



China's Media in Comparative Perspective

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Introduction

I have been asked to address the question of whether there are lessons to be learned from the comparative study of the media in China and in the former communist countries of Central Europe and the successor states to the Soviet Union. To do that, I must first briefly discuss the theoretical basis for comparing media systems. Then I review the outcomes in the former European communist societies and offer some indications of possible points of comparison. Finally, building on these foundations, I suggest ways in which these considerations might usefully be applied in the future study of the Chinese media.

When reading this essay, the author's limitations must be borne firmly in mind: I am not a Chinese speaker, and I make no claims to be an expert on Chinese media. My knowledge, such as it is, comes entirely from secondary sources, most of them published. Perhaps some of the things I say are simply wrong; if they are, I would welcome correction.

What to Compare?

Comparative media studies is clearly a major growth area, partly as a result of the enormous success of Hallin and Mancini's path-breaking work (2004). Since its publication, *Comparing Media Systems* has replaced, and not before its time, *Four Theories of the Press* as the starting point for almost all serious comparative studies. Hallin and Mancini explicitly focused their analysis on the stable democracies of Western Europe and North America and are only now engaged in extending that work to other types of systems. Their followers, however, have anticipated them. It is pretty obvious that most of the systems in Central Europe fit well into the polarized political model that they identify as present in Mediterranean Europe, and it is fairly simple to generate a new, fourth, model — authoritarian corporatist — that can be used for Russia and, perhaps, even for China. There are other relatively minor adjustments that it is desirable to make — replacing *political parallelism* with *political alignment* to account for one-party states like China, or critiquing the stress upon newspaper circulation on account of its very rapid collapse after 1989 in the former communist countries — but none of these pose insuperable obstacles.

There are, however, a number of more substantial problems, of which two are particularly important for our purposes:

1. The explicitly functionalist theoretical framework is problematic. A structural-functionalist analysis of the media in the former communist countries, or in China today, would identify the media as major mechanisms for social integration. The present Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership would not dissent from Parsons' famous dictum that "The problem of order, and thus of the nature of the integration of stable systems of social interaction, thus focuses on the integration of the motivation of actors with the normative cultural standards which integrate the action system . . ." (1970, pp. 36–37). In the former communist countries, the problem is that the grand historical fact with which we have to deal is 1989, when one political system collapsed and was rapidly replaced by another. The functionalist arsenal does not help us to understand changes, which, on most accounts, were revolutions: Certainly, Parsons' own discussion of "deviant sub-cultures" hardly seems an adequate starting point (pp. 521–523). Since, from a comparative perspective, we have to explain the paradoxes of 1989, a conflict-centered model, rather than one that assumes stability, seems more appropriate.
2. The explicit and overwhelming focus of Hallin and Mancini's book is on the relationship between the media system and the political system. This is not a self-evident way to compare media systems. If one considers broadcasting in the UK, the main channels devote relatively little space to political news and current affairs — perhaps 10% in the case of the BBC and less for their main commercial competitors. As for the dedicated news channels, they command tiny audiences. The BBC's 24-hour channel gets around a 1% audience share, and its main competitor, Sky News, gets around 0.6% audience share. CNN, Al-Jazeera English, and CCTV9 attract audiences so small that the current measuring techniques are too crude to record them accurately. The best that we can say is that each of them gets less than a 0.1% audience share. In the print media, the focus on political coverage automatically excludes the vast majority of the thousands of magazines concerned with business and consumer issues. What is more, whereas most newspapers can be illuminated very well from this perspective, even here the fit is far from perfect. Of the 10 national UK daily titles, only the *Financial Times* devotes more space to politics than to sport. The other nine give far more prominence to football (soccer) than to parliament, and the more popular the title, the greater the disproportion. A similar picture would emerge from a comprehensive account of any other media system, even the highly politicized Chinese media system. Considering only media and politics is fine, if one's focus is on a broad notion of political communication, but it simply won't do for the comparison of systems.

