National Media Coverage of Local Anti-PX Protests

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Abstract

Why does an authoritarian regime allow the media to report anti-PX protests and even express sympathy towards protestors in some cases? More importantly, why do some local anti-PX protests receive central media coverage while others do not? By conducting a case analysis of three anti-PX protests in China (2007 Xiamen anti-PX protest, 2011 Dalian anti-PX protest, and 2012 Ningbo anti-PX protest), this research paper argues although the Chinese central government frequently uses the state media’s coverage of local anti-PX protests to identify social grievances, discipline and monitor local government officials, and strengthen central authority, strict media censorship is applied again in politically sensitive times, such as the CCP National Congress and the Arab Spring, in order to prevent potential protest diffusion.
On December 19th, 2007, five days after the environmental impact assessment forum of the Xiamen Para-xylene (PX) project, Xiamen citizens were surprised to find that People’s Daily, the official mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), published an article “Xiamen PX Project: Continuation, Suspension, or Relocation” that claimed “the relocation of the PX project was a top choice” according to the opinions of experts from various parties and “the forum embodied the spirit of local government to respect public opinion and science” (J. Zhu & Jiang, 2007). Although it did not explicitly mention the “collective walking” or “stroll” of Xiamen citizens in June to protest against this project, it is still astonishing that the CCP’s propaganda machine has a follow-up report on a “mass incident” which is deemed to be detrimental to social stability. In stark contrast to the argument that Chinese censors aims to “curtail collective action” through deleting posts with collective action potential, the coverage of the Xiamen PX incident seems to indicate that the Chinese government does not always censor news of protests and media outlets controlled by the central government even actively report protests and their follow-up in some cases (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013). Why does an authoritarian regime allow the media to report anti-PX protests and even express sympathy towards protestors in some cases? More importantly, why do some local ant-PX protests receive central media coverage while others do not? Although the Chinese central government frequently uses the state media’s coverage of local anti-PX protests to identify social grievances, discipline local government officials, and strengthen central authority, strict media censorship is applied again in politically sensitive times, such as the CCP National Congress and the Arab Spring, in order to prevent potential protest diffusion.

**Research Questions and Literature Review**

“Middle-class” environmental protests have become increasingly visible during the past decade in urban China where more and more common citizens take to the street to protest against air pollution, water pollution and unsafe chemical plants located close to their
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apartments, in stark contrast to the traditional perception that the emerging Chinese middle class does not protest on the street and only express their grievances on the Internet. According to Zhaofei Yang (as cited in Jianqiang Liu, 2013), vice chair of the Board of the Chinese Society for Environmental Science (CSES), from 1996 to 2011, the number of mass environmental protests has increased by 29 percent on average and it grew by 120 percent from 2010 to 2011. In addition, he also revealed that the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP) handled a total number of 927 incidents from 2005 to 2012 and 72 of them were classified as major incidents (as cited in Kennedy, 2012). Among them, the most notable ones have been a series of anti-PX protests in various cities since 2007 when Xiamen citizens successfully forced the local government to relocate the proposed PX plant and set an classic of Not in My Backyard (NIMBY) movement to subsequent protestors. PX is a chemical, derived from petroleum, used to produce polyester and plastic bottles, and is detrimental to people’s health “if inhaled or absorbed through skin” (“Paraxylene (PX),” n.d.). According to the 11th and 12th Five-Year Development Plan of the Petrochemical Industry issued by the National Development and Reform Commission (as cited Gu, 2016, pp. 527–528), the Chinese government decided to increase its PX production capacity from 2.23 million tons in 2005 to 8.5 million by 2010 and to 12 million by 2015 in order to narrow the gap between production and demand. This directly leads to “an investment boom in PX projects”, especially in many coastal cities where many industrial complexes are located (Gu, 2016, pp. 527–528). These projects are regarded as growth engines of the economy by the local government, but local citizens have been increasingly concerned with their health and environmental risks. Although it is indeed harmful to be exposed to PX, well-regulated PX plants do not post a great health risk and there is also no evidence that long-term exposure to the chemical leads to cancers, little public participation in the planning stage of the project and the mistrust of the local government that it solely pursues fiscal revenue and never considers people’s healthy make
local citizens become increasingly resistant of the PX project ("Environmental Protests Expose Weakness In China’s Leadership," 2015). Consequently, throughout the past decade, the planning, construction and operation of PX plants have directly led to mass protests in various cities, as evidenced by Xiamen in 2007, Chengdu in 2008, Dalian in 2011, Ningbo in 2012, Kunming in 2013, Maoming in 2014, and Jinshan (a district of Shanghai) in 2015 (Huang, Boranbay-Akan, & Huang, 2016, p. 14).

