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Claims-Makers Versus Non-Issue-Makers: Media and the Social Construction of Motorcycle Ban Problems in China

Abstract In the past decade, more and more cities in China have adopted policies to ban motorcycles in the name of crime prevention or modernization. This paper examines the differential role of mass media in the construction of motorcycle ban policies in Southern China in general, and in the city of Guangzhou in particular. Although Guangzhou was neither the first city to ban motorcycles nor the city adopting the most radical means of implementing this policy, the media have successfully constructed a social problem of banning motorcycles in Guangzhou. Using content analysis of newspaper articles, I found that from 2000 to 2009 nearly two thirds of newspaper reports on motorcycle ban policy in China were published by newspapers based in Guangzhou. I argue that the relatively liberal media in Guangzhou played a vital role in constructing the ban policy as a social problem. In addition, I examine media discourse in constructing the problem of motorcycle ban policy and argue that although the mass media are still under strict control and serve as mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party-State, their increasing commercialization has made it possible to work as claim-makers for a social problem in China.

Keywords Social Construction; Mass Media; Content Analysis; Motorcycle Ban; China

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It is widely recognized that media play an important role as claims-makers in the construction of social problems (Best 1989). While much research has examined how the media construct social reality in general, and social problems in particular in Western countries, where media freedom is largely guaranteed (Spector and Kitsuse 1973; Best and Horiuchi 1985; Loseke and Best 2003), media's role in reporting and constructing social problems in authoritarian China remains underexplored. China's media have been regarded as among the most

restrictive in the world. In 2013, China was ranked 183 out of 197 and 173 out of 179 countries and territories by Freedom House (2014) and Reporters Without Borders (2013) respectively in terms of press freedom. Indeed, media in China have long been regarded as the mouthpiece of the Chinese authoritarian Party-State. Censorship instructions are issued to journalists and editors by state authorities on nearly a daily basis; censorship departments have been sarcastically called the "Ministry of Truth" (the term coined by George Orwell in his classic novel *1984*) by international observers (see: chinadigitaltimes.net).

Using the case study of banning two-wheel motorcycles in Southern China cities in the first decade of 21st century, this paper explores the dual roles of Chinese media as both claims-makers and non-issue-makers in the construction of social problems. On the one hand, due to the Chinese government's strict control and censorship, the media defend the government policy by constructing the motorcycle as a social problem. It condemned motorcycles as a subject with "seven sins" and claimed positive consequences from banning motorcycles in crime fighting, reducing pollution and social disorder. Borrowing the term of "non-issue" making from white collar crime research, I argue that by constructing the motorcycle as a social problem, the media actually work as non-issue-makers for the problem caused by banning motorcycles.

On the other hand, some market-oriented media have worked actively to expand the boundary of press freedom. To some extent, they become claims-makers for some local level, non-politically

sensitive social problems. In banning motorcycles, the media resort to a variety of rhetoric in identifying problems related to banning motorcycles by criticizing the reasons for the motorcycle ban policy, the process of policy making, and the method of policy implementation. Media can also challenge the government's insufficient concern for citizens and even call for eliminating the policy. In the construction of banning motorcycles as a social problem in China, the controlled but commercialized media play a unique role as both non-issue-makers and claims-makers.

Claims-Makers or Non-Issue-Makers: Media's Role in the Construction of Social Problems

Since its inception in the 1970s, social constructionism has been the dominant theoretical perspective on social problems. Different from previous theories that emphasize social conditions of certain problems, social constructionism takes a radical and sharp turn by focusing on the definition of social problems (Best 2001:1; Loseke 2003). Constructionist research views the media as playing a key role of claims-makers in social problems construction. However, most of these studies are from the United States and the United Kingdom, where media freedom is protected by law. Media's role as claims-makers for social problems in authoritarian societies like China, where media are subject to strict control and censorship, may provide a different story about the importance and process of claims-making.

Theoretically, in authoritarian societies, media's primary role is to defend the regime and support

the state's policies (He 2006; Stockmann and Gallagher 2011; Stockmann 2013). While media in democracies may be in the business of making grievances about putative social conditions, the media in authoritarian countries are more often engaged in constructing these putative social conditions as "non-issues" through either active propaganda or through simply ignoring claims about problems. Borrowing the term of "non-issue" making from the study of white collar crimes, where the term is used to describe how elite white collar and corporate crimes are not prosecuted and remain "non-issues" for the criminal justice system (Goetz 1997; Ghazi-Tehrani et al. 2013), this study explores media's complex role in the construction of social problems in authoritarian China. Using the example of banning two-wheel motorcycles, I will explore the following questions. First, how do Chinese media work as both non-issue-makers and claims-makers in constructing banning motorcycles as a social problem in China? Second, why can Chinese media work as claims-makers given strict control and censorship from the authoritarian Chinese Party-State?

