

The Role of Global Media in Chinese Transitions to Communism and Capitalism

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In the past 100 years China has undergone two ideologically different transitions. The first was to communism. The second, currently underway, is from communism to capitalism. While these appear ideologically different, there are some similarities. First, both involve foreign influences. Marxism was not a Chinese philosophy. The brand of capitalism currently being implemented (called neo-liberalism by David Harvey (2007)) is a global import. Second, both are argued to be heavily influenced or discouraged by foreign models of media.

This review essay will use two books describing different points in time to describe this. The first book is Charles A. Laughlin's *Chinese Reportage: The Aesthetics of Historical Experience* (2003). This book explores a European, socialist form of media—reportage—that involves dramatic representations of protests. Laughlin explores how this was used to incite protest against Japanese occupation and to solidify a sense of a Chinese industrial nation-state amidst political turmoil. This article will next explore chapters in the multi-author edited volume, *Changing Media: Changing China* (edited by Susan L. Shirk 2011) that explores the role of new styles of mass media on implementing markets and social change in China. Of special importance will be how can the media—a global industry—be said to be influencing the Chinese nation state? What does this say for international affairs, if a global industry is able to influence domestic and international politics?

Both books explore different ideological transformations—hence the transition to communism at the outset of the Peoples' Republic of China (P.R.C.) and the return to a class-based capitalist society in contemporary times. Accordingly both books explore the role of dissent. *Chinese Reportage* analyzes anti-colonial protests directed against the Japanese colonialism whereas *Changing*

Media, Changing China often focuses on journalistic dissent against policies and/or Chinese corporations.

Changing Media, Changing China does a few things particularly well. First, it provides a readable, accessible introduction to the complex changes brought about by commercialization of media in the P.R.C. Second, it provides description of negotiations between protestors and the C.C.P. Third, it shows how commercialization—for good and bad—has influenced Chinese domestic and foreign policy. Fourth, it provides a subtle—though mostly unintended—warning about the dangers of commercialized media.

A common theme explored in both books is Chinese nationalism. Both books explore how nationalism has been used to mobilize people in China. With both the creation of the P.R.C. as a Communist nation-state in 1949 and the implementation of market capitalism in 1978 foreign threats have been mobilized to create popular support of economic change. Shirk mentions the Chinese governments' belief that if it appears to not protect Chinese citizens from foreign threats, then there will be a repeat of nationalist overthrows of powers (similar to the one that brought the CCP into power) (2011a, 28). As Shirk mentions in the final chapter, contemporary Chinese media outlets, frequently using Western style journalism, seek to profit from nationalism and patriotism when describing foreign crises such as the 1999 accidental U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade (2011b 236) or maritime disputes with Japan. This use of nationalism parallels earlier European types of Communist journalism directed against Japanese occupation in *Chinese Reportage*. Though both are in a different economic context (establishing communism versus establishing a market economy) they show how nationalist considerations step in during economic transitions in China.

Changing Media, Changing China would benefit from a more consistent view among authors on the benefits and consequences of the commercialization of Chinese media. Shirk's introduction places the change in media within an important context: authoritarian government. But this context turns more into a dichotomy between democracy and authoritarian governance that seems intended to support conservative foreign policy. For example, before capitalist economic

reforms:

...the vast majority of the public was left to rely on rumors picked up at the teahouse and personal observations of their neighborhoods and workplaces. (In modern democracies, the information gap between officialdom and the public has disappeared almost entirely: U.S. government officials keep television sets on their offices and learn about international events first from CNN, not from internal source). (Shirk 2011, 8)

While this may be true, the focus on news through rumors in the P.R.C. before market reforms versus a fully functioning democratic mass media oversimplifies contemporary commercial mass media outside of the P.R.C. Throughout the Cold War, U.S. media provided media biased toward anti-Communism that reported oppression of Cold War allies while not providing sufficient coverage of similar oppression of U.S. enemies (Herman and Chomsky 2008). The U.S. media relied on conservative think tanks and thus provided factually incorrect information to the U.S. public about Iraq in the lead up to the 2003 invasion (and subsequent occupation) of Iraq (Altheide and Grimes 2005; Arsenault and Castells 2006). Similarly, Japanese media coverage of immigration used police with anti-immigration views as their main source (Shipper 2005). Rupert Murdoch's media conglomerate—which broadcasts in Hong Kong and the P.R.C.—has provided sometimes biased, incorrect information to the general U.S. public.