Traditional theories of social protest and authoritarianism argue that authoritarian regimes always censor the reports of protests since the coverage of the very first protest has a demonstration effect and may trigger a series of protests centered around similar issues in other regions within the country which are obviously threatening to the regime and may even spread to other countries, as evidenced by numerous historical examples, such as the fall of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the Arab Spring in 2011 (Hale, 2013; Lohmann, 1994; Weyland, 2012). From this perspective, it seems natural for the Chinese government to forbid traditional media from reporting protest and actively censor any information on the social media related to “mass incident” across the country. This is also verified by an internal periodical published by the CCP Central Propaganda Department which reminded media workers of the “extremely important propaganda guideline” that “any kind of mass incident must not be reported” (CCP Central Propaganda Department News Bureau, 2002, as cited in Steinhardt, 2015). However, according to Steinhardt (2016), protests have been increasingly visible on the Chinese media since the beginning of the 21st century with the accelerating media commercialization, the emergence of investigative journalists, and the penetration of the Internet. It is also interesting to note that the state media controlled by the central government has also started to report social protests. For instance, several national media actively covered the taxi drivers’ strike in Chongqing in 2008 by publishing “eyewitness reports” and this resulted in a “protest cascade” across China where taxi drives in 18 cities staged similar strikes.
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within one month (Huang et al., 2016, p. 2). So why does the CCP allow the media, especially media outlets controlled by itself, to report local protests that are threatening its own ruling? Why is it not afraid of the potential national revolution emerging from numerous similar protests in different regions, as the case of the Arab Spring?

According to Huang et al. (2016), if social protests focus on the local government rather than the central government, such as local governmental officials’ corruption and misconduct or the local government’s arbitrary decision to construct a chemical plant near residential areas, allowing the state (central) media to cover local protests has two benefits for the regime. First, in contrast to the traditional perception that the authoritarian regime will make all efforts to prevent protest diffusion, more local protests induced by the free state media allows the Chinese government to identify more social grievances and come up with solutions to address it in order to pre-empt potential national revolutions against the central government. Second, local protests work as a deterrent to local governmental officials since under the principle that “stability overrides everything” they will be punished by the central government if there are frequent mass incident in their jurisdiction. If national newspapers publish news of local protests, local government officials have much stronger incentives to be less corrupt, reduce their own misbehavior and take more public opinion into decision-making process. Therefore, it seems the Chinese central government even seems to favor more local protests in order to release potential revolutionary pressure and discipline local governmental officials to reduce potential social grievances. Furthermore, it has also been found that when a mass incident happens, the local government has more incentive to censor this negative news on the local media outlets which they have control of since such news will negatively influence their chances of being promoted, while the central government tends to use the central media as an instrument to identify local officials’ misconduct which leads to these protests (Tai, 2014; Tong, 2010). Therefore, there gradually emerges an interesting pattern of central government
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coverage and local government censorship when local people take to the street. However, this model seems not to be applicable in all cases. For example, the Xiamen anti-PX protest in 2007 received extensive central media coverage, while when Ningbo citizens held a similar demonstration in 2012, all the state media seemed to be instructed to remain silent? Why is the case? If the central media acts as a powerful tool of disciplining local officials and identifying local social grievances, why is it solely used by the central government in some cases? This is the central question that this paper seeks to answer.

Research Design

This paper uses the case analysis method to examine three anti-PX protest in China in order to understand why in some cases the central media actively reports the anti-PX protest while in other cases it remains largely silent. This paper only analyzes three cases (2007 Xiamen anti-PX protest, 2011 Dalian anti-PX protest, and 2012 Ningbo anti-PX protest) for the following two reasons. First, they are all anti-PX protests where urban citizens are worried about the environmental impact of the proposed or pre-existing PX projects in their own cities and they demand that the PX plant should be relocated or directly cancelled. Therefore, many variables of the three protests have already been controlled and it is much easier to directly compare and contrast the three cases. Second, among the five cases in Table 1, these three are arguably the most well-known anti-PX protests in China. Therefore, these three cases have been covered and reported in domestic and foreign media widely and they have also already been studied by many scholars as well, which means they have the best available information to compare and contrast and I am also able to find enough details about these three cases. Major characteristics/variables of the three cases have been summarized in Table 1, with two additional cases (2013 Kunming anti-PX protest and 2014 Maoming anti-PX protest) for reference, and the most important two variables that will be examined in the following are political sensitivity and national media coverage.
As mentioned above, the national media coverage of a series of anti-PX protests in China seems inconsistent where the state media actively covers the protest in some cases while it remains somewhat silent in other similar cases and this section seeks to explain this inconsistency through comparing the three cases in detail.

The Xiamen anti-PX case is arguably the milestone in the history of Chinese common citizens’ public participation in that it is the first time in which peaceful protestors succeeds in making the local government compromise on the construction a chemical plant which can generate enormous economic benefits but is deemed to be harmful to people’s health and the environment. Meanwhile, according to (Steinhardt, 2016, pp. 306–309), the first decade of the 21st century has witnessed an increasing visibility of protest in the Chinese media, not only in those commercial outlets, but also state-controlled mass media. It can be shown in Figure 1 that the Xiamen anti-PX protest is one of the very few cases that received media coverage from 2001 to 2010, reflecting a shifting position of the Chinese central media coverage of protest, from passive and strict censorship to “turn the party state into the primary definer of reality in a media world where simple suppression no longer worked” (Steinhardt, 2016, pp. 306–309).

