



The Study of Chinese Communication in the 2010s

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Fifteen years ago, I completed the research for a book that was eventually published under the title *After the Propaganda State: Media, Politics, and 'Thought Work' in Reformed China* (Lynch, 1999). The USC Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism's December 2009 workshop on Chinese communication provided me with an opportunity to reflect on how research in this field has changed in the past decade, and on what should constitute the agenda for research in the 2010s.

The origins of *After the Propaganda State (APS)* can be traced to the early 1990s, when I was a PhD student in the University of Michigan, Department of Political Science. This is significant when trying to answer the question of how I, or someone else, might approach writing such a book differently today, because the early 1990s unfolded in the shadow of the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, which ended six weeks of nationwide demonstrations for democracy. At the deepest level, what motivated *APS* was a desire to get a handle on China's developmental trajectory after that searing series of events. Like many graduate students at the time, I was struggling to understand where China was headed. I reasoned that if communication is *the* core social process in any country, researching how patterns of communication were changing in China might be a reasonable way to get at the overall trajectory. This same logic should, I think, hold in the 2010s, even though the particulars have changed substantially.

The early 1990s were also much closer in time to the Cultural Revolution. The differences between China in 1992 and 1972 seemed enormous — certainly much greater than the differences between 1990 and 2010 seem today. Nowhere were the contrasts more striking than in communication patterns, owing to the extraordinary emphasis Mao Zedong gave to propaganda and thought work when he ruled China (1949–1976). Deng Xiaoping's reforms prompted the key question driving my project: What was the fate of Maoist thought work under reform and opening? Could thought work's fate serve as the key to comprehending China's general trajectory? Would changing thought work patterns eventually cause political and other social changes in some logical way, or would they simply reflect them?

From the start, I was deeply skeptical of attempts to apply the civil society/public sphere framework to contemporary China, as many people were then doing (successfully) to illuminate political change in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and other places undergoing democratization. Efforts in the early 1990s to find civil society and a public sphere in China seemed to be more fruitful when examining late Qing and Republican China than when studying the PRC. Nevertheless, it was startling just how many people began arguing merely three or four years after Tiananmen that China was inevitably headed for democratization, *à la* the Soviet Union and Taiwan. This would come with economic development,

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integration into global society, Chinese people travelling more, etc. Everything that I had learned in my courses on Chinese history and contemporary politics, economy, society, and culture suggested that it was extremely unlikely we would see democratization in the country anytime soon — and certainly not within a decade. And yet, influenced by Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History* (1992) and the general tenor of the times, some prominent Sinologists were arguing the opposite. This deepened my desire to use research into "what has happening to thought work" as a means to penetrate the mysteries of China's trajectory.

At this point, I was very lucky to have read Joel Migdal's *Strong Societies and Weak States* (1988) and Vivienne Shue's *The Reach of the State* (1990). Through Migdal and Shue, I was introduced to a sophisticated literature on state-society relations that moved beyond the inherently liberal and sometimes tendentious state-civil society writing. I quickly came to realize that it was possible the Chinese party-state could lose significant control over thought work, but only to other forces in society, not necessarily to *civil* society. Similarly, propaganda and thought work could fade in importance without necessarily being replaced by a well-functioning liberal public sphere. Nor, I concluded, would the point at which Chinese communication patterns had arrived in the early 1990s necessarily be just a rest station on the road to an inevitably liberal-democratic future. It could be that China had changed profoundly — and still was changing — but not in ways easily captured by existing social science models.

I therefore set up the *APS* project as a kind of "test" of the liberal-democratic model of sociopolitical change. Did we see the Chinese communication system changing in the ways one would expect if liberalism was taking root and the country had embarked upon inevitable democratization? The core finding was that "no," we did not. And yet, at the same time, it was obvious that the party-state was losing a significant degree of control and influence over thought work. The liberal model failed, but so did the rejuvenated authoritarianism model. China seemed to be moving in multiple different directions at once, with no clearly discernible pattern. The result was what I called a "praetorian public sphere," derived from political scientist Samuel Huntington's (1968) term for a society roiled by extensive and intensive political participation that isn't channeled effectively through institutions. Writing in the late 1960s, Huntington expected the typical outcome of such a situation to be a military takeover. I wondered whether some sort of reassertion of absolute authoritarian dominance would also be the outcome in China, but I had to conclude, in a chapter on "The Struggle to Reassert Control," that the challenges facing the state were too daunting. China was simply stuck in praetorianism, and there was no metaphor or analogy we could use to help map the trajectory.