Since *Changing Media, Changing China* overuses national/economic categories for its analysis it does not fully explore how global media models affect Chinese politics. The focus is more on setting a dichotomy between the Chinese Communist Party (C.C.P.) (a national, seemingly economic entity) and capitalism (a global, imported economic entity), rather than assessing the impact of global media types on the P.R.C. This is an unusual dichotomy. The Chinese government (which is controlled by the P.R.C.) does not oppose capitalism nor is the rise of the middle class is likely to lead to democracy (Callahan 2010, 204). Within this context, other authors' chapters in *Changing Media, Changing China* identify international problems that affect Chinese people that rely on a simplistic mass media definition of what is foreign. The authors identify specific nation-

states: The United States, Japan, and Taiwan. They mention specific situations, the 1999 accidental U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade and Japanese governments' unwillingness to sufficiently apologize for World War II atrocities. They however, portray the creation of market capitalism in the P.R.C. as a beneficial process even though market reforms produce rapid, polluting industrialization (much of which is destined for U.S. and other foreign markets) and displacement of Chinese rural peoples.

Zhan Jiang's chapter on the media and the environment provides an excellent example of protest and media coverage of large scale environmental catastrophes: "market-oriented and Web-based media have boosted the growth of civil society in China" (2011, 119). Nonetheless, in regards to the Songhua incident, Zhan Jiang praises the quantity of reporting instead of the quality of reporting which agreed with Jilin Petrochemical Company's claim that benzene leaks into drinking water were harmless (126). Zhan recommends that "For China's media to become formidable and influential, more attention must be paid to accurate and analytical reporting rather than the necessity to beat competitors by reporting on hot button issues as spectacularly and quickly as possible" (126). Still, the placement of these processes in P.R.C. only is questionable. Companies that pollute the environment for profit and news companies that focus on profit but not responsible reporting are not unique to the P.R.C. Neither are such industrial practices unique to the market reform era. For Zhan it seems that there are new, yet unfulfilled, opportunities with commercial media. At the same time, it remains unclear why a market orientated approach is the only way forward as this recklessness toward human life and the natural environment is reminiscent of both capitalism as well as the excesses of Communism in a variety of nation-states.

The media industry, despite the often optimistic assessment of Chinese media commercialization, may actually be reasserting the power of the Chinese government instead of creating substantive changes. To this extent, *Changing Media, Changing China* successfully portrays a change in media form and style that does not necessarily create a change in political thought or behavior. Instead, commercialized mass media makes nationalism and war palatable to

younger generations whose tastes (and potential political views) are changing due to internationalization. *Changing Media, Changing China* describes global, corporate mass media as potentially influencing changes in policy—hence more accountability—and hints at the fact that Chinese nationalism and governance strongly influences this global media too. The global media industry’s power is in its style, look, and content rather than particular actions. In regards to Chinese state-run television (CCTV), Miao Di explains that: “As the primary television propaganda machine, *CCTV News* has always adhered to the principle of publicizing the policies of the CCP and government. Its reports focus on the activities of Chinese leaders and political conferences. They are full of meaningless context and presented in an inflexible style” (2011, 106). Thus, reporting on Chinese state television is rigid which makes the content less convincing to Chinese people. While there are commercial alternatives—at least in terms of style—they do not significantly influence reporting on the Chinese military. As Tai Ming Cheung explains:

For China’s military media, especially its LAD flagship and associated operations, their role as purveyors of propaganda and ideological education will take precedence over any commercial opportunities that may arise in the foreseeable future. The dissemination of military-related news and information is unlikely to change significantly from the highly conservative and propagandistic style that has existed over the past sixty years. (2011, 145)

The styles of presentation that are critiqued as “inflexible” or “highly conservative and propagandistic” are shown elsewhere in the book to change, without changing the content of the media or policy. For example, the *Global Times* newspaper has a “nationalist slant that is driven largely by commercial considerations” (Shirk 2011b, 228). Similarly, the Hong Kong based Phoenix Television (partially funded by the global media owner Rupert Murdoch’s Star T.V.) became famous for patriotic reporting of the 1999 Belgrade embassy bombing (231). Yet, its style—which is opposite of C.C.T.V.’s style is “splashy, nationalistic, and highly believable because it sounds nothing like old-style propaganda” (231). All of this, as Shirk mentions pushed the Chinese foreign Ministry spokesman to confront

Japan over disputed islands in 2005 (234).

