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John Alekna, **Seeking News, Making China: Information, Technology, and the Emergence of Mass Society,** Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024, 376 pp., $35.00 (paperback), $140.00 (hardcover).

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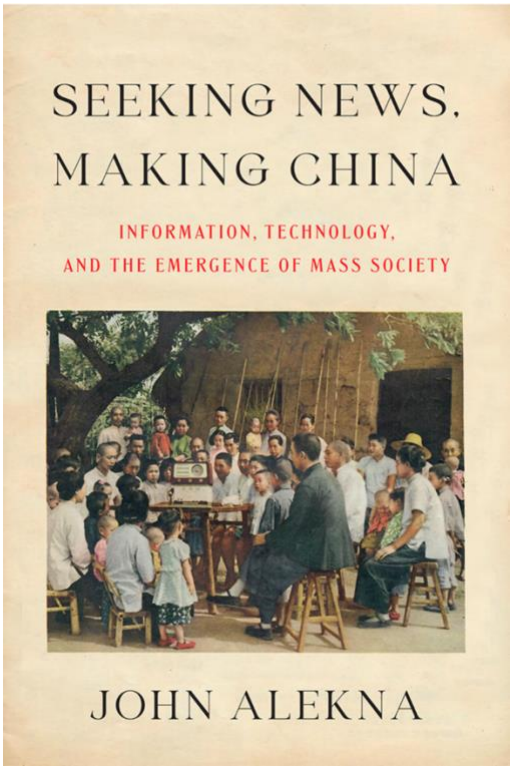

The book aims to examine the origins of modern mass society in China by tracing the development of communications technology, which the author, John Alekna, views as an underappreciated area of study. While the rise of nationalism, the impact of the Japanese invasion, and the Communist Party's mobilization apparatus were all important drivers for the change in social organization in early 20th-century China, Alekna argues that greater emphasis needs to be placed on showing the development of the communication ecosystem through a historical analysis of the variety of actors, events, and technological developments that provided its backbone. He terms this "newsscape": the interaction of technology, specifically radio broadcasting, with social practice; the bridging of the urban-rural spaces; the specific sensory nature of radio as sound media; and the blurring of the distinction between news, information, and propaganda.

The book follows a largely chronological order, with chapters following different streams tied to a specific time range and themes related to geography, technology, and politics. These streams merge in 1949 after the end of the Chinese Civil War. Each chapter shows the development of the specific mix of the political, social, and cultural ecosystems at the time with the deployment of new communication technologies.

Each part is diligently researched, drawing from a wide range of contemporaneous writings, archival documents from various governments and militaries, historical newspaper articles and magazines, as well as modern historical research, both in Chinese and English. The depth and breadth of the archival writings and literature included in the analysis give great weight to the central arguments of the book.

Chapter 1 sets the scene by exploring the general newsscape in China on the eve of the May 4 movement in 1919. It shows, through a case study of Chengdu, how the mix of the telegraph and newspapers, while transformative for those literate and in major metropolitan areas, only had limited impact and penetration. The illiterate continued to rely on aurality, specifically listening to those who were literate conveying the messages from newspapers and telegraph dispatches via public speeches and the radio.

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Chapter 2 focuses on the technopolitical implications of the advent of broadcasting technologies in 1923, which coincided with the birth of both the Nationalist and Communist political parties in China in the middle of the warlord era. Alekna weaves together several stories about the battle for control over the airwaves: Sun Yat-sen's vision of using the enhanced scope provided by radio to enhance his efforts to unify China under the Nationalist Party, the birth of commercial radio in Shanghai, and the efforts of powerful groups to limit the spread of radio, fearing its power.

Chapter 3 shifts focus to 1920s Manchuria and the creation of a government-run radio monopoly under Zhang Zuolin and his son Zhang Zueliang, which Alekna describes as "a newsscape encompassing the local, regional, national, and international while conflating technological, martial, and propagandistic goals within a single process" (pp. 69–70). This highlights not only the unique situation of Manchuria at the time which gave rise to that influential newsscape but also how the government-run broadcast model became the model for future systems across China.

While chapters 2 and 3 focused on elite usage of media, chapter 4 shifts the emphasis to how average people in cities and the countryside experienced media in unique ways. This includes communal and public listening practices at tea houses, theaters, and schools, as well as the listening station system, where radio transmissions were quickly transcribed into various printed forms for dissemination to less-developed areas.

The attempts to manipulate the newsscape during the Japanese invasion and occupation of China are explored in chapter 5. Especially interesting are the different cat-and-mouse games played—the efforts to control news flow by the occupying forces and their collaborators versus the thirst for information through underground radio and newspapers by the Chinese. Chapter 6 follows the Communist Party's efforts both during the war and after, simultaneously highlighting the efforts of women while showing the innovation of the revolutionary movement.

Chapter 7 revisits a well-studied area: the use of media by the Communist Party after consolidating power to legitimize its rule and expand the revolution through local efforts. Alekna, however, centers radio, showing how it "pervasively influenced the daily existence" of the people (p. 197). The final two chapters tie together the various strands of the book in a concise manner.

This book provides greater details on the historical context of media development while expanding the definition of media, that is, his concept of mediascape, than similar books such as Huang (2023), Zhao (1998), and Culp (2019), which focus more on newspapers and journalism specifically. This nuance on the multifaceted nature from a more McLuhanist approach, rather than a political-economy one, is appropriate and highly enlightening. In contrast to Mittler (2004), who focuses on one foreign newspaper in Shanghai from 1872 to 1912, Alekna covers a later era and places greater emphasis on the localizing effects of Chinese culture and history on media technologies from diverse geographical contexts.

Of course, not every book can cover every type of media for all eras with all approaches, and this is especially relevant when exploring the last century of media development in China throughout colonialism

and wars and revolutions. Alekna's book skillfully bridges these chaotic decades from 1919 to 1958 with his innovative theoretical framework and extensive archival work.

It often follows a pattern of introducing each chapter and chapter section with interesting historical anecdotes that help lead the reader into the context and themes under discussion. This includes well-known leaders like Sun Yat-sen, Mao Zedong, and Chiang Kai-shek; lesser-known figures like journalist and broadcaster Ding Yilan and author Li Dai; as well as dozens of ordinary citizens. These effectively hook the reader, providing dense, well-written prose that sets the scene perfectly for the detailed analysis that follows.

The book seems almost antiquated in its emphasis on predigital technologies, bucking the modern trend of Chinese media research that overwhelmingly explores social media, memes, viral videos, online spaces, and online community formation. Yet such contemporary research often lacks historical context; digital media obviously enhance the scope and scale of communication (McLuhan), but this is not new. As Alekna shows, this has happened before multiple times and in varying political, economic, and social contexts. The current era is just another iteration in this vein, and scholars of contemporary Chinese media need to embrace this more fully in their analyses. This book, then, provides a good basis to reassert more technological-determinist perspectives over culturalist and anti-media imperialist ones.

The audience for the book would include media historians who would appreciate a global perspective, 20th-century historians of China, and those interested in a unique perspective on the influence of technological development on politics, society, and culture.

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