Data and Method

I did a content analysis of media in order to examine media's role in the construction of motorcycle ban problems in China. I tried to collect all newspaper articles published in Mainland China about the motorcycle ban policy in the first decade of 21st century. I used "motorcycle ban" (*jinmo*) as the keyword to search newspaper articles in the WiseNews database, a full-text newspaper clippings database with search capabilities. It includes news

from more than 1,500 newspapers, magazines, and websites in the Greater China area (Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, and Singapore). Nearly all newspapers published within Mainland China are included in this database. The search scope was restricted to within Mainland China and search time scope is from January 01, 2000 to December 31, 2009. All in all, 6,462 newspaper articles related to "motorcycle ban" were identified from 168 different newspapers, varying from the national level (e.g., *People's Daily*, *China Youth Daily*) to local level (e.g., *Southern Metropolis Daily*, *Guangzhou Daily*). I downloaded and read these 6,462 articles to explore Chinese media's role in the construction of motorcycle ban problems.

The Social Condition of Motorcycle Ban Problems

A motorcycle has different meanings for different people in China. In the 1980s, it was a status symbol for the rich, but it became a common transportation vehicle in the 1990s for ordinary people. Guangzhou banned all motorcycles in January 2007. An examination of the brief history of motorcycles in Guangzhou can help us to understand the process by which the motorcycle became regarded first as a fashion symbol, before becoming an object of "evil" in China's march towards a consumption society, in which yesterday's fashion becomes today's waste (Bauman 2005). According to Guangzhou's records, the history of motorcycles in Guangzhou starts in 1927, when there were 12 motorcycles in the city, increasing to 249 by 1937. From the 1950s to 1970s, motorcycles were mainly used for military and sports purposes and were rarely

used for personal transportation. Since the start of the "reform and opening-up policy" in 1978, the motorcycle became the "magic weapon for getting rich" for individual business operators as they can use it for fast delivery in the 1980s. In 1983, Guangzhou had 70,000 motorcycles, more than any other Chinese city, and this number increased to more than 100,000 in 1988. In the 1990s, motorcycles became the most fashionable transportation vehicle, and one fifth (700,000) of Guangzhou households owned one. During the period of "constant traffic jams" in Guangzhou since the 1990s, motorcycles served as the "fast horse" (*kuaima*) of transportation (Xu, Wu, and Wang 2006). After 2000, motorcycle snatch theft¹ started to become rampant. As a drive-away policing strategy to solve the problem of motorcycle snatch theft (Xu 2012), in January 2007, the Guangzhou government implemented a full motorcycle ban policy banning all motorcycles (except for police use) from the streets. The history of Guangzhou's motorcycles represented a typical development track of motorcycles in urban China and by 2009 as many as 168 cities had implemented different motorcycle ban policies (Zuo 2009), from issuing no new motorcycle licenses to banning motorcycles from main streets, to banning non-local licensed motorcycles, to a full ban of all motorcycles.

However, the motorcycle ban policy caused many problems for their users. First, motorcycle users are forced to abandon this convenient transportation vehicle in urban China where public transportation is insufficient and inconvenient. Second, over 250

¹ Thieves riding motorcycles snatching purses or whatever from pedestrians.

million Chinese migrant workers are second-class citizens in urban China because of China's *hukou* (household registration) system and its related social welfare policy (Chan and Buckingham 2008). These migrant workers feel further discrimination in cities banning non-local licensed motorcycles as they are required to register motorcycles in the places which they come from (Xu 2009; Xu, Laidler, and Lee 2013). Third, a full ban on all motorcycles affects the urban poor who rely on motorcycle taxi driving to make a living. Despite these problems, 168 cities have adopted various policies to ban motorcycles. The most controversial one is the full ban policy adopted by Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Dongguan in Southern China. Let me now examine how the Chinese media make the problems of banning motorcycles a "non-issue" by condemning "seven sins" of motorcycles and highlighting achievement when ban policies were implemented.

Media as Non-Issue-Makers for Problems of Banning Motorcycles

Much research has explored media's role as claims-makers in the construction of social problems, while their role as potential non-issue-makers has been largely ignored. This is particularly the case in authoritarian China where media's main function is to defend the Chinese Party-State and its policy. In their role as party defender, media serve to make the problems caused by the ban policy a "non-issue" by emphasizing problems related to motorcycles. The most comprehensive accusation of the problems of motorcycles occurred in Guangzhou when the local government planned to ban all motorcycles in 2004. *Yangcheng Evening*

News, the official newspaper controlled by Guangdong Provincial Communist Party Committee, condemned motorcycles as implicated in “seven sins” (*qi zong zui*), in order to defend banning motorcycles (Yan and Sun 2004).

The first sin of motorcycles was noise pollution. It was claimed that according to noise monitors in one residential community, the noise level could reach up to 80.4 decibels when a motorcycle passed by, and it could be as high as 90-100 decibels when starting an engine. The second sin of the motorcycle was air pollution. The newspaper claimed that motorcycles accounted for 15.2 percent of carbon monoxide in air pollution, as well as 30.4 percent of hydrocarbon pollution, and that this percentage surpassed that of trucks and buses combined. The third sin was the motorcycle’s role in traffic accidents. Using the data from the first half of 2003, the newspaper argued that there had been 3,044 motorcycle related traffic accidents, causing 363 casualties, with an average of two people losing their lives every day. The fourth sin was that motorcycles were used by criminals for snatch theft. It was claimed that there were 9,320 motorcycle snatch theft cases in Guangzhou from January to October 2003. This made up 47.1 percent of all snatch theft cases. The fifth sin was that there were many illegal motorcycle taxis. It was argued that illegal motorcycle taxis not only disturbed the normal transportation order, but also caused severe safety and public security problems. The sixth sin was that motorcycle drivers always broke traffic regulations. It was claimed that many motorcycles did not have a license and drivers drove motorcycles without proper certificates, drove against the flow of traffic,

