (58.0)	-7.95 (39.3)
Newspaper from same province	1.34** (0.55)	1.34** (0.57)	-63.5* (37.1)	-23.0 (20.1)
Number of high-level officials mentioned	✓		✓	
Seasonal controls	✓		✓	
User province FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Newspaper FE	✓		✓	
Official FE	✓		✓	
Weibo post FE		✓		✓
No. of obs.	33,558	33,558	3,594	3,594
R-squared	0.11	0.44	0.25	0.71
Mean dep. var.	0.67	0.67	42.2	42.2

Robustness checks

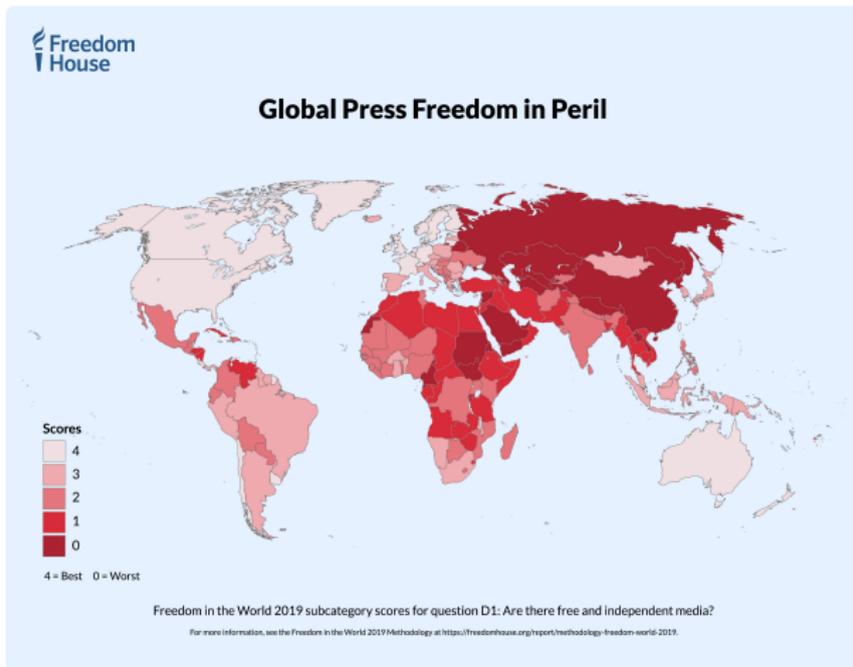
- Alternative frequencies [Table](#)
- Dynamic effects [Chart](#)
- Complete official-newspaper province matrix [Table](#)
- Matched parent-subsidiary newspaper pairs [Chart](#)
- Fixed effects Poisson using number of articles published [Table](#)

Outline

Conclusion

- Local newspapers in China underreport and downplay high-level corruption scandals in their local area in response to local government pressure.
- Censorship is not uniform in autocracies.
- Differential media bias as empirical evidence of conflict of interest within the government hierarchy.
- Wider implications about principal-agent problems within autocracies: decentralised and captured local media cannot act as effective monitoring device for the autocrat.
- Local censorship reduces local government accountability.