First, in order to understand the national media coverage pattern in the Xiamen case, it is important to identify the two stages in this incident: from the end of May to the beginning of June when Xiamen citizens staged a peaceful collective walking (protest) in front of the Xiamen Municipal Government to protest the proposed PX plant and from the beginning to the end of December where the environmental impact assessment (EIA) was published by the Chinese Research Academy of Environmental Science, suggesting the local government to consider relocating the project, and the local government held a EIA forum to let the experts, People’s Congress delegates, and citizen representative to voice their opinions on the PX project.
For the first stage, the state-controlled media only had little and scattered coverage and reporting of this incident. By the end of May, an anti-PX SMS message began circulating among Xiamen citizens and the text message reads:

Xianglu Group [the company of the PX plant] joint venture has already begun investing in a benzene project. Once this kind of heavily poisonous chemical is manufactured, it will be like all of Xiamen has been hit with an atomic bomb, and Xiamen people’s lives will be full of leukemia and deformed children. We want to live; we want to be healthy! International organizations require this sort of project to be developed a distance of 100 kilometers outside of a city. Our Xiamen is just 16 km away! For our children and grandchildren, send this message to all your Xiamen friends!” Another message states: “For our children and grandchildren, act! Participate among 10,000 people, June 1 at 8 a.m., opposite the municipal government building! Hand tie yellow ribbons! SMS all your Xiamen (“SMS Texts Energize a Chinese Protest,” June 1, 2007, as cited in Yu & Zeng, 2010, pp. 183–184)

On May 28, Xiamen Evening News published the article entitled “The Haida PX Project has been approved for construction under the legal procedures of the state”, based on the interview with the director of the Xiamen Environmental Protection Bureau (Yu & Zeng, 2010, p. 184) This article emphasized that the project had been approved by the state environmental protection agency and attempted to show that it was environmentally friendly through comparing it with similar foreign chemical plants. Since the government had previously blocked news about the PX project, the emergence of this article was seen by some as an attempt of the government to signal a strong stance on the potential protests. On the morning of May 29th, the Xiamen Municipal Government asked all departments to prioritize stability maintenance and Xiamen leaders then went to Fuzhou to report the progress of the project and the public outcry in an emergency meeting of the provincial party committee in the afternoon (Ansfield, 2013, p. 167). Surprisingly, Ding Guoyan, the executive vice mayor, announced that the government decided to postpone the construction of the project and have a new and more
extensive environmental impact assessment of the whole petrochemical industrial, without mentioning any specific EIA agency and the timetable. Seemingly dissatisfied with the decision to only postpone the construction, Xiamen citizens still took to the street peacefully on June 1st and 2nd in the form of “stroll”. After the protest ended in the evening of June 2nd, the government immediately initiated a propaganda campaign on convincing people of the low toxicity and began contacting the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) in order to find a proper institution to conduct the environmental impact assessment of the project. Finally, Chinese Research Academy of Environmental Science was conducted a six-month environmental receive. Although the general perception is the Xiamen case received significant media coverage, most of the reporting happened at the second stage (December) and People’s Daily, the CCP mouthpiece, remained silent until December as well. The only state media coverage in the first stage came from Xinhua News Agency and China News Service. Xinhua News Agency published a very short article on May 30th entitled “Xiamen Municipal Government Announced to Postpone the construction of A Foreign-funded PX Chemical Project Worth 10.8 Billion Yuan”. However, strictly speaking, this article should not be regarded as national media coverage for the following two reasons. First, it only reported the Xiamen government’s official decision to postpone the project and made no comment on it. Second, it was published the day before the protest and therefore contained no information about the protest per se, though it indeed mentioned the content of the circulating anti-PX SMS message and labeled the call for citizens to protest “sensitive”. China News Service published a short article entitled “Xiamen Citizens Offer Three Categories of Suggestions for the PX Project” on June 4th, a politically sensitive date since it reminded people of the 1989 bloody crackdown of students at Tiananmen Square. This piece’s primary focus is that the Xiamen municipal started to ask for advice and suggestions from the general public from June 1st, after
it decided to postpone the construction of the project, and it is interesting to note that it also mentioned that the government informed the public via a text message and it reads:

“The PX project has been temporarily suspended. Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) is underway now and it requires more than half a year. If you have good advice and suggestions, please use the normal channel to express them to the municipal government.”

(Yang, 2007)

In addition, it reported that citizens’ suggestions could be divided into three categories: conducting EIA as soon as possible, support the PX project, and cancel the PX project. Most importantly, although this article was published on June 4th, it did not mention anything about the protest on June 1st and 2nd and it seemed to give its readers a feeling that the protest never happened. Therefore, to sum up, there are primarily two characteristics of the state media coverage in the first stage of the Xiamen case. First, both articles reported from the perspective of the Xiamen government and only covered information whose source is official, ignoring common citizens’ opinions and concerns. Second, they all seem to avoid mentioning the protest per se and only focus on the government’s reactions before and after the protest.