drove through crowds, and wore no crash helmets. The seventh sin was that motorcycles were signals of underdevelopment. It was claimed that the more motorcycles a city had, the lower the city’s modernization level. It was argued that motorcycles not only affected Guangzhou’s transportation, but also damaged its image as an international metropolis. Although much of these accusations cannot be well defended, they were further widely circulated in other newspapers. Two days after *Yangcheng Evening News* accused motorcycles of these “seven sins,” both *People’s Daily*, the official mouthpiece of Chinese Communist Party, and *Yangcheng Evening News* further reiterated these “seven sins” and concluded that a “motorcycle ban was absolutely necessary” (Rijing 2004). By condemning motorcycles, the media justified the policy to ban them.

Another way the media worked as non-issue-makers for problems caused by banning motorcycles was to dramatize to the public the “achievements” of the policy. For example, Guangzhou started to ban motorcycles from some main streets on May 01, 2004. On the second day, the *South China Daily*, another official newspaper controlled by the Guangdong Provincial Communist Party, argued that “it is much safer” after the implementation of this policy (Bi and Yang 2004). After Shenzhen banned motorcycles from the main roads in November 2003, *South China Daily* claimed that motorcycle related traffic accidents declined by 41 percent by April 2004 (Chen, Yang, and Wang 2004). Crime reduction also has been repeatedly cited to defend the policy. *Shenzhen Special Zone News*, the official newspaper controlled by Shenzhen Municipal Communist Party, claimed Shenzhen public

security continued to get better by presenting the achievement of banning motorcycles in 2007:

[s]ince lots of non-local license motorcycles and no-license-no-certificate motorcycles have been used in our city for a long time, many problems were caused, such as motorcycle snatch theft, motorcycle theft and robbery, illegal business operations, et cetera. From November 2003, our police became the first in Guangdong to make the decision to ban motorcycles in a big way. We enlarged the scope of the ban gradually and continued to make efforts in searching for illegal motorcycles. Until now, we have identified 795,000 illegal motorcycles and 335,000 of them were demolished in public destruction campaigns. These actions achieved immediate effects in reducing street crimes, traffic accidents, and pollution. According to our statistics, motorcycle snatch theft cases have been reduced from 29 cases per day in 2003 to 1.4 cases in 2007. In 2004, 2005, and 2006, such crimes declined by 32.3 percent, 61.0 percent, and 41.4 percent respectively. No such case has happened this year in the former “hotspot” areas of Luohu and Futian. (Hu 2007a)

In Dongguan, the *South China Daily* defended banning motorcycles as “the good cat which can catch mice” as it was a “successful” crime prevention strategy in Dongguan in May 2007 (Liu et al. 2007).

In a nutshell, by emphasizing “seven sins” of motorcycles, as well as claiming positive achievements of the ban, the Chinese media defended local governments’ policies banning motorcycles. In doing so, the media have also worked as non-issue-makers by ignoring the problems caused by

banning motorcycles. For instance, there were as many as 100,000 migrant workers relying on driving motorcycle taxis for making a living in Guangzhou. These migrant workers became unemployed after the ban. Many local residents, particularly the poor, had to rely on motorcycles for their daily transportation. In addition, there are 138 urban villages in Guangzhou where a public transportation system nearly does not exist. Motorcycles are the most common vehicles for people to get around. The official media have largely ignored these problems when they defend the government’s policy. In authoritarian China, it is nothing new to explore how media defend the Party-State and its policy, but the conceptualization of media’s coverage as non-issue-making in the construction of social problems enriches our understanding of media’s complex roles. Let me now turn to the other side of media’s role: claims-making.

Media as Claims-Makers for Problems of Banning Motorcycles

In constructing the motorcycle ban as a social problem, Chinese media adopted five different types of discourses in their claims: unjustified reasons for banning motorcycles, incompetent and arbitrary administration in policy making, problematic method in policy implementation, insufficient concerns on citizens, and even calling for abolishing the policy.

Unjustified Reasons for Banning Motorcycles

The first and foremost discourse of media claims about the problems of banning motorcycles is that

the government's reasons for the ban could not be well defended. While some media accused motorcycles of leading to "seven sins," other media challenged these accusations as unproven in general, and to the "sins" related to crime prevention and traffic jams in particular. First, the media widely challenged the strategy of banning motorcycles to reduce crimes. In December 2005, three newspapers, including *Youth Daily*, the *Information Daily*, and the *Shanxi Evening News*, published the same article entitled "It Is Ridiculous to Crack Down on Snatch Theft and Robbery by Banning Motorcycles." The article argued that crime had its social roots, that high crime rates might indicate serious social problems, such as poverty, unemployment, and corruption. Only when these social problems were solved could crime rates be reduced (Hanshan 2005). After banning motorcycles, motorcycle snatch theft declined as offenders could not use motorcycles to flee. However, crime displacement occurred and burglary increased dramatically in Guangzhou (Xu 2012). An article in the *Southern Metropolis Daily* expressed the citizens' concern about the increasing burglary rates. The article pointed out that although snatch theft and robbery had declined, burglary had increased. As a result, many residential communities had to adopt new security measures such as anti-theft doors, anti-theft nets, and anti-theft alarms, and people had to be very vigilant for strangers (Zhanghui 2007). Indeed, the displacement of crime type from motorcycle snatch theft to burglary makes the effectiveness of the motorcycle ban policy in reducing crime questionable.