Freedom House index of press freedom

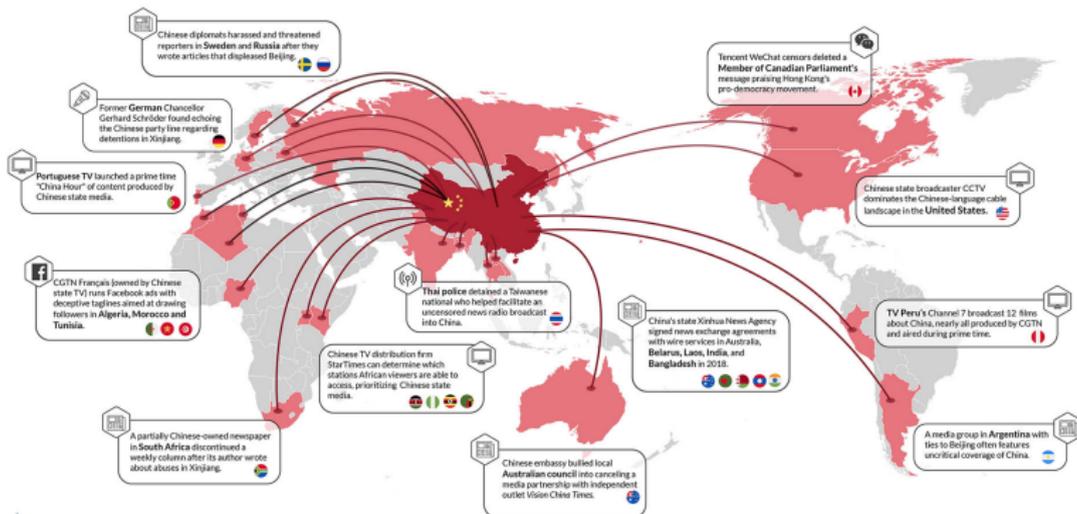


Source: Freedom House, “Freedom in the World Report 2019”.

[back](#)

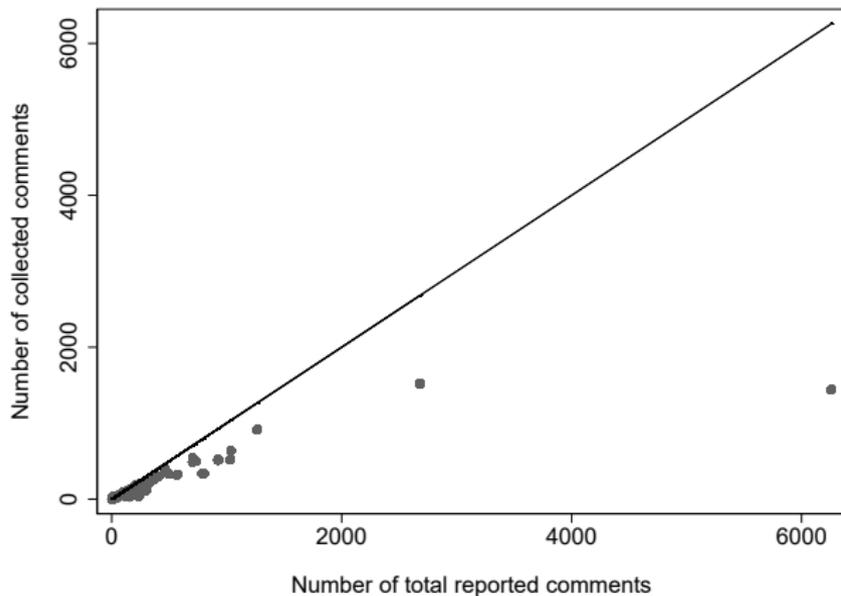
China's media influence around the world

Beijing's Global Reach: Selected Cases of Chinese Media Influence Abroad



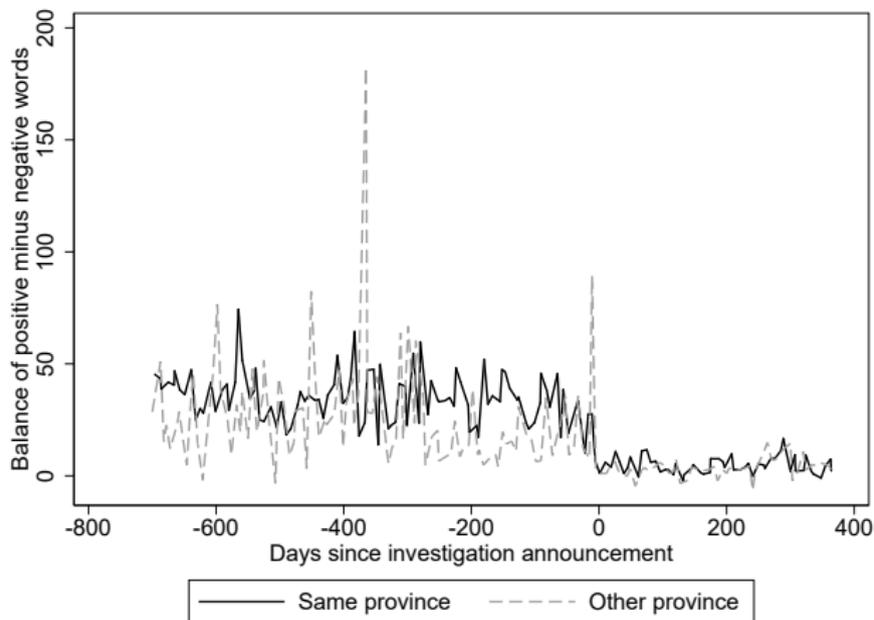
Source: Freedom House, "The Implications for Democracy of China's Globalizing Media Influence". [back](#)