Between June and December, Xiamen experienced a six-month period of relative silence and this seemed to be “reinforced by a virtual media blackout” (Ansfield, 2013, p. 176). As Ansfield (2013, p. 176) described,

Like thousands of flare-ups of mass unrest across China each year, it all appeared to burn out just as quickly. The carrot-and stick reaction from the government, combined with a pragmatic public, produced an eerie quiet in the interim. However, although the Xiamen government promised in June that the EIA would probably take six months to complete, this six-month silence and “media blackout” still seem to be a myth. There were many significant progress happening during the six-month period. In July, the Xiamen government intended to require Internet users to register their real names before
commenting on news in order to seek greater control over the Internet after the protest. The only national media that covered this controversial issues is The Beijing News, and it published a commentary on July 6th that strongly criticized the policy of “real-name registration” of the Internet and pointed out that only the National People’s Congress (NPC) Standing Committee had the authority to legislate on issues related to the freedom of speech. Although The Beijing News (Xin Jing Bao) is now controlled by the Beijing Municipal Party Committee Propaganda Department, it was considered by the public as a rather liberal and dare-to-speak (gan yan) newspaper back in 2007, even comparable with the most liberal one Southern Weekly. In November, there had even been rumors that the PX project “has received formal approval” and will start construction after the Spring Festival (H. Zhu & Su, 2007). According to an article in Southern Weekly in December, for the six-month period, the Xiamen municipal government received a total number of nearly 10,000 suggestions from various channels and one said she even wrote a letter to the Prime Minister and also called Focus Report (Jiaodian Fangtan), a popular news program for critical investigative report of current issues, to express concern and uncertainty about the project (H. Zhu & Su, 2007). Therefore, if one of the most important role of the state media is to monitor and discipline local government officials when mass incident happen and it fulfills this role by covering the protest critically, as explained by the literature, why did the state-controlled media outlets only published submissive and official-tone articles during the first stage of the Xiamen case and remain largely silent during the six-month period when the EIA was in progress and there were several important developments?

It is arguable that the prudent central media before December could largely be attributed to the approaching 17th CCP National Congress. According to Zheng (2012, p. 33), media censorship and political control were “particularly tightened” in 2001 and 2006, prior to the 16th and 17th party congress. Likewise, it has also been found by Steinhardt (2015, p. 132) that many major protests were covered less extensively in the media in 2011 and 2012 compared
with preceding years and he argues that the reason for this is “possibly” the approaching of the 18th CCP National Congress. These phenomena could probably be explained by the guideline “No Bad News during Holiday Periods / Sensitive Dates” of the CCP Central Propaganda Department and media outlets are instructed to focus on positive news during holiday periods and politically sensitive dates, such as the month between May 4th (anniversary of the 1919 May 4th Movement) and June 4th (anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests) (Brady, 2017, p. 764). For instance, when the outbreak of the sudden acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) first began in Guangdong in November 2002, no pressed was allowed to report on this issue until April 2003 since the 16th CCP National Congress was held in November 2002 when Hu Jintao became the new CCP general secretary and the 10th NPC was held in March 2003 when he was elected the new PRC president. It is clear that the primary responsibility of the media during the power transition period is to maintain stability through reporting positive news, instead of creating chaos by covering the outbreak of SARS. Therefore, the little and scatted coverage of the state-controlled media is understandable since they may be instructed to downplay the Xiamen anti-PX protest in the news in order to keep the society stable, though the party congress (October 2007) was still four months away when the protest happened in June. For the article of China News Service on June 4th, a politically sensitive date, there are two reasons for explaining this abnormality. First, China News Service serves primarily overseas Chinese and residents of Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau (China News Service, n.d.). Therefore it is reasonable to assume that this outlet does not have a lot of influence inside mainland China and the Chinese government is less worried about this article. Second, as mentioned above, this article is rather submissive since it did not mention the protest at all and it content seemed to imply that the Xiamen government was willing to take common citizens’ advice and suggestions into account when making important decision. Therefore, this article not only does not have the effect of informing other people what happened in Xiamen
In order to have a better understanding of the political sensitivity of the party congress in October, the pattern of national media coverage in the second stage (December) will be analyzed. On December 5th, Xiamen Net, the government’s official website, published a 14-page review report of the environmental impact assessment and it explicitly criticized “Xianglu Group’s [the company of the PX plant] repeated emissions breaches and their disregard of requests since 2003 from the local environmental protection bureau to tackle the problems” (Yu & Zeng, 2010, pp. 184–185). The report also pointed that it was impossible to pursue industrialization and urbanization in such a small region like Haicang (the PX plant’s location) and it suggested that the Xiamen government should reconsider its original vision of Haicang which is to “develop the area as a petrochemical industrial zone and as a secondary city center” simultaneously (Yu & Zeng, 2010, pp. 184–185). On December 13th and 14th, the Xiamen government held an EIA forum and fifty representatives of the general public (selected by lottery) voiced their opinions (mostly opposition) on the PX project, in addition to fifty delegates from local people’s congress and people’s political consultative conference. Finally, in later December, the government decided that the project would be relocated to Zhangzhou, a small city in Fujian province.