Second, the media also challenged the government's reasons of reducing traffic jams by banning motor-

cycles. They argued that the ban actually forced motorcycles off the streets and encouraged more people to use cars, which caused more traffic jams. In January 2007, an article from the *Yangtze Evening News* criticized Guangzhou's motorcycle ban policy and argued that it would be a disaster if cars were to dominate the city's transportation system (Yin 2007). Another article from the *Straits News* cited traditional Chinese medical philosophy that "what is good for the liver, may be bad for the spleen" (*zhi yi jing sun yi jing*) and argued that what the government banned, could actually play a positive role in an efficient urban transportation system (Ruiyuan 2007). Third, some criticisms went further to question the local government's initiatives. An article in the *China Insurance News* criticized the policy of banning motorcycles as being plotted by the local governments and the car industry together and the purpose was to increase market demand for the car industry. The article assumed that, on the one hand, Guangzhou had already set up the car industry as its pillar industry and, on the other, car companies had donated thousands of cars to the Guangzhou government and the Guangzhou police in the past years. The purpose was quite obviously to encourage the government to ban motorcycles (Zhang 2007). From this claim, the banning motorcycles is another example of the symbiotic relations between state power and economic capital in China's crony capitalism (Xu 2013).

Incompetent and Arbitrary Administration in Policy Making

The second type of claims constructing the motorcycle ban as a problem centered on how the gov-

ernment administered the ban. This type of claims started in 2000, when Xi'an banned motorcycles from its central district. An article from the *Southern Metropolis Daily* claimed this reflected the Xi'an government's incompetence in administration. According to such claims, the city government was unwilling to do the difficult work of regulating motorcycles, and simply resorted to a general ban (Yizhou Zhizheng 2000). However, the ban in Xi'an did not work well, and motorcycles could be found everywhere. Two years later, another *Southern Metropolis Daily* article pointed out that the fundamental reasons for the failed ban policy lay in the fact that the government did not listen to people's voices and had banned motorcycles arbitrarily without deliberation (Yiling 2002). Beginning in 2004, cities in the Pearl River Delta started to ban motorcycles and this triggered another round of media's criticism of the local government's arbitrary way of administration. An article from the *China Economic Times* argued that the reason for people's resistance was because local governments were keen on achieving their wills by arbitrary methods, neglecting the effects on relevant interest groups (Yang 2005). *South China Daily* also supported the same argument, and assumed that only by recognizing the cost of policy change and compensating for it can a win-win game be achieved (Zonghe 2005).

In November 2007, the Zhengzhou police announced that all motorcycles would be banned within the fourth ring road within ten days. This abrupt policy incurred wide criticism of the government's arbitrary way of administration again. *Information Daily* commented that the government should not issue an order condescendingly. They

should remain humble and learn to negotiate with people (Sun 2007). An editorial from the *Beijing News* remarked that by failing to take people's voices into consideration, even if the policy was implemented by force, its value and effectiveness would be seriously hampered due to people's everyday resistance. In addition, this abrupt ban policy destroyed people's trust in the local government and showed there was a long way to go in building a regulated, coordinated, fair, clean, effective, and service-oriented government (Editorial 2007a). The *Daily Sunshine* also supported such claim and commented that public policymakers should abandon the idea of simply resorting to a ban, and should instead use fair, just, and legal ways to distribute city resources and coordinate conflicts between different interest groups (Hu 2007b). Even the *People's Daily* worked as a claim-maker in criticizing Zhengzhou's motorcycle ban policy and argued that the government should listen to people's voices and minimize the losses for relevant interest groups (Cao 2007).

Media's claim of the local government's incompetent and arbitrary administration can also be seen in the case of Dongguan. Dongguan banned motorcycles from its central city during rush hours in September 2007, and it planned to ban raising pigs in December 2007 as the later was regarded as one of the major pollutants by the Dongguan government. In December 2007, an editorial from the *Southern Metropolis Daily* remarked that the policy of a "complete ban" (*jingjue*), no matter if it was about banning motorcycles or banning raising pigs, entailed "social violence" in public administration. The result of these public policies with "social violence"

(or soft violence) was a lose-lose rather than a win-win situation. It worked like a two-edged sword, cutting off two forces: on the one hand, the social forces became weaker and weaker, and on the other, the government repeatedly caused injustice in administration and went too far in the wrong direction (Editorial 2007b). Later, both the *South China Daily* and the *Oriental Morning Post* published articles to support this editorial, and further pointed out that administrative arbitrariness had been a problem for a long time. The social violence would become concrete violent behavior when the implementation of these policies was resisted as the basis for administrative arbitrariness was the state's dictatorship rather than people's support (Yan 2007). While some claims focused on the general situation of local governments' incompetence and arbitrariness, others questioned the concrete method of policy implementation.