Reported vs. accessible comments on Sina Weibo



[back](#)

Sentiment analysis based on NUTSD: High-level officials



[back](#)

Example of Sina Weibo post from People's Daily

 人民日报  

#习大大打虎动漫#【习近平挥棒打虎卡通形象亮相】春节前夕，三个动画短片《群众路线动真格了？》《老百姓的事儿好办了吗？》《当官的真怕了吗？》网上流传。片中多次出现习近平等领导人的卡通形象，甚至有习近平挥棒“打虎”的画面。网友：短片比春晚反腐相声尺度还大。来看看→[网页链接](#)

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后来发现 中央最靠谱的动画的 @人民日报



2015年02月20日 09:29 来自 人民日报微博

Source: People's Daily Sina Weibo account. [back](#)

Example of Sina Weibo post from People's Daily - comment section



The screenshot shows a Sina Weibo post from the account 'People's Daily'. At the top, there is a profile picture placeholder, a search bar, and a '评论' (Comment) button. Below the post content, there are filter tabs: '全部' (All), '热门' (Popular), '认证用户' (Verified Users), and '关注的人' (People I Follow). The total number of comments is '共61条' (Total 61 comments). The comment section lists five comments:

- 风吹不动天边月123**: 不错! 😊
2015年10月25日 18:23
- 范胜春3** 🙄: 很多事情本来就糊涂! 再叫马云阿里李彦红他们! 陈安之不是马帮的吗? 再误导! 祸事大全! 大杂烩! 他们要我不是人? 他们是人
2015年07月28日 16:40
- 陈晓晓-** 🍷: 棒棒哒👍
2015年06月23日 02:48
- 爱情方程式6**: 去年真的是打击了官场的黑暗, 但是贪污的小村官的惩治力度不够, 希望习大大继续加油, 新年好!
2015年06月16日 19:19
- 尔旺节能灶具厂**: 习总书记好辛苦, 你打了老虎, 别忽视了苍蝇和蚊子, 小咬咬多了能把老虎吃了, 蚂蚁吞大象就是个例子! 您要慎重! 您要好好休息, 继续培养灭虫专家和打虎英雄!
2015年04月12日 08:15

At the bottom, there is a comment from **园原杏里** with a red star icon and the text '啧啧'.

Source: People's Daily Sina Weibo account.

[back](#)