From Table 2, it is clear that the national media seemed to become suddenly interested in what was happening in Xiamen and covered almost every step of the Xiamen government took to address this project in the second stage (December), from publishing EIA to the EIA forum and finally to the relocation decision, in stark contrast with its relative silence during the first stage (end of May to June). Overall speaking, during the second stage of the Xiamen case, the major focus of the state media was the EIA forum and they all constructed a “public-participation” argument that the general public’ voices are important in the government
decision making process and the EIA forum held by the Xiamen government reflects this spirit. Among these articles, the most important one is People’s Daily’s commentary entitled “Xiamen PX Project: Continuation, Suspension, or Relocation” since People’s Daily is the official newspaper of CCP Central Committee and thus its article directly reflects the central government’s attitude and position on this issue. Meanwhile, this piece seems to be the only article that directly made comments and indicated a clear stance on this issue instead of simply reporting the progress, as other national media outlets did.

In this commentary, it first specifically covered the pro-PX and anti-PX arguments from both sides in the EIA forum and argued that despite their opposition to the project, most of the delegates expressed appreciation for the Xiamen government’s decision to listen to the will of the people and believed that this forum reflected the government respect for science and public opinion in the decision-making process (J. Zhu & Jiang, 2007). It is also noteworthy that it also did not mention the protest in June explicitly as well and only referred it to as “the citizens’ emotional opposition to the project in June” through interviewing with a citizen representative who reflected on the whole incident and said the current discussion of the PX project was “a return to rationality of the public” (J. Zhu & Jiang, 2007). It continued to argue that public opinion should be expressed rationally and seemed to attributed the protest in June to citizens’ believing rumors irrationally (J. Zhu & Jiang, 2007). Then it provided an overview of the Xiamen government’s actions to create better and more transparent channels of communicating with citizens and listing to their suggestions throughout June to December, citing examples such as issuing 250,000 copies of pamphlet entitled How Much Do You Know About PX? on June 7th and 8th and opening “Mayor’s Hotline”, and argued that in the face of increasing environmental and participation awareness of the general public, the communication between the government and the masses needs to be foreseen, channeled, and advanced (J. Zhu & Jiang, 2007). Finally, it reached the conclusion that although the construction of PX projects is a
demand of the market and the industrial structure, more than 100 similar projects in the world are mostly located in economically developed and densely populated areas, the Xianglu Group has already invested 1.688 billion RMB in environmental protection, the project relocation was the best choice based on the opinions of experts from various parties (J. Zhu & Jiang, 2007).

It is arguable that this piece is a typical example of how the national mass media covers the local PX protest. It blame both sides, the government and the public. On the one hand, it criticized the Xiamen government for not actively listening to the public’s suggestions and not respecting the will of the people during the decision-making process by referring to guiding principles set by the central government, such as exercising governmental power in accordance of the law (Yifa Xingzheng) and the Scientific Outlook on Development (Kexue Fazhan Guan) (the core idea of Hu Jintao which was just written into the party constitution in October 2007). Here, it is clear that the central media is fulfilling the role of disciplining local government officials while strengthening the central government’s authority at the same time. On the other hand, without explicitly mentioning the citizens’ protest, it criticized the citizens for not participating in public affairs rationally and believing rumors of the project. Here, this strategic method attempts to ensure that the readers of the article get as little information as possible of the protest per se and shift their attention from the confrontation between the people and the government (protest) to a positive public participation practice of the public and the government’s respect for public opinion (EIA forum) as much as possible in order to minimize the possibility of protest diffusion.

Therefore, through comparing and contrasting the central media coverage of Xiamen case during the first stage (May-June, before the party congress) and the second stage (December, after the party congress), it is clear that the national media remained cautious and submissive at the end of May and beginning of June when the protest happened and became much more concerned and critical of this issue in December. It is arguable that the 17th CCP
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National Congress in October is the decisive factor in shaping the stage media coverage before and after. During the first stage, the time of the Xiamen anti-PX protest (June 1st and June 2nd) is already quite politically sensitive since: 1) as mentioned above, the protest happened only several days before the anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square Protests, and 2) the party congress is four months later. The national media during this period primarily served the role of blocking the news of the protest and preventing protest diffusion to other regions through reporting only from the Xiamen government’s perspective and not mentioning the protest explicitly in the articles. The six-month media blackout period also confirms the politically sensitivity of the party congress. As mentioned above, although there were some significant developments of this event during the six-month period such as the ‘real-name registration’ of the Internet and rumors of the formal approval of the PX project, the central media remained silent consistently since as the approaching of the 17th CCP National Party Congress. It had become increasingly sensitive to have some follow-up reporting. As a result, the media did not want their critical tone of the Xiamen government be perceived by the Xiamen citizens as a support of the central government for their “collective walking” in June and trigger another round of protests. In contrast, during the second stage when the political environment had become much more lenient, the national media became active and critical again through publishing commentaries and day-to-day updates of this event. It resumed its role of monitoring and disciplining the Xiamen government, strengthening the authority of the central government, and preventing protest diffusion as well.