Problematic Method of Policy Implementation

The third way that media claimed the motorcycle ban was a problem focused on the methods used by local governments to implement the policy. In 2006, The Shenzhen Bao'an district decided that Chinese Communist Party (CCP) members, civil servants, and cadres would be punished through public criticism and even through the Party and government disciplinary measures if they were found using motorcycles. This policy incurred widespread criticism. An article from the *New Express Daily* argued that both laws and the CCP Charter did not ban civil servants from driving motorcycles. It was deemed ridiculous that the Shenzhen government used CCP discipline to

punish those who used motorcycles. The article criticized the Shenzhen government for retreating to the simple and brutal administration style of the past (Li 2006). On the same day, another article in the *Southern Metropolis Daily* argued that Shenzhen's new regulation was unnecessary, being equated with the Chinese idiom "draw a snake and add feet to it" (*huashe tianzhu*). The government was emphasizing an idea that civil servants were a group with special power (Liu 2006). The problematic method involved other dimensions. When the Shenzhen Longgang government used the so-called strategy of "banning motorcycles from the source" and sent security guards to gas stations in the hope of stopping motorcycle riders from getting gasoline, this method was also widely criticized. The *China Insurance News* critically argued that because of the difficulty in banning motorcycles, the local government had resorted to "comprehensive management" by asking gas stations to stop selling gasoline to motorcycle users. It was deemed ridiculous to ask gas stations to join the campaign to ban motorcycles (Yang 2007). Some problematic methods even involved the local government's clear violation of laws. In March 2009, Shenzhen police broke into migrant workers' houses to confiscate motorcycles when the owners were absent (Xu 2014). An editorial from the *Southern Metropolis Daily* commented that motorcycles were blamed for too many sins and so were banned. We were not talking about whether the ban was contradictory to China's laws or not. Even according to the ban policy, it only banned motorcycles from the road. The author questioned: "Is it illegal to buy a motorcycle as a collection? Is it illegal if somebody invested in a motorcycle facto-

ry in Shenzhen?" (Ruiyuan 2009). Another article from the *Southern Metropolis Daily* commented that a house is part of a person's private rights. Even children would know it was illegal to enter others' homes without permission. No matter what excuses the police might have, the public power encroached on people's private rights in this case (Comments 2009).

Challenging the Government's Insufficient Concern for Citizens

This fourth type of claims constructing the motorcycle ban as a problem goes beyond simply challenging the rationales for the ban and the ways of making public policy. It escalated to question the government's failure to care about the livelihood of the lower classes as they have to rely on motorcycles for daily transportation or making a living.

In November 2006, before Guangzhou implemented the ban, the *Southern Metropolis Daily* published its first editorial regarding this policy. The editorial remarked, "please feel concern for the powerless," and argued that although the government showed some kindness in form, the lower classes' interests had been harmed and the poor had to face this brutal reality. The debate about the ban not only reflected the conflict of interest between government and people, it also reflected the widening wealth gap between the rich and the poor. The editorial argued that the debate of the ban reached its climax in the powerless cry of the weak, which might reflect both the arrogance of the powerful and the pains of the lower class. The editorial called for those who wished for no traffic

jams and a safe city through a ban to show sympathy rather than boast as if triumphant (*ai jin wu xi*). Since no matter how solid the reasons the government had, the ban indicated that the government had given up on the interests of the weak (Editorial 2006). An article in the *China Youth Daily* supported this claim and argued that although many people called on the government to "save some sunlight for the poor," it ignored the interests of the weak in the name of creating smooth traffic (Shi 2006). The *China Youth Daily* also questioned why the Guangzhou administration was against transportation tools used by the lower classes and pointed out that the true reason was that policymakers did not use those means of transport themselves (Xiaoshu 2006). The *China Insurance News* also claimed that ordinary Guangzhou residents actually suffered a lot from this so-called "development" of the city without motorcycles (Yang 2007). After the motorcycle ban, many former motorcyclists resorted to other rickshaws and manpowered tricycles to make a living. However, Guangzhou police also started to ban these rickshaws and manpowered tricycles in April 2008, which triggered another round of media's claim of the local government's insufficient concern on the poor. An article from the *Straits News* criticized that each transportation vehicle has its own value to meet different groups' needs and the government should not abandon the so-called "outdated transportation means" (Zhao 2008).