Leaked propaganda guidelines from Guangdong

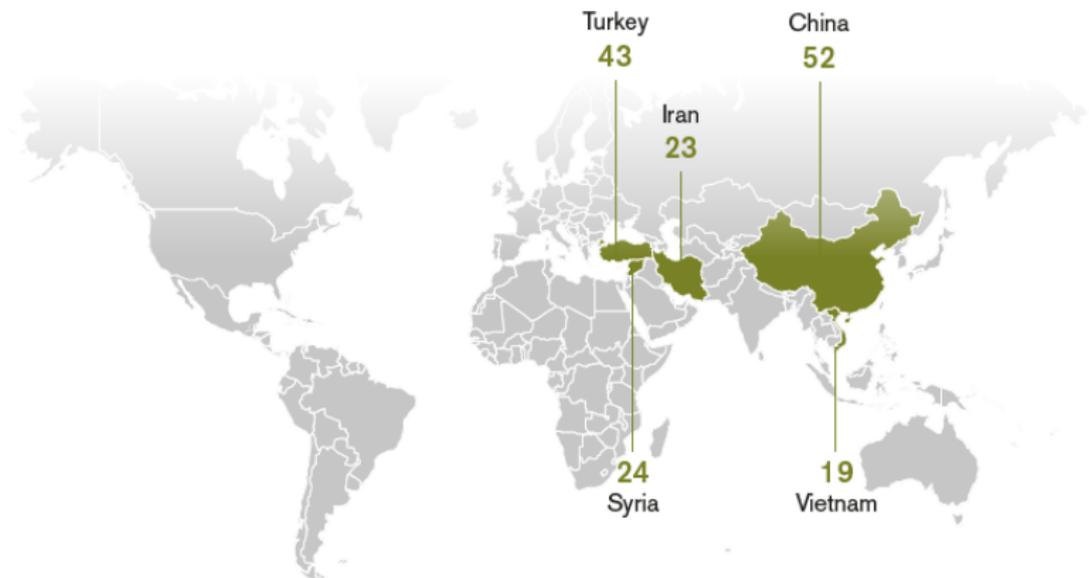
Do not independently investigate, report, or comment on the series of corruption cases in Maoming, with the exception of those which are arranged unified manner. (December 5, 2012)

During the group discussion of the Zhongshan district delegation at the provincial People's Congress, Li Yumei mentioned a case under investigation in which a main level cadre embezzled public funds for a family grave. *Without exception, no media will report this. (January 25, 2013)*

No media are to sensationalize the topic of government officials making public their personal assets or related issues. Do not place reports on the front page, and do not lure readers to coverage. (January 24, 2013)

[back](#)

Number of journalists detained in 2017



Source: Reporters without Borders

Example of CCDI post

“The Deputy Secretary of the Municipal Party Committee and Mayor of Nanjing, Ji Jianye, is suspected of seriously violating the discipline and engaging in illegal behaviour and is currently under investigation.”

published on CCDI website on 17 October 2013

[back](#)

Summary statistics I

	mean	sd	min	max	obs
A. Newspapers					
Party NP	0.21	0.41	0	1	99
Govt-owned commercial NP	0.27	0.45	0	1	99
Subsidiary NP	0.52	0.50	0	1	99
Central NP	0.18	0.39	0	1	99
Provincial NP	0.55	0.50	0	1	99
Sub-provincial NP	0.27	0.45	0	1	99
B. Officials					
High-ranking	0.08	0.28	0	1	408
Government	0.78	0.41	0	1	408
Local govt.	0.72	0.45	0	1	408
Provincial govt.	0.19	0.39	0	1	408
Sub-provincial govt.	0.53	0.50	0	1	408
SOE	0.13	0.34	0	1	408
Other institution	0.08	0.27	0	1	408

[back](#)

Summary statistics II

	mean	sd	min	max	obs
C. Articles					
Number of words	1357	1776	1	32767	41,377
Incl. image	0.09	0.29	0	1	41,378
Page number	8.38	8.47	1	134	37,142
Positive to negative words	3.44	24.44	-148	891	17,839
Multiple officials	0.22	0.42	0	1	17,839
Citizen complaints (in text)	0.12	0.33	0	1	17,839
Announcement copy (in headline)	0.01	0.09	0	1	17,839
Corruption (in headline)	0.22	0.41	0	1	17,839
Campaign (in headline)	0.05	0.21	0	1	17,839
D. Official-Newspaper-Day Panel					
Article	0.001	0.034	0	1	39,941,978
Number of articles	0.001	0.042	0	11	39,941,978
Same province	0.076	0.266	0	1	39,941,978