When people asked me in the mid-2000s what, in retrospect, I liked and disliked about *After the Propaganda State*, I would always say that the main thing I disliked was that the book presented only a negative model of Chinese communication: not liberal and not authoritarian, but just praetorian. Since praetorian meant, in effect, chaos, I thought this could be considered an abdication of the responsibility to find patterns.

Today, though, I feel quite the opposite: I am pleased that I eschewed the temptation to try to impose order where no order was discernible. I am glad that I was willing to leave things hanging, even though I knew at the time that simply undermining the liberal model of development as applied to China

could leave the book vulnerable to criticism. ("Okay, so you can tell us where China *isn't* going, but why can't you tell us where it IS going?"). Reality is messy. It is simply a fact that China's multiple, conflicting trends — then and now — create a mosaic so complex that it would be foolhardy to claim a firm, confident sense of where things are heading. Making a bold prediction, or even a high-probability forecast, would have been irresponsible. I believe this holds just as true in the 2010s as in the 1990s. Hubris must always be checked at the door when studying China.

Trying to force-fit social science models would have also implied that there is a fixed universe of general possibilities, one of which must describe China, either now or in the near future. Many in the social sciences believe deeply in the importance of searching for these general laws. But what if China is not simply one case in a universe of all possible cases? What if it is distinctively China? Even if there *is* a universe of all possible cases — literally extending throughout the universe — why is there any reason to expect that even two of the 200 nation-states on Earth would be substantively alike? Looking at other countries can be very useful for suggesting what to look for in China, and for providing insights, but not if the assumption is that China will be substantively similar to these other cases at a deep level. Students of Chinese communication in the decade ahead should be content with China being unique. We should accept that the logic of China's trajectory is both complex and open-ended — subject to contingent events and human caprice — and for that reason, it is not easily captured using off-the-shelf models.

In some ways, the main findings of *APS* seem to be holding up fairly well 15 years after the project was first conceived — particularly the primary argument, which is that the party-state is losing substantial control over much of communication, but not to the forces of liberalism. In particular, the book outlined three dimensions to the breakdown seen to that point in the party-state's control: commercialization, globalization, and pluralization. All three were specifically contrasted to the late Mao and early Deng periods. The section on commercialization referred to the increasing tendency of media unit managers and staff to respond to market signals when designing content, even when that meant ignoring the exhortations of propaganda *xitong* party officials. The section on globalization discussed the Chinese people's increasing access to communication messages (including complex messages, such as television programs and films) originating abroad. The section on pluralization denoted the multiplication in points of origin of communication messages circulating within China, and in particular, the radical decentering of message origination relative to the recent past. In developing the pluralization concept, I did something that was then novel in the context of studies of Chinese communication: I analyzed telecommunication alongside mass media. My fieldwork in 1995 overlapped with the arrival of the Internet (World Wide Web manifestation) in China, and many of the people I spoke with about it were abuzz with the possible implications. But even before then, I realized that, from a theoretical point of view, it made little sense to address the mass media's functioning without reference to telecommunication. The two were clearly intertwined. Today, they are intertwined even more organically.

Commercialization, globalization, and pluralization all overlapped. The categories were never meant to be mutually exclusive. They were also all jointly "caused" by three "independent variables" that I developed in response to the demands of the Political Science discipline to take a rigorously positivist approach to conceptualization. The three independent variables were administrative fragmentation, property-rights reform, and technological advancement. Administrative fragmentation referred to the

primary and secondary consequences of moves made by China's leaders in the late 1970s and early 1980s to loosen tight centralized policy-making control in a number of areas, moves made so that provincial and local governments would be freer to experiment economically and sociopolitically, searching for models that could break the backwardness locked in under Mao. Property-rights reform was related. It indicated the decision leaders took in the early 1980s to make state-owned enterprises and other work units — including some providing public goods — “responsible for their own profits and losses,” which, in practice, meant “allowed to consume many of the profits they generated without having to worry about going bankrupt.” Technological advancement denoted the rapid proliferation of all manner of new communication technologies throughout China, starting in the 1980s, including satellite dishes, cable television, facsimile transmission, cellular telephones, and eventually, the Internet.