Calling for Abolishing the Ban

The fifth claim constructing the motorcycle ban as a problem calls for abolishing the ban. Although

motorcycles have been banned in Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Dongguan, some media have actively advocated the abolishment of the policy. 25 September, 2007 was the Mid-Autumn Festival in China and Guangzhou experienced five hours of a traffic jam. The *Southern Metropolis Daily* commented that the big traffic jam had put no one in a festive mood to eat moon-cakes at all. Many people were filled with nostalgia for motorcycles as motorcycle taxis could go freely around during traffic jams. The author claimed the fact that the increasing number of cars after banning motorcycles had contributed heavily to the big traffic jam (Sanjiao 2007). While some media called for the abolishment of the ban policy implicitly, others did so explicitly. In December 2007, *Guangzhou Daily* published an article entitled "It Is Time to Call Motorcycles Back." The article argued that motorcycles had many advantages such as low emission, small volume, flexibility, requiring minimal parking place, and being environmentally friendly. These advantages became more valuable with the rising problem of traffic jams, pollution, and car parking. Even in big European cities such as London and Paris motorcycles could be used freely. The mayor of London even restricted the use of cars and encouraged people to use motorcycles, it was stated. The author argued that although motorcycles caused crime and traffic problems, banning motorcycles should only be a temporary method. The article concluded that we simply could not deny the advantages of the motorcycle. The article further proposed that in the near future the government should call the motorcycle back (Zhou 2007). The calling for a lift of the ban policy from the mass media reached its climax in March 2009, when

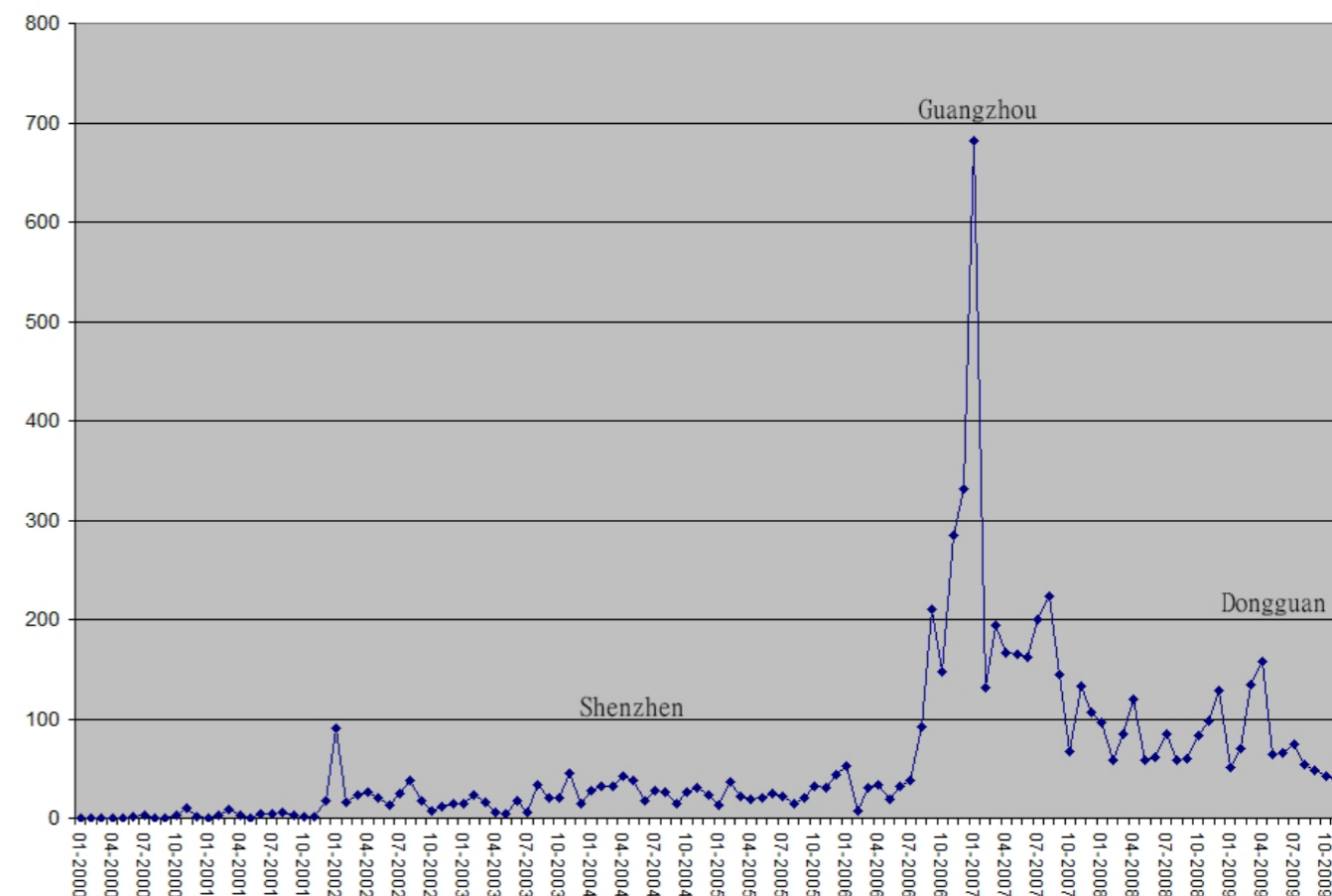
a member of Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, Zuo Zongsheng, used his political influence to submit a formal proposal to lift the ban policy at the 2009 national Two Meetings. Although abolishment advocacy did not succeed, some media continuously reminded audiences of the problems of banning motorcycles.

Media Commercialization and Claims-Making

This study of how the Chinese media responded to issues surrounding motorcycles and the banning of motorcycles shows how, although media are under strict control and serve as mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party-State, Chinese media are not monolithic. On the one hand, media did defend local governments' policy banning motorcycles, and therefore they become non-issue-makers in the construction of motorcycle ban problems. On the other hand, they also worked actively to criticize the ban by constructing problems with policy making and policy implementation, they criticized incompetent and arbitrary administration, as well as the government's insufficient concern on citizens. In the construction of motorcycle ban problems, Chinese media played a unique role of both claims-makers and non-issue-makers.

