

Changes in China's Media and Internet Technology: A Review Essay

Anthony Y. H. Fung, **Global Capital, Local Culture: Transnational Media Corporations in China**, New York: Peter Lang, 2008, pp. 240, \$32.95 (hardcover).

Jinjiu Zhao, **The Internet and Rural Development in China: The Socio-Structural Paradigm**, Frankfurt, Germany: Peter Lang, 2008, pp. 287, \$74.95 (paperback).

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Wei Yuan (1794-1856), a 19th century Chinese thinker, was deeply concerned about the threat of Western intrusion and China's maritime defense after the First Opium War (1839-1842). He proposed to "emulate the strength of the foreigners' technology in order to overcome them" (*shi yi changji yi zhi yi*). For Chinese, this means that China must employ Western science and technology to defeat the Western intruders (Leonard, 1984; Liu, 2004). Wei Yuan's idea gave rise to two aspirations for modern China: materialist progress and national empowerment. Over the last two centuries Chinese leaders had launched reforms, revolutions and radical movements to promote economic progress and to create a strong nation in an increasingly hostile and competitive international environment.

In the early 21st century, China began to implement Wei Yuan's idea and as a result, has become a rising economic and political power. In retrospect, the 2008 Beijing Olympics became a big coming-out party for China, a showcase of its economic accomplishments. China's rise to prominence in the world economy is reflected in its increased influence in global politics that, until now, has been dominated by Western nations. For example, the United States is currently trapped in its "War on Terror" in Iraq and Afghanistan while China has been developing strategic alliances with many developing countries through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, the six-party nuclear talks on North Korea, and through its closer relationships with the United Nations Security Council and the World Trade Organization (WTO). Meanwhile, Chinese President Hu Jintao is pursuing an even larger strategy of creating a multi-polar and anti-hegemonic world order, and he is determined to combine that policy with China's goal of competing with the United States in different parts of the globe (Lee, 2004; Lee, Cliadakis & Cliadakis, 2006; Lee, 2008; Kaplan, 2008). Fareed Zakaria (2008) calls this development the beginning of "the post-American world," in which the United States retreats and China advances in economic power and political influence.

As China is emerging as a superpower, let us examine the transformation of the Chinese commercial media industries and Internet technology in recent years. The central question is how the Chinese state incorporated Western science and technology in the state-building process, especially in the realm of media. The two books under review focus on the political economy of media technology and the structural change of communications system in China today. They address some specific issues: how the Chinese state co-opted major transnational media corporations in order to modernize its national media industries; how it absorbed the Western modes of media production, operation and management to create

a state-supervised-and-corporation-run media system; and how it used the Internet as a new mechanism to facilitate economic development in rural areas. What follows is a critical assessment of their findings and insights.

Global Capital, Local Culture is a fascinating study of the operation of transnational media enterprises in China and the commercialization of the Chinese media in recent years. Drawing on extensive interviews with senior executives and media producers, Anthony Y. H. Fung critically examines the business strategies of major transnational media corporations in China and their interactions with the Chinese state. Comprised of eight lucid chapters, the overall structure of the book guides readers from the arrival of global media players in China to discuss the Chinese government's policy of co-optation and the formation of Sino-Western media partnerships. Anthony Y. H. Fung writes clearly and fluently, giving those unfamiliar with China's media development a sense of its shape, dynamics, and change in the early 21st century. He skillfully combines the methodologies of political economy and cultural studies to present his rich ethnographic data, and he succeeds in illustrating conceptual insights with concrete examples from fieldwork.

A major strength of Fung's study is his in-depth analysis of the media-state relations in contemporary China. The transnational media groups under study include Warner Bros. Pictures, Rupert Murdoch's Star Group Ltd., Viacom's MTV Channel, and News Corporation's Channel V. According to Fung, these corporations underwent a process of localization after they entered the Chinese market. Driven by material rewards and business incentives, the corporations actively collaborated with the Communist authorities and designed their cultural products according to the state's agendas. Since China's entry into the WTO in November 2001, the Chinese government was determined to attract foreign capital to modernize its national media industries, and to apply the international corporate standards to transform internal practices. The state encouraged the formation of Sino-Western joint ventures, and incorporated the global media players into its ambitious project of building a new Chinese century. Meanwhile, the transnational media corporations capitalized on China's open-door policy. Instead of waiting for a transparent, free, and democratic Chinese society to emerge, these global players worked with the state-controlled media agents to produce popular music, movies, and TV programs in order to promote Chinese nationalism. To reward this strategic partnership, in 2003, the Chinese state permitted foreign companies to hold as high as 49% of the ownership of the joint ventures. In effect, this policy opened a new door for global media players to establish themselves in China. But the Chinese leaders had no intention of seeing China become a colony of Western media corporations. Their goal was to incorporate the transnational corporations into the political agendas of media-restructuring and state-building. They used the global capital and its mode of management to transform the socialist media structure into a capitalist one, and to connect China with the international media networks.