Summary statistics III

	mean	sd	min	max	obs
E. Newspapers' Sina Weibo Accounts					
Party NP	0.24	0.43	0	1	59
Govt-owned commercial NP	0.29	0.46	0	1	59
Subsidiary NP	0.47	0.50	0	1	59
Central NP	0.15	0.36	0	1	59
Provincial NP	0.53	0.50	0	1	59
Sub-provincial NP	0.32	0.47	0	1	59
Number of friends	1,216	1,278	41	8,259	59
Number of followers	9,018,091	14,470,034	10,240	92,136,679	59
Number of posts	75,120	38,284	1,978	182,801	59
F. Newspapers' Sina Weibo posts					
Number of comments	27.98	157.94	0	6258	2397
Number of forwards	75.41	453.50	0	16656	2397
Number of likes	25.32	119.42	0	2447	2397

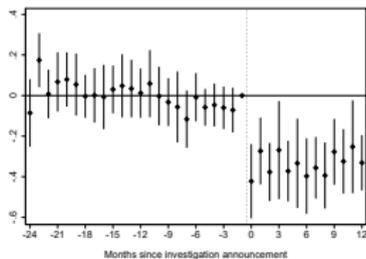
Summary statistics IV

	mean	sd	min	max	obs
G. Commenters on Sina Weibo posts					
Number of followers	83,155	2,159,433	0	92,023,217	30,334
Number of friends	573	873	0	20,000	30,334
Number of posts	6,095	17,125	0	697,415	30,334
Male	0.78	0.42	0	1	30,334
Verified	0.10	0.30	0	1	30,334

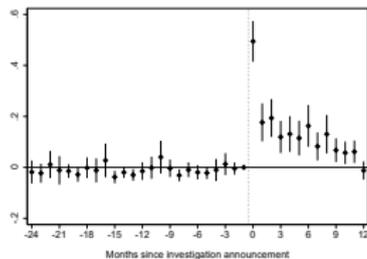
[back](#)

Dynamic effects

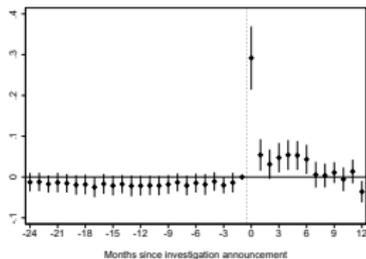
A. High-level officials, same province



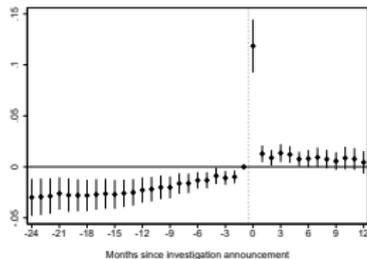
B. High-level officials



C. Low-level officials, same province



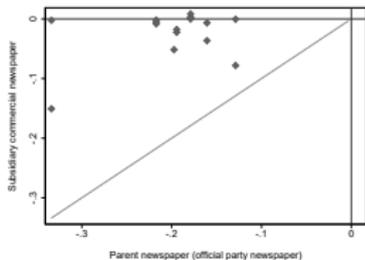
D. Low-level officials



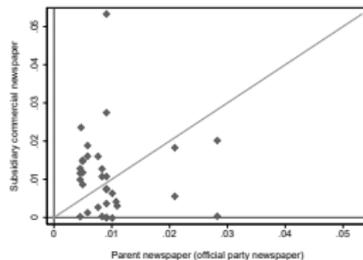
[back](#)

Subsidiaries and their parent newspapers

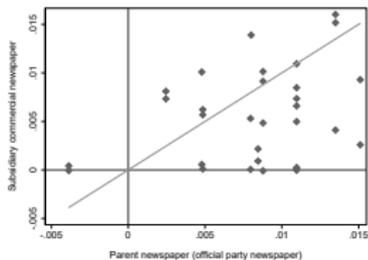
A. High-level officials, same province



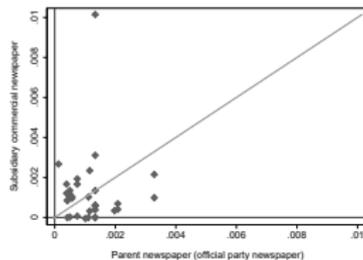
B. High-level officials



C. Low-level officials, same province



D. Low-level officials



[back](#)