After analyzing the Xiamen case in detail, the following sections will focus on comparing and contrasting it with similar anti-PX protests in Dalian (2011) and Ningbo (2012), and examining the role of political sensitivity in determining the presence and the tone of national media outlets. Due to page limitations, the primary focus of the remaining part will focus on the Dalian case.
2011 Dalian Anti-PX Protest

On August 8th, 2011, typhoon Muifa breached a dyke protecting the Fujia PX plant in Dalian and “rumors spread on social media that a leakage from the PX storage tanks would flood the Yellow Sea with highly toxic PX” (Li, 2018, pp. 97–98). However, when several CCTV reporters attempted to get into the PX plant to cover this incident, they were not only denied access but also beaten by the staff of the plant, with their cameras snatched and broken as well. At that time, the violence against CCTV reporters was covered extensively by many media outlets including Xinhua News Agency, as shown in Table 3, and the official website of CCTV even set up a special news section to report on this issue, entitled “Beat CCTV Reporters, What Made the Dalian PX Project So Audacious”. On the evening of August 9th, the CCTV News Channel broadcasted a trailer of NEWS 1+1, a popular news commentary program, indicating that the Dalian Fujia PX Project would be today’s focus. However, at 21:30 when that day’s NEWS 1+1 was expected to start, it was secretly replaced by another news program, without explanation. Therefore, this incident “further frightened an already alarmed populace and reinforced the belief that company and government financial interests would supersede any health risks” (Gunter, 2015, pp. 169–170). Long-term dissatisfaction finally erupted. In the next few days, the message calling for citizens to join a collective walk in front of the city government quickly spread on the Internet. On August 14th, an estimated 10,000 people participated in the peaceful demonstration in front of the municipal government building, demanding the PX plant be moved (Ansfield, 2013, pp. 197–198). Finally, on the afternoon of August 14th, the Dalian Municipal Government announced that the PX project would stop production immediately and be relocated in the future, without providing a specific schedule of relocation. Nevertheless, according to Watts (2012), a reporter of The Guardian, the Dalian PX plant was “believed to have quietly resumed production just months after officials promised to halt operations and move the facility.”
From Table 3, it is clear that before the protest on August 14th, national media outlets covered the Dalia Fujia PX project extensively and they not only focused on the violence of its staff against CCTV reporters, but also the project’s safety issues and risk of environmental pollution. It is also noteworthy that the official website of People’s Daily (People.cn) set up a special news section of the Dalian PX project, entitled “Investigation of Dalian PX Project: It will probably be relocated”, where people can find most of the articles of the national and local media covering this project. However, during the protest and after the protest, state media outlets turned silent immediately and only People’s Daily published a very short article on August 14th that simply repeated the Dalian government’s official decision, without making any comments. Most importantly, it turned a blind eye to the protest in the morning and did not mention it at all, as it did in 2007 when covering the Xiamen PX EIA forum. According to Radio Free Asia (2011), the CCP Central Propaganda Department prohibited the media from reporting the protest on August 14th without authorization and could only quote the Dalian government’s relocation decision. Therefore, why was there a U-turn of the censors’ attitudes to national media coverage of the Dalian Fujia PX project before and after the project?