Laughlin's *Chinese Reportage* (2003) analyzes a European-style Marxist media form that created meaningful space for protesting colonial occupation but was later used for different purposes and ultimately did not lead to ideal socialist practice. Laughlin focuses mostly on one type of media and works in hindsight, which is always easier to analyze. He analyzes how "reportage," a European, Marxist mode of emotional reporting of events—rather than factual reporting— influenced a variety of demonstrations in the early twentieth century Republic of China. Reportage arose after the 1919 May Fourth movement in opposition to "professional journalism....Reportage authors attempt to make actual historical experience meaningful, to rescue the truth of actual events from the hollowing, refying effects of journalistic objectivity" (Laughlin 2003, 10). Thus, reportage argues that objective information is not as factual as it appears, but instead is a promotion of capitalism. In this sense reportage is foreign to Chinese culture, yet like Marxism, it is perceived as an alternative to the threat to Chinese people from foreign values and colonization.

Laughlin's work is somewhat more theorized than *Changing Media*, *Changing China*, and also puts "reportage" in a more global context. Reportage is not simply looked at within the context of its application to China, but also briefly within its use in France and Germany (and with Czech theorists, though this is not fully explored). This multi-country approach is also complimented by a more developed look across different time frames. Laughlin mentions early reportage writing that reports on but also instigates a variety of protests:

Finally, the published work remains a script insofar as its readers may be prompted by it to go out and perform similar "plays." This open ended quality of true-life narrative as theater is an important distinguishing feature of reportage: the text's connection to the real world via the veracity of its subject matter is met with a readers response that is connected to the real world via the text's lack of aesthetic closure. (Laughlin 2003, 76)

Similarly during the war with Japan (1937-1945), "war reportage," creates a pan-Chinese consciousness by linking people's bodies with Chinese landscapes to

create a sense of Chinese nationalism. (Laughlin 2003, 153). Thus, reportages take on different forms as an oppositional force (protest) a nationalizing force (war) but also 1980s reportage that critiques Chinese socialism and recent reportage on subjects that are open to criticism (such as environmental problems) and “‘commercial endorsement’ reportage” that uses the genre to glorify market capitalism (Laughlin 2003, 264). The acknowledgment of reportage as an independent genre of Chinese literature is only done by Chinese academics in the 1980s (Laughlin 2003, 19). Therefore, what works well with Laughlin’s analysis is that reportage cannot be glorified as a perfect medium of communication. Rather, its results vary in different nation-states and time frames. It changes and henceforth offers both revolutionary and not-so-revolutionary potentials.

Laughlin’s work could be further developed by more clearly explaining what exactly a revolutionary stance for contemporary Marxist reportage might be, perhaps by considering how political economy impacts media. Since others (Harvey 2010) have noted that Karl Marx viewed on capital as a dynamic “process” instead of an unchanging “thing,” (191-92) it is interesting that Laughlin at once portrays reportage as revolutionary when confronting Japanese occupation in the 1930s, but not so when the Chinese nation state is established, and really so when confronting the Communist government in the 1980s and definitely not so when used for commercial purposes. Is it revolutionary to be anti-imperialist but not to run a socialist nation-state? If so, Laughlin could further this to explain a non-nation-state version of Marxism, but the potential for this is my own analysis, rather than anything written in *Chinese Reportage*. In contrast to this, *Changing Media, Changing China* is able to make a forceful assertion for global style, media commercialization and hence market capitalism as liberating, albeit while largely ignoring its own voices on the downside of these changes.

Both books provide opportunities to understand how global types of media make economic change more acceptable often by spreading nationalist ideology. Therefore, at both epochs, the rise of Communism in the early 20th Century, and the rise of market capitalism in 1978, global media has helped influence economic change and rises in Chinese nationalism, but perhaps cannot be said to

be importing foreign political influence (though global economic and business influence may be a different matter). Chinese nationalism may be pragmatic because it lets global media types help spread it; i.e. the use of socialist reportage imported from Europe and commercialized global media. In the near future, it appears that the impact of this combined global and nationalist influence may likely be felt intensely outside of China's borders.

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