Poisson and OLS comparison

	Poisson: Number of articles published (1)	OLS: Dummy for whether an article is published (2)
High-level official x Post-scandal x Same province	-3.47*** (0.43)	-0.064*** (0.013)
High-level official x Post-scandal	2.45*** (0.28)	0.014*** (0.0017)
Low-level official x Post-scandal x Same province	-0.84*** (0.22)	0.0012 (0.00075)
Low-level official x Post-scandal	2.75*** (0.27)	0.0083*** (0.00067)
No. of obs.	11,816,358	11,816,358
(Pseudo) R-squared	0.2306	0.044
Mean dep. var.	0.0045	0.0040

[back](#)

Alternative Frequencies

Frequency	Dummy for whether an article is published			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
High-level official x Post-scandal x Same province	-0.19*** (0.036)	-0.19*** (0.036)	-0.33*** (0.060)	-0.33*** (0.061)
High-level official x Post-scandal	0.046*** (0.0070)	0.052*** (0.0074)	0.13*** (0.017)	0.15*** (0.019)
Low-level official x Post-scandal x Same province	0.017*** (0.0031)	0.016*** (0.0031)	0.064*** (0.0095)	0.063*** (0.0095)
Low-level official x Post-scandal	0.0053*** (0.00070)	0.013*** (0.0016)	0.019*** (0.0024)	0.047*** (0.0050)
Month FE		✓		✓
Year FE		✓		✓
Chinese holidays		✓		✓
National CCP events		✓		✓
Provincial CCP events		✓		✓
Official-newspaper-pair FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
No. of obs.	5,753,324	5,753,324	1,383,985	1,383,985
R-squared	0.11	0.11	0.19	0.20
Mean dep. var.	0.0067	0.0067	0.021	0.021

[back](#)

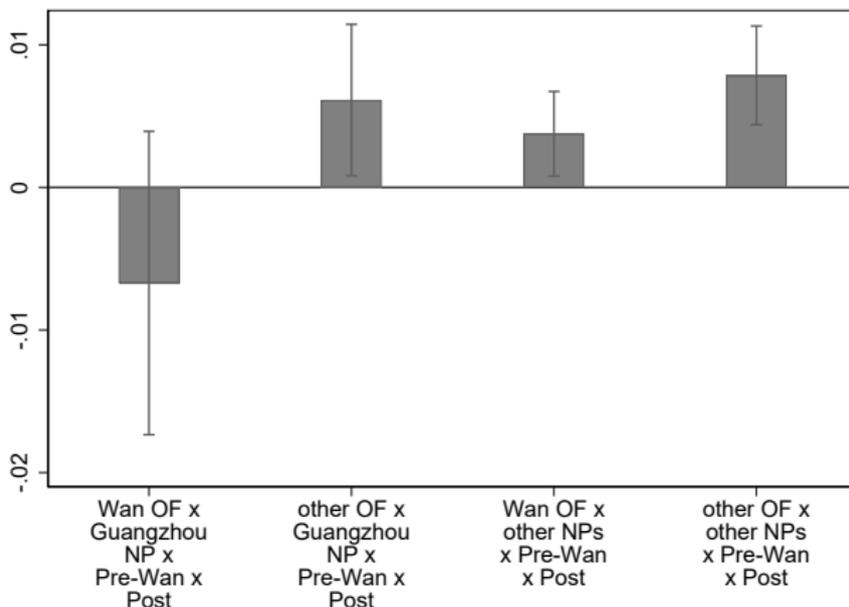
All newspaper and high-level official provinces