This essay, therefore, while naturally concerned with the relations between politics and the media, will argue, first, for a much broader approach to the societies under consideration and then for a more conflict-centered view both of those societies and of their mass media.

What Happens After Communism?

China today is so different from Russia or Poland that it might seem foolish to attempt to make any systemic comparison, but there is a case for making such a move. One powerful reason is that, despite different historical trajectories, they once shared a large number of common features, and they also share a surprising amount of their more recent history. All were command economies in which the bulk of large-scale industry was held by the state, which controlled foreign trade and foreign exchange. Investment was directed toward industrialization, and, in particular, toward heavy industry and weapons production. As a consequence, consumption goods were in chronic short supply and often of inferior quality. Politically, a single party monopolized power. In principal, it was "totalitarian" in that it sought to be the sole controller of all aspects of social life — education, media, state apparatus, voluntary organizations, and so on — although, in practice, it was sometimes forced to tolerate alternative centers of influence, notably the Roman Catholic Church in Poland. Opposition was always strongly discouraged and often brutally repressed, particularly when it took an organized political form.

In the course of the 1980s, these societies, which, for many years, had experienced considerable economic success, at least in their own terms, faced economic stagnation and an increasingly discontented citizenry. Although mass working-class opposition was only really present in Poland, that example entered into the calculations of the various regimes and of their opponents. In the face of these pressures, a significant section of the bureaucracy began to advocate far-reaching reform of the system. This was particularly evident in the Soviet Union, Poland, and Hungary in Europe and also in China. The reformist impulse was met with resistance from conservative party members determined to maintain a monopoly of power. The struggle that developed, for example, between the followers of Yelstin and those of Ligachev, quickly spilled over into the media, which ceased to be the monotonous voice of a monolithic party and began to investigate all sorts of previously forbidden topics and say all sorts of previously forbidden things. A third element, unevenly present in different countries, was the existence of more or less conscious oppositional currents. Poland and Hungary were the clearest examples of this: Both had long histories of popular opposition, insurrectionary in character in Hungary in 1956 and near insurrectionary in Poland in 1981. In those countries without such established traditions, a similar development occurred very quickly indeed — for example, in China in the spring of 1989.

What happened in the communist countries in the period between 1989 and 1991 was thus a complex series of negotiations about the future direction of society, sometimes between groups of functionaries and sometimes also involving opposition from outside the party. These splits meant that, for the first time, there was a certain amount of space for public criticism of the regime, in the media as elsewhere. The limited and controlled freedom of Gorbachev's "glasnost" was replaced by a situation that many of the journalists involved look back upon as a golden age. They were free of the iron hand of the

party, could report what they liked, and were not yet subordinated to the demands of proprietors and advertisers for particular kinds of coverage to deliver particular kinds of audiences.

The outcomes of these negotiations varied widely. In the European examples, the reform communists were able to defeat the conservatives and reach agreements with the opposition about ending the one-party system and abandoning the command economy. These agreements were reached with various degrees of physical force. Quite considerable violence occurred in Romania and the Soviet Union, whereas negotiation and election characterized the events in Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. The immediate outcomes were various. In some cases, the communist rulers were forced to accept opposition victories in elections they had tried to stage-manage. In others, a more or less reformist wing of the bureaucracy managed to present itself as a new force, often legitimating itself through the crudest forms of nationalism.

China constitutes the opposite case. There, the hardliners won the internal party struggle, imprisoned the most prominent reformers and used force to crush the opposition. It is in 1989 when the trajectories between China and Eastern Europe most obviously and visibly diverge. After 1989, no unreconstructed Communist Party held power in the new nations emerging from the former Soviet Union or in Eastern Europe. In China, the Communist Party remains as much as ever in effective control of the country. This obvious difference is assumed by many observers to mean that the paths pursued were fundamentally different ones, but a closer examination will reveal some surprising similarities, particularly in the media.