I portrayed each of these as being analytically distinct — each exerting its own impact — and yet also mutually intertwined. For example, administrative fragmentation meant that, in cities, district officials could make money by establishing a cable TV network that used the new satellite technology for the purpose of stealing signals from STAR-TV and legitimately (sometimes) downloading them from China's own providers. The districts would then relay the TV images to subscribers for healthy fees. I found analogous sorts of micro-level behavior in all the media: television, radio, film, periodical and book publishing, and telecommunication. By trying to examine literally all of them — in three different locales (Beijing, Guangzhou, and Kunming) — I satisfied myself that the “model” I had drawn up describing and explaining the changes was reasonably sound, even if it still lacked the power to map China's political trajectory.

Even to this day, the model seems sound, although the details have changed enormously, and some trends have been amplified almost — but not quite — beyond the point of recognition. Here, though, is where I again feel somewhat dissatisfied when looking back, and where I hope scholars of the 2010s will make redoubled efforts. *APS* demonstrated reasonably well that China had not embarked upon a liberal road of sociopolitical development, as reflected in the changes in thought work. Neither was the party-state going to be able to reassert effective control — certainly not to the degree it had enjoyed before, or that its leaders wished (complaints about media content and lamentations over lost control were ubiquitous at that time in party publications). The immediate “cause” of this outcome was probably, indeed, a combination of administrative fragmentation, property-rights reform, and technological advancement. But what, in turn, caused these developments? What *exactly* convinced Deng and those working under him c. 1980 to embark upon the course of reform they ended up choosing, and how exactly did the resulting state policies interact with difficult-to-map secular trends (or newly-generated developments) in Chinese society and culture to produce the pattern of change I detailed?

Ironically, at the time, I implicitly seemed to be assuming that Chinese society was a kind of constant, and that once the state changed — through altering its policies — society would change, too, albeit not necessarily in the directions intended by the state. In effect, I was presupposing that any formerly near-totalitarian state that implemented Deng-style reforms would get the outcome we finally saw in China by the late-1990s. I did make mention of particular historical events — frequently, in fact. I understood that China was unique. But I failed to ask this key question: “If society and culture were different in this way or that, would the outcome in thought work have been the same?” Only by asking

this daunting question can we begin to imagine what difficult-to-discern dimensions of society and culture — apart from state policies or economic incentives — might be playing a role in the kinds of communication patterns now emerging. Communication may well be *the* core social process, but it can never be abstracted from its complex context without a damaging sacrifice of critical information.

Today, for example, it is clear that, in order to understand evolving Chinese communication patterns and their roles in politics, we must do systematic work on how the communication networks of non-Han ethnic groups — especially Tibetans and Uighurs — intersect and clash with the official networks of the party-state, and with the unofficial, Han-centered networks that service the semi-market economy and convey their own type of political information. Somehow, even in the presence of extraordinary pressure, and despite relative technological backwardness, Tibetans were able, in March 2008, to stage what appeared to be a well-organized uprising. The Xinjiang riots of July 2009 seemed more spontaneous, but they still must have involved intensive underground communication among those who took part. How is it possible that, despite all the surveillance technologies to which the state has access, and despite its willingness to deploy uncompromising violence, the events in Tibet and Xinjiang could occur? Ethnic identity would seem to be one potent factor facilitating some flows of communication while restricting others — and with explosive consequences. It may be analogous to a network switch — and urgently in need of study. What other switches in China turn on some channels of communication while shutting off others? How are these switches constructed and maintained? Such questions as these should be placed on the agenda for Chinese communication studies in the 2010s.

Complexity theory teaches that, sometimes, patterns exist in what appear to be chaotic events, even though they can be extremely difficult (sometimes impossible) to recognize without the benefit of many years or even decades of hindsight, and/or very powerful computers. This could be what will happen in the professional study of Chinese communication. There are many trends at present, but only after some decisive change or consolidation of a new future order will researchers be able to look back and say: “Trend A was important, but Trend B was surprisingly insignificant.” This will happen, and yet, if history is contingent and open-ended, it must be very difficult to specify now which trend is Trend A and which is Trend B. Nevertheless, it is supremely important to try. It is much wiser to try to assess the probable relative importance of conflicting trends in China than to insist upon imposing artificial models — which are constructs that could actively impede recognition of those elements in the present that do genuinely matter.



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