The question that remains unanswered is how Chinese media can work as claims-makers given Chinese Party-State's strict control and censorship on media. Let me address this question by examining the pattern of media coverage on banning motorcycles from 2000 to 2009.

Figure 1. Monthly media coverage of banning motorcycles in Chinese newspapers from 2000 to 2009 (n=6,462).



Source: Self-elaboration.

Figure 1 shows the number of articles related to banning motorcycles in Chinese newspapers. The frequency indicates when banning motorcycles became a heated issue and when there was less interest. I will particularly compare media coverage intensity (measured by frequency of monthly published newspaper articles in China) when Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and Dongguan started to ban motorcycles. From Figure 1, it is clear there was no significant change in media coverage when Shenzhen and Dongguan started their full ban policy in 2004 and 2009 respectively. However, the media coverage of banning motorcycles sky-rocketed with nearly 700 articles when

Guangzhou started to ban all motorcycles in January 2007. In other words, when Guangzhou banned motorcycles, Chinese media successfully constructed the issue as a social problem, evidenced by skyrocketing media coverage. When other cities banned motorcycles, the intensity was much less.

How can we explain the sky-rocketing media coverage when Guangzhou started to ban motorcycles? Why did Chinese media become claims-makers when Guangzhou started the ban, but they failed (at least not at the same level) to do so when other cities banned motorcycles?

Table 1. A selected list of top 10 newspapers that published articles about motorcycle bans from 2000 to 2009 (n=6,462).

Title	Newspaper Base	Number	Percentage	Accumulative Percentage
<i>Southern Metropolis Daily</i>	Guangzhou	1414	21.88	21.88
<i>South China Daily</i>	Guangzhou	863	13.35	35.23
<i>Guangzhou Daily</i>	Guangzhou	663	10.26	45.49
<i>Yangcheng Evening News</i>	Guangzhou	582	9.006	54.496
<i>Information Times</i>	Guangzhou	391	6.051	60.547
<i>New Express Daily</i>	Guangzhou	314	4.859	65.406
<i>Shenzhen Special Zone Daily</i>	Shenzhen	151	2.337	67.743
<i>Changsha Evening Newspaper</i>	Changsha	138	2.136	69.879
<i>Modern Life Daily</i>	Nanning	126	1.95	71.829
<i>Nan Guo Morning Post</i>	Nanning	124	1.919	73.748

Source: Self-elaboration.

In order to examine this puzzle, I looked at which newspapers are main claims-makers on banning motorcycles and where they are based. Table 1 shows a selected list of the top 10 out of 168 Chinese newspapers that published articles on banning motorcycles from 2000 to 2009. Among all 168 newspapers, all of the top six newspapers are based in Guangzhou. In constructing the problems of banning motorcycles, *Southern Metropolis Daily* took the lead and published 1,414 articles, accounted for 21.88 percent in all newspaper coverage in China. The next top five claims-makers included *South China Daily*, *Guangzhou Daily*, *Yangcheng Evening News* (national version), *Information Times*, and *New Express Daily*. All together, these six Guang-

zhou-based newspapers published nearly two-thirds (65.41%) of articles on the issue of banning motorcycles in China.

Put the above two sets of data together, and it is not surprising that media coverage sky-rocketed when Guangzhou started the policy because Guangzhou-based newspapers were dominant claims-makers on the issue. It is safe to draw the conclusion that the reason for why the motorcycle ban successfully became the most heatedly debated social problem in Guangzhou, while they failed to do so in other cities, lies in Guangzhou-based newspapers' role in claims-making. But, why can newspapers in Guangzhou work as claims-maker,

while they failed to do so in other cities given the Chinese government's strict control and censorship on media? To answer this question, we need to understand the transformation of Chinese society in general, and the government's strategies in controlling media in particular.

Since the 1980s, when China started economic reform and opened-up to the outside world, marketization and commercialization have spread to every corner of Chinese society. Although economic liberalization has not yet caused political democratization, the transformation of Chinese society from hard authoritarianism to soft authoritarianism has been widely observed (Pei 2000; Xu 2014). The relationship between the state and media is also changing and the market becomes an important player in shaping state-media relation. Before the economic reform, all media are state-owned and financed by the state. The budgetary constraints in 1980s forced the Party-State to cut off media subsidies and nearly all media (except a few such as *People's Daily*) had to become financially autonomous. The commercialization of media further accelerated after 2000, when China joined the World Trade Organization as the Party-State sought to strengthen media organizations to withstand future competition from foreign media. In order to seek profit, the media have to face market pressures and provide useful information to audiences instead of purely working as a propaganda machine for the Party-State as before. As widely acknowledged, the current Chinese media have two masters: the Party-State and the public (Sukosd and Wang 2013). In terms of newspapers, the two goals of propaganda and profit-making are achieved by division of labor in

the same media group. While the "parent" papers are oriented towards the wishes of Party-State, the "offspring" papers are oriented towards the public. For example, in Guangzhou, *South China Daily* is an official party newspaper of Guangdong Provincial Communist Party. While *South China Daily* mainly serves the propaganda function, its commercial spin-off, *Southern Metropolis Daily*, mainly serves the market. Despite editors and journalists being sanctioned, fired, and even imprisoned for its aggressive reporting, *Southern Metropolis Daily* remains one of the most liberal commercial newspapers in China. In constructing motorcycle ban problems, *Southern Metropolis Daily* took the lead. It not only published the most articles on the issue, but also published many editorials exclusively in making claims. Its aggressive reporting doctrine can be vividly seen from an advertisement for the newspaper in which it swears to be different (see: Figure 2).