We might broadly sketch some of the key changes that have taken place in the former communist countries in the following way:

1. There was, everywhere, a rapid political change from communist rule to other forms. It is reasonable to call these changes *political revolutions*, as they involved sudden and fundamental changes to the political order. Even when reformed versions of the Communist Parties won elections and formed enduring governments, they did not make any attempt to re-establish the old order.
2. There has been a high degree of institutional continuity — in the education system, in the state apparatus, and, not least, in the media. The old state broadcasters have nowhere been sold off, and many of the communist-era newspapers continue to dominate the press market. These organizations have adapted to the exigencies of the market very rapidly, usually with some success. They seldom receive direct subsidies today and survive on the familiar staples of advertising revenues and subscription income.
3. There has been a high degree of personal continuity. Relatively few of the old *nomenklatura* have suffered under the new regimes. Elite renewal has been more marked in the political sphere than in the economic and social spheres, including media, but overall the new elites are direct successors of the old elites. Very often, the new elite

can trace its origins back to the relatively junior members of the old *nomenklatura*, which leads to the Russian expression of *Komsomol Capitalism*. Others, if not former party cadres, are relatives or associates of the old rulers.

4. The process of privatization has been accompanied by large-scale theft of state property, insider dealing, corruption, and political favoritism. This is nowhere more marked than in the mass media, where, very often, newspapers were seized by their staff, and the award of broadcasting franchises depended on political connections.
5. The emerging economic order, although clearly market oriented, is characterized by endemic corruption and continuing political intervention. Again, this is very obvious in the mass media, with governments favoring media aligned with them and intervening in the state broadcaster to replace senior posts to suit their tactical convenience. Journalistic professionalism remains a dead letter in most of the media.
6. There is no uniform political outcome. Some of the successor states, for example, the EU accession states, are (barely) recognizable versions of the Western European model of democracy. Some, for example, Russia, have been through rather chaotic and sketchy democratic periods, but today are subject to a much more authoritarian regime. Elsewhere, in the Central Asian Republics, for example, there has been a move from communist dictatorship to personal dictatorship, usually under the same individual, as in the case of Nursultan Nazarbayev. Again, the formal structures of the mass media reflect these outcomes rather well. In the accession states, the legal situation corresponds to the norms of the EU — conforming to the *acquis communautaire* was a condition of membership — in terms of public, rather than state broadcasting. In Russia and elsewhere, the state has re-exerted control over broadcasting, and ownership of other media outlets depends on political favor. In the Central Asian Republics, the majority of the media are more or less directly the expression of the will of the government, or of the relatives of the president.

There are important qualifications that could be added to each of these general points, and they do not apply to the exceptional case of the former East Germany, which has effectively been wholly absorbed into what was West Germany, most notably with regard to its media system. There is, however, enough in common between these different examples to invite a point-by-point comparison with China.

1. There has been no change in the political structure in China. The Communist Party is still in power, still in rude health, still able to recruit the young and the talented, and still ideologically hegemonic, particularly over the middle class. (China, incidentally, provides a conclusive refutation of the frequently repeated assertion that the middle class is the natural bearer of democracy.) This constitutes an indisputable difference between China and the cases considered above.