According to Zheng (2012, p. 28), nothing particularly significance happened in 2011, but it was “a year of particular significance”. With the influence of the Arab Spring and the idea of twitter revolution, 2011 had witnessed an increasing number of Internet- and social media-based social protests in China since the beginning of the year where a number of protestors took a peaceful “strolling” to advocate democracy, political reform and freedom of the press in Wangfujing, a famous tourist attraction, Beijing on Feb 20th and another round of “strolling” on Feb 27th. Similar “strolling” happened at the same days in Shanghai, Nanning, and Shenzhen. Although this so-called Chinese Jasmine Revolution was finally suppressed by the government, the CCP had become increasingly alarmed at the diffusion effect of this kind of protest and concerned about maintaining stability. On February 19th, Hu Jintao addressed
the Central Party School of CCP on “social management”. Although he did not explicitly mention the impact of the Arab Spring on China, he stressed that provincial leaders should have a good grasp of the new changes and features in the domestic and international situation and adopt innovative ways of managing the society accordingly (Zheng, 2012, p. 32). From this speech, it is clear that Chinese top leaders were particularly worried about the eruption of similar protests in China, especially those focusing on the same issue happening in different regions simultaneously which may finally result in a national revolution. More importantly, the 18th CCP National Congress would be held in October, 2012 when Xi Jinping would be the new general secretary of CCP and social stability was particularly important at this time point. Given the Chinese government’s increasing concern over social instability in 2011 under the influence of the Arab Spring starting in December 2010 and the Chinese Jasmine Revolution in February, the time when the Dalian anti-PX protests happened is highly political sensitive and the national news blackout after the protest on August 14th is a direct result of the CCP’s consideration over this protest’s demonstration effect on people having similar environmental concerns in other cities, and the potential of a national environmental protest. Experience in Taiwan and South Korea has well demonstrated that an environmental movement is highly likely to turn into a pro-democracy movement that the Chinese government makes all efforts to preempt. For the extensive national media coverage before the protest resulting from the CCTV reporter incident, it is possible at that time, the party had not realized the danger and sensitivity of such PX project and had largely underestimated the demonstration effect that the Xiamen anti-PX protest in 2007 had on this case. According to an interview of a 36-year-old taxi driver who participated in the 2008 Chengdu anti-PX protest (this paper choose not to analyze this case since its scale is too small and cannot be comparable to other cases), the national media coverage of the Xiamen anti-PX protests indicates “the [central] government had accepted ‘the stroll,’ or street protest, as a legit[imate] way of opposing the PX project”
(Jun Liu, 2016, p. 616). Therefore, the coverage in the Xiamen case indeed seems to encourage people to take to the street peacefully if they also have similar concerns about their own cities’ PX plants. Before the protest broke out in Dalian on August 14th, it seems the CCP Central Propaganda Department insisted on the national mass media’s role of monitoring and disciplining the local government through covering local news critically. However, they did not expect that such coverage also served as a catalyst for triggering protests. When the protest did happen, it immediately prohibited all the media from reporting this issue in such a politically sensitive time in order to prevent potential protest diffusion and ensure social stability. Even after the 18th CCP National Congress when the political environment was more lenient, it seemed still no national media was allowed to have follow-up reports afterwards to investigate whether the PX plant had been relocated or not since that coverage would probably trigger another round of protest again, though this seemed to be a great opportunity for criticizing the Dalian government for not keeping its promise.

In conclusion, in a politically sensitive year such as 2011 when the Chinese government was overwhelmingly concerned about rising social instability, the Dalian case has demonstrated that it is still permissible for the central media to report on the PX project as long as no collective action happens. However, when a protest does occur, politically sensitivity and the concern over protest diffusion soon become much more important considerations than the state media’s role of disciplining the local government.

2012 Ningbo Anti-PX Protest

The Ningbo anti-PX protest originated from a group petitioning in nearby Zhenhai county where local peasants opposed to the expansion of a chemical industry park near their houses and the construction of a new PX plant inside the park and the large-scale street protest happened on October 26th and 28th as the government’s decision to construct a new PX plant spread out on social media among Ningbo citizens (Chen, 2017, p. 310). Finally, the Ningbo
government decided to cancel this PX project. What makes the Ningbo case so special is that it happened only two weeks before the 18th CCP National Congress when Xi Jinping would become the new party secretary. Although this protest was still targeted at the local government, “[s]uch incidents illustrate the social tensions confronting the central government as it approaches its once-in-a-decade leadership transition”, as argued by Tam (2012). Therefore, the Ningbo anti-PX protested happened at a highly politically sensitive, so the central government wanted to make the society stable at all costs and strict media censorship was applied. Table 4 clearly indicates that the national media only published two articles covering this issue. Both were very short and simply repeated the official tone and decision of the Ningbo government. Therefore, the Ningbo case fits perfectly well with the expectation that can be drawn from the Xiamen and Ningbo case: when it is considered as a politically sensitive time, the Chinese government are much more concerned about the coverage’s demonstration effect and potential protest diffusion effect in order to make the society stable.

Conclusions

In conclusion, first, it should be pointed out that it is hard to answer yes or no to the question that whether the state-controlled mass media covers a specific anti-PX protest for the following reasons. First, strictly speaking, no anti-PX protest in China have ever been truly reported in China since almost no article listed in Table 2,3, and 4 explicitly mentions the protest and they either directly ignores the existence of the protest or use some fuzzy words to make people confused. Second, from another perspective, it is also arguable that the three cases have all been covered by the central media since even in the Ningbo case where strict media censorship was applied, there were still two short articles reporting the Ningbo government’s official decision. Therefore, a dichotomy answer is not enough to capture the national media coverage pattern. As shown in Table 1, a better way is to focus more on the amount of national media coverage in different stages of the case, namely before and after the protest. By
integrating conclusions of each case, several general conclusions can be drawn from the three anti-PX protests. First, political sensitive time in China refers to when the CCP National Party Congress, National People’s Congress, and anniversary of important social movements in Chinese history (such as the May Fourth Movement and the 1989 Tiananmen Square Protests) are approaching. Second, when it is a politically sensitive time, the Chinese government will not allow national mass media to cover local anti-PX protests since its primary concern during this time is stability maintenance and national media coverage of these protests will possibly result in protest diffusion. Third, when it is not a politically sensitive time, national mass media will be encouraged by the CCP Central Propaganda Department to cover local anti-PX protests since this can help the central government identify local citizens’ concerns, discipline and monitor local government officials, and strengthen central government authority. Fourth, if there is a long period of political sensitivity, such as the year 2011, national media will not be allowed to provide follow-up reports of the protest since that will easily remind people of it. However, if there is only a short period of political sensitivity, such as the National Party Congress, national media will be able to resume its responsibility of monitoring the local government by writing follow-up articles.
References