The other strength of Fung's work is the approach that he uses to conceptualize the politics of media-state relations. By focusing on the political economy of cultural production, Fung highlights the symbiotic relationship between the Chinese state and the transnational media enterprises. As a result, a state-supervised-and-corporation-run media complex was formed in China which monopolized the Chinese media and popular culture industries. A good example of this is the promotion of hip-hop music. Rather than criticizing injustices and suppressions, Chinese hip-hop celebrated love, romance, ethnic harmony,

materialistic progress, and traditional festivities. The Chinese policy of co-optation succeeded in monitoring the transnational media operations in China while satisfying the public desires for information and entertainment. Evidently, the state juxtaposed the global capital and popular culture with the national agendas of political unity and stability. This form of media-state partnership not only neutralized the threats of global media corporations, but also produced a variety of cultural products beneficial to China's modernization.

By comparison, *The Internet and Rural Development in China* is more limited. It has the format of a doctoral dissertation. Composed of 13 chapters, the first six chapters give extensive citations of previous studies and long reviews of scholarly literature. Chapters 7 through 13 constitute the core of this book, and discuss the diffusion, usage and application of the Internet in China's vast rural areas. Based on ethnographic research and extensive interviews in the countryside, Jinqiu Zhao examines the successes and failures of using the Internet for rural empowerment. Zhao asserts that the Chinese state has always used mass media to integrate the inland areas into the political center in the state-building process. Therefore, this political agenda is key to understanding the expansion of the Internet technology in the countryside.

Jinqiu Zhao uses five selected case studies to reveal a regionally differentiated picture of the Internet's usage and application in rural China. The Internet technology has succeeded in breaking down geographical boundaries and creating an electronic platform for social and economic interactions. The networking aspect bridges the social, economic and cultural gaps between rural and urban areas. According to Zhao, in the remote and impoverished villages of Gansu province in western China, the Internet technology led to social and economic empowerment. For example, in Yellow Sheep River Town, a history teacher ran an Internet café and helped local villagers better understand citizenship rights. He even helped a patient's family to search online for information about medical compensations, and won a court case against the local hospital for malpractices. In Jinta County along the ancient Silk Road, the local government designed a biweekly online newspaper to inform farmers of the latest agricultural technologies and the price of cash crops. In 2001, the county farmer association learnt about the loss of cummin harvest in India and Pakistan because of a natural disaster, and it quickly collected cummin at a higher price and sold directly to an Indian company. The same economic benefits can be seen elsewhere. Some rural entrepreneurs in Tongan County of Chongqing Municipality and in Weifang City of Shandong province embraced e-commerce, as they posted the farm products online and directly contacted the buyers.

But the maintenance of the Internet facilities is a serious problem in the isolated mountainous region. In Pinggu County northeast of Beijing, low Internet subscription rates, remote location, and poor transportation made it difficult for the cable company to maintain and repair the network, especially after thunderstorms and snowstorms. How to sustain the Internet service in the less developed regions of China becomes the most important question. As Zhao suggests, unless the Chinese state takes the initiative to maintain and promote the cable network in the countryside, it will always be difficult for remote villages and townships to use the Internet for empowerment.

In short, Anthony Y. H. Fung's study of the transnational media corporations is outstanding as it highlights how the Chinese state succeeded in co-opting these enterprises in its state-building project; and Jinqiu Zhao's work presents an interesting analysis of the social and economic impacts of the Internet usage in China's rural areas. Two important lessons can be drawn from these studies. First, the powerful Chinese state has succeeded in using the transnational media corporations and the Internet technology for state-building. Today, the West cannot exercise power over the media at the expense of China's sovereignty as it did during the heydays of foreign imperialism in "the Bible and the Gun" era (Lee, 2003). Thus, the early 21st century has become a period of political and economic leveling in which China has effectively used Western science and technology to strengthen itself. Second, the Chinese entrepreneurs and ordinary people are active agents in this technological transformation. They have embraced the new communication technology, and have taken advantage of this new social and economic climate to empower themselves individually and collectively (Cheung, Lee & Nedilsky [Eds.], forthcoming). If Wei Yuan had been alive today, he would have been pleased with the progress that China has made in the early 21st century.

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