2. There is a high degree of institutional continuity. CCTV and other established broadcasters continue to dominate the television industry and have successfully adapted to a world in which their main income is from advertising, rather than governmental subsidy. In the press, the appeal of the traditional party press may well have declined dramatically, but the press groups of which they are part have diversified and established titles that are much more market oriented. This same continuity of group ownership is evident in the wholly new magazine titles, to which I will return.
3. There is high degree of personal continuity. This is true on the grand scale. Not only are capitalists warmly welcome in the Communist Party but many of the new entrepreneurs are, in fact, the old bureaucrats, or the relatives and connections of the old bureaucrats, armed today with BMWs, Armani suits, and mobile phones, but still running the same organizations in which they were once the ill-dressed, bicycle-riding, party secretary or manager. It also seems to be the case, at least on the basis of anecdotal information, that relatives and connections are central to the staffing policies of the mass media, and that new entrants to the ranks of journalists and broadcasters are disproportionately dependent upon personal networks of power.
4. We can repeat the opening section of this point more or less unchanged: "The process of privatization has been accompanied by large-scale theft of state property, insider dealing, corruption, and political favoritism." So far, however, this move toward a market economy has not directly affected the editorial functions of the mass media. The precise ownership of the Chinese media is a matter of some mystery, but the most reliable source gives the party as the real proprietor. The Chinese solution in the media, endlessly discussed by scholars, is, of course, the combination of continuing political control with strong market orientation.
5. We can repeat the opening sentence for this point, too: "The emerging economic order, although clearly market oriented, is characterized by endemic corruption and continuing political intervention." This obviously extends to the mass media. Political intervention is quite open and above board, in the shape of the work of the various propaganda departments. Endemic corruption is present at the levels both of individual journalists and of the editorial judgments of news organizations.
6. The political outcome is the continuation of Communist Party rule. True, this is challenged by widespread discontent amongst workers and peasants, often spilling over into savage anti-authority riots. There is also growing discontent amongst at least some of the ethnic minorities in China, which, in Tibet and Xinjiang, takes explosive and violent forms. There is also the more mysterious (to me, at least) and subdued opposition of the Falun Gong and other attempts at establishing independent oppositional foci of a more familiar kind (to me, at least) like oppositional political parties.

Reviewing this evidence, the striking fact that presents itself is the degree of similarity between the cases. True, there is an immense and fundamental difference in the continued rule of the Communist Party in China, but perhaps this can best be seen as one point on a spectrum that runs from complete absorption into the norms of Western democracy (the former East Germany) through a range of increasingly authoritarian regimes, up to the continuation of communist rule in China, and perhaps as far as good old-fashioned totalitarianism in North Korea. Such an interpretation seems to me to make much better sense of the available evidence than do the ideas of those political scientists who have developed the concept of *transitology* as a more sophisticated and scholarly version of the end of history. This evidence points quite decisively away from the twin teleologies of marketization and democratization. There are examples of both, but there are examples of quite other outcomes too, and the claim of their inevitable triumph cannot be sustained.

A better candidate for the role of underlying process is surely that these different outcomes represent different political solutions to a common economic and sociological phenomenon. An established elite, which, for half a century, ruled through the collective mechanisms of a fused party and state wedded to autarchic economic development, is, today, seeking to transform itself into something much closer to a traditional private capitalist class and to integrate itself more closely into the world capitalist market. At the same time, to a greater or less degree, it is attempting to negotiate with, accommodate, and integrate new elements, without altering its basic social nature. Sometimes this takes the form of democratization, and sometimes it takes the form of a continuing dictatorship of one kind or another. But in whatever form the new politics emerges, the ruling group in the current order is made up essentially of the same people (or the close allies of the same people) who made up the ruling group in the old order, and most of the time they are ruling through the same institutions.

Understanding Chinese Media

For some years in the 1990s, much of the most interesting research on Chinese media revolved around the issue of the supposed contradiction between market and state control. In a nutshell, the argument ran that the needs of the media to build and retain a mass audience would inevitably conflict with the demands of the party for detailed control of media output. In this, it would be one of the flashpoints in a more general conflict in which the increasing marketization of Chinese society would lead to the downfall of the CCP regime. This approach, consciously or unconsciously, echoed the highly ideological suppositions of the transitological model, and it suffers from a special case of the same limitations as those analyzed previously. Put formally, the assumption of this model is that the size of the audience, and thus subscription revenue, is the key variable in producing economic pressure. This ignores the fact that, in China as elsewhere, the key economic variable is advertising revenue. As there are clearly close connections between party propaganda committee, local entrepreneurs, and the advertising and editorial departments of media, the opposition between market and politics is mediated through this nexus, rather than being expressed directly in audience numbers. A further limitation of this approach is that, while the market orientation of Chinese journalism continues, and indeed grows, there has been, over the last few years, an increasing pressure toward political conformity, without generating the sort of major confrontation that the theory would predict. The recent fate of Hu Shuli is simply one famous case

of a general trend. Although this approach may still linger in some quarters, because it chimes so well with the dominant ideological framework in many Western countries, most contemporary work takes different, and often more nuanced, approaches. We can identify a number of different currents in the recent literature:

1. The direct successor of the market-state problematic is the concern with the status of journalists, and particularly, investigative journalists. It falls well within the scope of comparative research, as discussed by Hallin and Mancini, although I do not know of many publications that have tried systematically to develop and apply their insights to the Chinese case. We could, however, argue that the broader theoretical framework, within which one prominent current of research operates, fits very well with Hallin and Mancini. As there has not, in China, been a decisive political rupture that has recast the systemic relations of media and society, one could argue that the evident changes to the media (shift from politics to market, formation of media groups, sharp competition between outlets, cross-subsidy of party publications, and so on) constitute a process of functional adaptation to the changing social conditions. Within this framework, we might place the influential studies by Lee, He, and Huang of "Party Publicity Inc," with their stress upon the ways in which media institutions have managed to accommodate the various pressures generated by social and economic change and to recast themselves as instruments of social control. This view is contested by those who argue that, although there is no systemic conflict between media and state, it is, nevertheless, the case that journalists do attempt to pursue non-propaganda and non-commercial objectives. While some media organizations lend a greater degree of institutional support to these efforts, everywhere there is a constant, low-level guerrilla war as journalists attempt to cover sensitive issues and say sensitive things. The outcomes, far from representing an accommodation to the existing order, are best understood as the negotiated outcomes of conflicts between different social groups. The underlying theoretical model of this approach is radically different from the structural-functionalist derivative in that it is not based on the conception of social institutions having unproblematic integrative functions that allow for the stable reproduction of the social order, but rather that it sees these institutions as the sites of conflicts between different social interests pursuing different strategies with regard to social organization. The issue here is very far from being resolved and is likely to constitute a continuing research frontier in studies of Chinese journalism, particularly since the object of study shifts its contours more or less continuously. Steps toward a resolution would require the clarification of a number of theoretical and methodological issues. At the level of theory, it is inevitably the case that one would need to revisit the tired old concept of "professionalism." Accounts differ as to whether Chinese journalists are adopting the same kind of professional norms as are characteristic of (some) Western journalists, or whether what is revealed by inquiries into their behavior is something derived from specific Chinese factors. If we can demonstrate that the former is the case, then the argument for functional differentiation would be on firmer ground. If it is the latter, then we would need to reconsider our common-sense notions of (Western) journalism's universal applicability to understand it

as a special case of a more general social phenomenon. At the methodological level, the issue at stake is what kinds of research tools, applied to what kind of research subjects, are appropriate to provide answers to our questions? Very crudely, the accommodationist strand of research has tended to rely upon interviews with senior journalists, whereas the negotiationist approach has tended to rely upon participant observation and interviews with junior journalists. Both these theoretical and methodological issues are obviously very closely related to the underlying debate. To that extent, perhaps, there can never be a satisfactory resolution, although one possible way forward — but perhaps one that prejudges the theoretical debate in a conflictual direction — is to understand Chinese journalism as, to borrow Bourdieu's terms, an heteronomous field articulated with both the political and economic fields in a variety of conflicting ways (Bourdieu, 1998). Following the theoretical points we have made, the supposition would be that we would find wide divergences both within and between media organizations.