NATIONAL MEDIA COVERAGE OF LOCAL ANTI-PX PROTESTS


Appendix

Figure 1 (Steinhardt, 2016, p. 310)

Media coverage of major protests within one month and the following twelve months, 2001–2010.
### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Disputed Project</th>
<th>Political Sensitivity</th>
<th>Modes of Action</th>
<th>The Stage of Protests</th>
<th>National Media Coverage</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Xiamen</td>
<td>2007.5-6</td>
<td>Construction of a New PX Plant</td>
<td>17th CCP National Congress 2007.10.15-10.21</td>
<td>Peaceful</td>
<td>Initial Construction</td>
<td>Some (primarily after the protest in December)</td>
<td>Project Relocation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2007.12</td>
<td></td>
<td>17th CCP National Congress 2007.10.15-10.21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ningbo</td>
<td>2012.10</td>
<td>Construction of a new PX plant</td>
<td>18th CCP National Congress 2012.11.8-11.14</td>
<td>Violent</td>
<td>Planning Stage</td>
<td>Almost No</td>
<td>Project Cancellation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2013.5</td>
<td>Construction of a New PX plant</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Peaceful</td>
<td>Planning stage/substantial investment</td>
<td>Some</td>
<td>Project Resumption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kunming</td>
<td>2014.3-4</td>
<td>Construction of a New PX plant</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Violent</td>
<td>Planning Stage</td>
<td>Some</td>
<td>Project Cancellation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maoming</td>
<td>2014.3-4</td>
<td>Construction of a New PX plant</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Note: The data in the table is based on the provided information and is subject to further verification.
Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National Media Outlet</th>
<th>Publishing Time</th>
<th>Article Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Xinhua News Agency (official press agency of PRC)</td>
<td>2007.5.30</td>
<td>Xiamen Municipal Government Announced to Postpone the construction of A Foreign-funded PX chemical project worth 10.8 billion yuan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China News Service (second largest state-owned news agency)</td>
<td>2007.6.4</td>
<td>Xiamen Citizens Offer Three Categories of Suggestions for the PX Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China News Service</td>
<td>2007.12.5</td>
<td>Xiamen City General Planning Environmental Impact Assessment Enters the Stage of “Public Participation”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xinhua News Agency</td>
<td>2007.12.12</td>
<td>Xiamen Conducts Public Lottery to select PX project environmental assessment forum representatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People.cn (official website of People’s Daily)</td>
<td>2007.12.14</td>
<td>Xiamen Postponed PX project: Industrial Zone or City Sub-center?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People’s Daily (official newspaper of CCP)</td>
<td>2007.12.19</td>
<td>Xiamen PX Project: Continuation, Suspension, or Relocation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People.cn</td>
<td>2007.12.22</td>
<td>“Abortion” Story of Xiamen PX Chemical Project</td>
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### Table 3

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<tr>
<th>National Media Outlet</th>
<th>Publishing Time</th>
<th>Article Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Xinhuanet.com (official website of Xinhua News Agency)</td>
<td>2011.8.9</td>
<td>Dalian Police is Investigating Correspondents Being Beaten who Intended to Report the PX Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China News Service</td>
<td>2011.8.10</td>
<td>Five Dalian Fujia Employees who Beat Reporter was Detained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xinhuanet.com</td>
<td>2011.8.10</td>
<td>Dalian PX Project’s Relocation is On the Agenda The Factory is In A Safe Status Now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China News Service</td>
<td>2011.8.10</td>
<td>Dalian PX Project that has 10 billion RMB investment has Risk of Pollution and will be Relocated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China Youth Online (official website of China Youth Daily)</td>
<td>2011.8.11</td>
<td>If Typhoon Muifa Doesn’t Uncover the Dalian PX Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xinhua News Agency</td>
<td>2011.8.11</td>
<td>Dalian Municipal Government: Evaluate the Relocation of PX Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCTV.com (official website of CCTV)</td>
<td>2011.8.12</td>
<td>Beat CCTV Reporters, What Made the Dalian PX Project So Audacious?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People’s Daily</td>
<td>2011.8.14</td>
<td>Dalian Decided to Stop the Production of Fujia Dahua PX Project Immediately and Relocate it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 4

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>National Media Outlet</th>
<th>Publishing Time</th>
<th>Article Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Xinhuanet.com</td>
<td>2012.10.24</td>
<td>Ningbo Zhenhai PX Project Causes Group Petitioning: Local Government Says EIA Standard is Met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People.cn</td>
<td>2012.10.28</td>
<td>Ningbo Municipal Government decides: Resolutely not going to the PX project</td>
</tr>
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</table>