OF prov.	Newspaper province								
Chongqing	Chongqing - 0.086*** (0.009)	Guangdong 0.009*** (0.002)	Guangxi 0.010*** (0.002)	Hubei 0.011*** (0.002)	Hunan 0.010** (0.004)	Jiangxi 0.013*** (0.002)	Shandong 0.009** (0.004)	Sichuan 0.008* (0.004)	Tianjin 0.010*** (0.002)
Guangdong	0.012*** (0.002)	- 0.040** (0.018)	0.013*** (0.004)	0.014*** (0.005)	0.017** (0.008)	0.018** (0.007)	0.013* (0.007)	0.008*** (0.003)	0.012** (0.005)
Guangxi	0.018*** (0.001)	0.014*** (0.002)	- 0.029*** (0.009)	0.013*** (0.003)	0.014* (0.007)	0.018*** (0.004)	0.014*** (0.004)	0.008** (0.003)	0.008** (0.004)
Hubei	0.012*** (0.002)	0.018*** (0.003)	0.018*** (0.004)	-0.030 (0.018)	0.014** (0.006)	0.022*** (0.004)	0.019*** (0.002)	0.011** (0.004)	0.009* (0.005)
Hunan	0.012*** (0.002)	0.019*** (0.004)	0.019*** (0.004)	0.016*** (0.004)	0.010*** (0.003)	0.022*** (0.004)	0.018*** (0.005)	0.010*** (0.004)	0.014* (0.008)
Jiangxi	0.012*** (0.002)	0.014*** (0.003)	0.015*** (0.004)	0.012*** (0.003)	0.011*** (0.004)	- 0.071* (0.040)	0.014*** (0.004)	0.009*** (0.003)	0.011*** (0.003)
Shandong	0.014* (0.007)	0.010 (0.007)	0.011** (0.004)	0.012** (0.005)	0.013* (0.007)	0.015* (0.008)	-0.003 (0.008)	0.005** (0.002)	0.010* (0.006)
Sichuan	0.015*** (0.004)	0.014*** (0.002)	0.013*** (0.003)	0.013*** (0.003)	0.013* (0.007)	0.026*** (0.009)	0.016*** (0.004)	- 0.071* (0.041)	0.008 (0.006)
Tianjin	0.017*** (0.002)	0.021*** (0.003)	0.018*** (0.003)	0.019*** (0.003)	0.019** (0.009)	0.018*** (0.004)	0.018*** (0.005)	0.008*** (0.002)	- 0.069*** (0.017)

back

Case Study: Wan Qingliang and his network

A. Before Wan Qingliang's investigation announcement

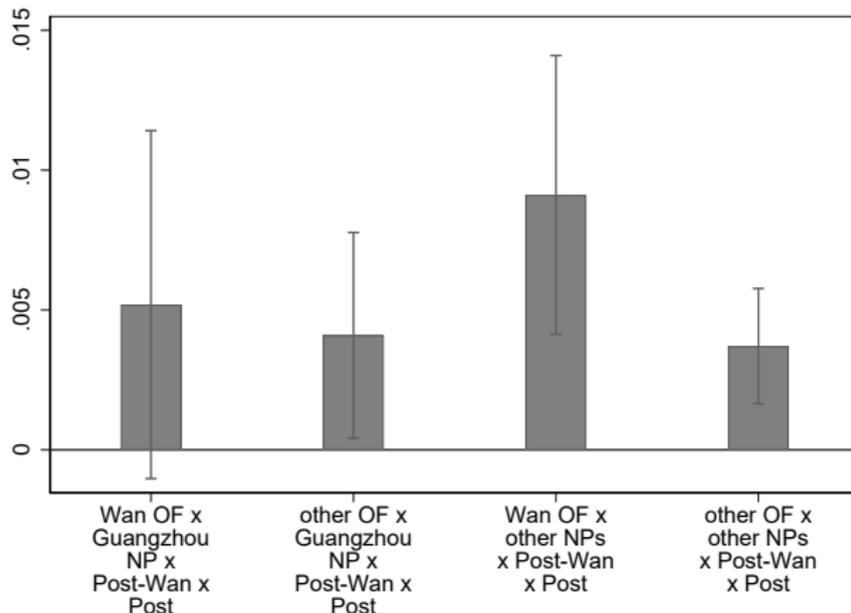


Newspapers from Guangzhou report less about scandals involving low-level officials connected to Wan Qingliang than comparable unconnected officials.

[back](#)

Case Study: Wan Qingliang and his network

B. After Wan Qingliang's investigation announcement



Newspapers from Guangzhou report similarly about scandals involving low-level officials connected to Wan Qingliang than comparable unconnected officials. [back](#)