2. Such a conception would lead us toward a much more complex view of the dependencies of Chinese media. The classical totalitarian model, as much as the transitological model, which clearly owes much to its predecessor, tended to operate with a unitary notion of power. They correctly recognized the fused nature of power in communist societies, but incorrectly extrapolated from that a belief that there was a single source of power pressing upon other institutions in society. On the contrary, even the most totalitarian of societies faces problems, for example, resource allocation, that produce conflicts not only between the nomenklatura and the mass of the population but also within the nomenklatura. Classically, these internal conflicts were resolved by a purge; the Soviet Union in Stalin's time is, of course, the most notorious example, but there are also accounts of the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath that argue the same case. Such bloody outcomes, however, are not the only ways in which conflicts within a communist elite can be resolved. The existence of internal conflicts within the contemporary CCP is a well-observed phenomenon, for example, in economic development or environmental protection, where central directives are frequently either ignored or subverted by the local authorities. In the case of recent studies of Chinese media, the top-down version of conflict resolution has been well explored. It is clearly the case that higher party bodies, wishing to re-exert central control over lower level bodies, have allowed, or encouraged, "their" media to expose the corruption or criminality rampant at lower levels. There is a second, horizontal dimension to this, where a media organization responsible to a given administrative level exposes problems at the same administrative level, but in another administrative unit. Provincial-level media exposure of corruption in other provinces is a well-known example. Taken together, these realities suggest that, while power in China is unquestionably monopolized by the Communist Party, that party itself is not a monolith. On the contrary, the power structure in China is fractured along a number of lines, most obviously geographical, and because of the tiered system of media responsibility these fractures are reproduced to a greater or lesser degree within the press and broadcasting. Developing our knowledge of how and why these relations of

- dependency operate would go some way toward resolving the geographical dimension of the issue of journalistic autonomy that we considered. It is one thing to observe that the media in Shenzhen or Shanghai are notoriously timid or conformist in their content, whereas Guangzhou enjoys the most liberal of media climates, and it is quite another to explain it. So far as I am aware, that latter task has never been satisfactorily concluded. The issue, however, is not only the extent to which these bureaucratic fissures open or close the space for journalism, they also are observable in terms of the economic and regulatory framework within which media operate. The virulent hostility Shanghai Media Group employees frequently display toward China Central Television (CCTV), for example, does not appear to be based on any political differences but on the sense that their commercial and journalistic ambitions are hindered by the privileges granted to the central media. Similarly, the competitive situation of broadcasters in the Pearl River Delta can only be understood in terms of the differing strategies of local and national sectors of the bureaucracy.
3. Studies of the Chinese media have tended to prioritize political issues defined in a fairly traditional way. This is true of the relative degree of attention paid to journalistic, as opposed to other, forms of media output, of the way in which the extraordinary complexity of online life in China has been treated and on the ways in which even entertainment programming is treated. Discussions of *Super Girl*, for example, frequently emphasize its "democratic" aspect rather than identifying the reasons for its success as entertainment. We saw that, while this is an important dimension in studying media systems, it does not constitute an adequate basis for comparing media systems. This emphasis on the political dimension of Chinese media is present for good and understandable reasons, but the limitations that such an approach imposes upon our understanding is, every day, more obvious. Alongside news and current affairs, TV broadcasts an enormous amount of popular entertainment programming. As well as hard-hitting investigations in *Caijing*, there are also extremely successful lifestyle magazines discussing fashion and decor, not to mention acres of features about various aspects of consumption in newspapers that also carry the traditional news diet. There are, today, some attempts to study these phenomena, although even they tend to suffer from a desire to politicize material in a remarkably narrow way. Of course, images of femininity in the Chinese version of *Cosmopolitan* or in *Super Girl* pose political questions in a broad sense, but they are, first and foremost, cultural phenomena that need to be understood in their own terms. The absence of much serious work on these issues is particularly damaging in the Chinese case, as one of the most striking achievements of 30 years of economic reform has been the emergence of huge income inequalities and, as a consequence, the construction of a substantial middle class that has a prodigious appetite for luxury consumption. Estimates of the size of this group differ and depend partly on one's definition of "middle class," but there is general agreement that such a group exists and that its cultural life, or at least the cultural life of its younger generation, is significantly different to the patterns that prevailed 20 years ago. To place this group in the center of analysis is perhaps to stray from media