Commercial newspaper's aggressive reporting is also supported and protected by the media group as they are the source of profit. For instance, while the party paper *South China Daily* suffered a 14 percent drop in its daily print run from 876,000 in 1993 to 750,000 in 2003, the commercial paper increased from 41,000 in 1997 to an astonishing 1.4 million copies in 2003 (Qian and Bandurski 2011:42). The editors and journalists also play the game of cat and mouse with censorship authorities to report before censorship orders reach them (Qian and Bandurski 2011:64). In addition, national leaders also need media to work as a watchdog to monitor subordinate officials, and particularly at local level, and therefore they can identify and fix problems before they

Figure 2. An advertisement of *Southern Metropolis Daily* (SMD) on Guangzhou street.

It reads: "SMD, omnipresent; We don't take the old road, nor do we take only one road; We are not tunnel-visioned, nor are we rule-abiding and obedient; We always want to try something new and do something different; Now, it is our time to show our talent; SMD, omnipresent, attacking, with razor sharp sword."

Source: Photo by the author.

provoke popular unrest (Shirk 2011:5). In Guangzhou, besides South China Daily Group, the Guangzhou Daily Group and the Yangcheng Evening News Group are another two newspaper giants fiercely competing for audiences (He 2006). By contrast, newspapers in Shenzhen and Dongguan face

much less competition. Much research has shown newspapers in Guangzhou are taking the leading role in China in commercialization and pushing the boundary of press freedom (Shirk 2011). To a large extent, the successful construction of banning motorcycles as a social problem in Guangzhou lies in

the commercialization of Guangzhou media, which provides strong motivation and space for the media to become claim-makers. While Chinese Party-State still holds strict control on media through complicated mechanisms such as monetary control, coercion, and self-censorship (Hassid 2008), the commercialization of media creates strong motivation for the press to push the boundary of press freedom in order to attract audiences and therefore become claim-makers for certain local social problems.

Conclusion

Zygmunt Bauman (2004; 2005) once argued that the production of waste of all kinds is an inevitable outcome of modernization and an inescapable accompaniment of modernity. In China, we see a visible hand from the authoritarian Party-State to construct the meaning of the motorcycle as a waste, a sinful subject (Xu 2014). Indeed, with China's march towards modernization, the fate and value of motorcycles have experienced dramatic ups and downs. In urban China, a motorcycle was regarded as a magic tool of getting rich for individual business operators in 1980s, a fashionable transportation vehicle for local residents in 1990s, and a tool of making a living for migrant workers and local poor in 2000s. Nowadays, however, it becomes a subject associated with "sins," and motorcycle users are regarded either as dangerous criminals or troublemakers who damage China's image of modernization.

In the construction of social problems, the media play a vital role as claims-makers (Best 1989). Extant literature has widely documented how mass media work as claims-makers in democratic society where

freedom of speech is largely guaranteed. To what extent can mass media in authoritarian China play such a role is underexplored. In addressing these questions, this study contributes to the existing literature in the following ways. First, while most of existing research on the construction of social problems is conducted in the Western democratic countries, a case study of China will contribute to examine to what extent social constructionism can be applied in authoritarian countries. Second, in bringing the concept of non-issue-making from criminology into social constructionism analysis, this study also contributes to the toolkit of constructionists. Third, an understanding of how Chinese media make claims for certain social problems in a highly restrictive media environment will also help the media in other authoritarian regimes to expand their space of press freedom.

In this current research, I have explored the dual roles of Chinese mass media as both non-issue-makers and claims-makers. On the one hand, Chinese media suffer from severe censorship from the Party-State. They are required to defend the government and serve as mouthpiece of the authoritarian regime. By condemning the motorcycle as a subject of "seven sins," as well as dramatizing the "achievement" of the policy, the media worked as non-issue-makers for problems related to their policy of banning motorcycles. On the other hand, the commercialization of mass media provides strong motivation and limited space for media to become claims-makers for certain interests of the poor and underclass. In its construction of banning motorcycles as a social problem, various rhetorics have been used by the media in their claims. An examination

of media reporting patterns further reveals that commercialization of Chinese media provides the ground for media to become possible claims-makers for social problems. However, to what extent can Chinese media's role as claim-makers facilitate their transformation towards democracy remains to be seen. Some scholars even argue that media's commercialization actually strengthens Chinese authoritarian regime rather than weaken it (Stockmann 2013). But, a solid understanding of Chinese media's role as both non-issue-makers and claim-makers provides a basis for any prediction.

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