- and communication into cultural studies, but there is certainly a media dimension to the ways in which the middle class has learnt to consume and has constructed its various identities around different forms of consumption. Understanding the genesis, history, and contemporary role that the media, primarily the magazines, have played in the formation of this new middle class seems to me a major intellectual project. It involves issues of identity formation, cultural globalization and differential modernity, economic relations between national and foreign media companies, general questions of social change, and so on. Certainly, there is a political dimension to all of this, but the narrow definition of the "political" that has dominated Chinese media studies for many years is not really the appropriate starting point for this study.
4. A similar overpoliticization dominates debates about the role of the Internet in Chinese society. It is certainly true that the Internet provides a source and an outlet for many ideas and issues that would otherwise remain unspoken in the official media. It is true as well that it is often a source of information that the bureaucracy would prefer to keep quiet. It is clearly the case, at least according to the negotiationist strand of journalistic research, that the more independently minded journalists use the Internet as a valuable tool both in sourcing and in publishing stories that would otherwise be difficult to develop. Certainly, also, there are lively debates online that would not otherwise find any form of public expression. On the other hand, the Web is also the site of an enormous amount of diverse activity of a non-political nature that hardly ever makes its way into the (Western) academic literature. Every bit as much as in the West, you can find everything on the Web in China, and the contribution of that material to the texture of contemporary life is certainly worth more investigation than it has recently received. Given the social nature of the majority of Internet users in China, the non-political content of the Internet is another factor in the process of individual and collective identity formation for the newly constituted middle class.
 5. Closely related to the need to investigate the role of sectors of the media in the formation of the middle class is the need to begin to understand the role of the audience in China. So far as I know, there is relatively little current research that goes very far beyond the simplest sorts of counting of numbers and opinions. What is not yet very well developed is any real understanding of the kinds of sense that Chinese people make of their media consumption, or to put it in other language, what are the uses to which they put the media and what gratifications do they derive from that usage? What research I have seen, and it is very limited in scope, suggests that at least part of the Chinese audience has an extremely sophisticated stance toward media content, including critical and exposure content. What reading a popular newspaper, or watching the main CCTV news bulletin, actually means to people remains very seriously underexplored, but it is clearly an essential element both in the broad analysis of cultural life in contemporary China and in the narrower task of understanding the extent to which there is anything that might be called a *public sphere*. In fact, this latter task might be more closely linked to general cultural questions than is usually assumed. The concept of the

public sphere, at least in its current international usage, is more or less explicitly derived from the theory of the Enlightenment (and very much less from its practice). In that framework, reason and law take a central space, and the complex of emotion, passion, and feeling are relegated to the private realm (and heavily feminized). Whether this strongly European concept of the nature of public life is of universal significance is certainly open to question. It may be that serious inquiry would demonstrate that the public sphere has different constituents and dynamics in the Chinese case. It is certainly not the case that we are obliged to categorize all examples of public discussion as imitations of a European or American social reality here, any more than it is necessary in trying to understand the meaning of journalistic professionalism.

6. The emergence of China as a significant economic factor in the world economy and its membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO) also has a cultural and media dimension. The dominant trend in studies of the problems arising from these factors up until now has been on China's reaction to the foreign media. This has involved studies of Western media corporations attempting (pretty unsuccessfully) to enter the Chinese market and work on the notorious problems of intellectual property and copyright as applied to media, notably to the theft of formats in entertainment television and video piracy of completed films and programs. Within this, and closely related to theoretical arguments about different kinds of modernity, have been studies of the rationale for the influence of Japanese and Korean artifacts in Chinese popular culture. What has been much less well studied is the increasing international projection of China's symbolic influence (its "soft power," to use the inevitable formulation). Here, the cultural dimension, notably in the case of the film industry, has been relatively well studied, but the issue is broader than simply cinema production. A number of Chinese media groups (Hunan and Shanghai, for example) have ambitions not only to import programs and formats but also to export their own productions. This strategy is not only forcing them to reconsider their attitude to intellectual property issues but also to attempt to understand which elements of Chinese culture might give them a comparative advantage in the world market. A parallel question is posed by the efforts to produce institutions that can project China's view of the world internationally. Put crudely, there is a lot of mileage in answering the question: Why can a tiny feudal despotism produce a news channel that shakes the world while China has only CCTV9? The issue, however, is much broader and longer term than this. Historically, it is pretty clear that symbolic influence follows economic (and military) influence. The world plays football (soccer) because, when mass sport was being codified and internationalized, the UK was the world's strongest economic and military power. The world watches Hollywood movies because, when the cinema and TV were becoming dominant cultural forms, the U.S. was the world's strongest economic and military power. If China continues to grow, then we can say with some confidence that aspects of Chinese culture will become increasingly the common currency of global popular culture.

7. All of these elements are necessary for an understanding of contemporary Chinese media, but underlying them is the central question of political economy. Despite the strong elements of marketization that are present, it is quite clear that there are very distinctive features of that market. The division of editorial and business activities, and the continued hold of political factors on the former are comparatively well understood, but the implications of the very tentative steps toward a marketization of editorial functions are still unexplored. If ever there is to be any truth in the claim that the market and political control are incompatible, then the floating of editorial functions on the stock market must surely be a powerful catalyst toward their conflict. More generally, analyses of media behavior that seek to interpret it in terms of rent seeking, while extremely problematic from a theoretical point of view, do serve to provide an economic account of the relations between media and political power that is independent of a particular ownership form. In a broader perspective, many of the current research topics reviewed here are based upon the supposition that the Chinese state can continue to exercise effective control over its symbolic environment. The extent to which it can combine this with increasing integration into the world market is open to question. It is nowhere near as obvious, as is often claimed, that relaxation of ownership rules and, thus, foreign penetration follows inevitably from such a process. The U.S. for example, continues to exclude non-nationals from majority holdings in broadcasting stations, and there seems no reason why China should not enjoy the same sort of latitude. On the other hand, China has a long history of bargaining access to foreign markets for access to the domestic market, and while this is unlikely, in the short term, to effect any dramatic transformation of the media landscape, it might, in the end, provide an opportunity for international media companies to gain a significant foothold in the Chinese market. Here, we might note that, in the former communist countries, it tends to be middle-sized media groups, rather than the giant global corporations, that have had the agility and initiative to successfully enter these new markets.

Conclusions

In this essay, I have tried to show how an understanding of the process of media change that went on in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989 can provide a point of entry for a better understanding of what is happening today in the Chinese mass media. The political transformations that took place in Central and Eastern Europe were enormously important events, and that a similar transformation was strangled at birth in China means that the articulations between power and the media are different in the two cases, and this difference explains the central importance of the work on news and current affairs and on journalists that is so relatively well developed in the case of China. On the other hand, there are also important social continuities present in both cases, and one of these is the way in which the ruling elite of the communist past has transformed itself into the ruling elite of the capitalist present, or the present "Socialism with Chinese characteristics." Part of that recomposition, and a part for which the media is extremely important, is a cultural transformation "from Pravda to Prada." Understanding how that cultural change has been effected in China is a central element in understanding how the CCP has managed to

retain its hold on China. We know that workers and peasants are often highly discontented, in some instances to the point of riot and murder, but it seems that the middle class, in their majority, are prepared at least to accept the current political settlement, except when someone wants to build a chemical plant in their backyard, perhaps. In the European cases, the road to consumerism was seen as running over the resistance of the cadres. In China, the cadres have encouraged the consumers, and the road to luxury is signposted and protected by the CCP. Any convincing study of the mass media in contemporary China must give as much weight to that cultural reconstruction as to the narrow question of political control.



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