



## Directions for Research on Communication and China: An Introductory and Overview Essay

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In December 2007, while teaching an intensive graduate course at Peking University, I isolated myself in a campus guest room, writing an overdue book chapter contribution entitled “Rethinking Chinese Media Studies: History, Political Economy and Culture” (Zhao, 2009), to *Internationalizing Media Studies* (Thussu, 2009). It had been almost 10 years since I published *Media, Market, and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line* (Zhao, 1998). If this book’s challenge against what Colin Sparks calls, in his piece in this collection, “the twin teleologies of marketization and democratization” was refreshing at the time of its publication, this had more or less become common sense in the field. Indeed, some analysts, even scholars who initially heralded the emancipatory power of the market in the Chinese context, seemed to have taken my insight to the extreme to depict a tightly integrated market authoritarian communication order in China.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, my second book on the same topic, *Communication in China: Political Economy, Power, and Conflict*, was at the last stage of the production process at Rowman & Littlefield. Among other objectives, this newer book challenges a totalizing market authoritarian framework by acknowledging the enduring and contradictory legacies of Chinese socialism, by foregrounding social conflict, and by recovering the terrains of discursive contestation by a multitude of activated Chinese social agents.

I had hoped to complete the promised book chapter in Vancouver before I had to leave for Beijing to deliver the scheduled graduate course in Fall 2007, and to undertake new fieldwork for the next project. However, as usual, I was behind in my writing schedule. I was compelled to slow down, to reflect upon the general intellectual orientations of a research field I had ploughed for more than a decade, before I could embark any new field research. Drawing on my own work, including a compelling story I had to cut from *Communication in China* due to space limits, I proposed five “Rs” — re-root the area in history, re-embed the area in the social terrain, re-define the agency of social change, re-engage with meaning and community, and finally, recover utopian imaginations — as a way of “broadening and deepening Chinese media and communication research in the process of internationalization” (Zhao, 2009, p. 175).

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<sup>1</sup> Lee et al.’s widely cited study of the press conglomeration in Shenzhen (Lee, He, & Huang, 2006) is a case in point.

As I was undertaking this humble intellectual endeavor alone at the small guest room in the cold Beijing winter, I could not have anticipated that, two years later, December 14–16, 2009, a sizable group of scholars would gather to brainstorm the future directions of research relating to communication and China at a splendid conference setting in warm Southern California. The financial support, intellectual commitment, as well as organizational capacities of the Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism at the University of Southern California (USC) had made this gathering, the USC Annenberg Colloquium on China Media & Communication Studies, possible. Underscoring the growing status of, and even philanthropy support for, research in this area, the inaugural Wellen Sham distinguished lecture, an endowed public lecture dedicated to the discussion of issues relating to Chinese media and communication at USC, led off the one-and-a-half-day colloquium.

Thus, along with the growing importance of China in the global political economy and reflecting the centrality of communication in contemporary social life, issues concerning communication and China have assumed growing importance, not only as a matter of scholarly attention, but also in politics, business, everyday media representation, and popular consciousness. The “Google vs. China” saga in early 2010 underscored this point. Underneath the powerful human rights and Internet freedom rhetoric that underpins American official pronouncements and Western media coverage on the one hand, and official and popular Chinese nationalistic assertions on the other, “the geopolitics of the Internet are breaking out into the open” (Schiller & Sandvig, 2010). As we bend our back ploughing in a sprawling field that is simultaneously localizing and globalizing, trying to make sense of rapid and complicated developments such as this one, and as an enlarging number of scholars both inside and outside China join the ranks, it seems to me that it is not a luxury, but an imperative that we stand up and pause, looking back, looking sideways, so that we may better reorient ourselves, refurbish our toolkits, and above all, rekindle our academic imaginations, in the endeavor to move on. The essays in this special section are some of the fruits of such an exercise by some participants of the December 2009 colloquium. The contributors have diverse academic trajectories and are at different stages of their career. Their pieces vary in length — some of us wrote (and cut) to meet the length suggestions for short “thought pieces,” some contributed longer pieces. However, they all share the same objective of reflecting upon our research approaches and analytical frameworks, and of charting out future research directions.

#### **History, Geography, National Comparisons, and Social Divisions**

Looking back, it is perhaps fair to say that analysis of media and communication issues in China in the English scholarly literature started more or less as a subfield of the Cold War-conditioned area study branch known as sinology, with the United States as the core site of knowledge production. As Judy Polumbaum’s opening piece captures it nicely, although the field has come a long way since its Cold War and immediate post-Cold War days, supposedly outmoded views “still cast long shadows.” She can’t be more correct. Just think about the resonance of one of the Cold War era book titles she cited, F. W. Houn’s 1961 *Propaganda and Indoctrination in Communist China*, in a current title: *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China* (Brady, 2008). As the Sino-American relationship emerges as perhaps the most important bilateral relationship in a crisis-laden and increasingly uncertain global order, it is more important than ever to critically reflect upon the Orientalist and Cold War assumptions that have underpinned much of the study of media and communication as a subfield of China

studies. Among other things, this makes Polunin's plea for communication scholars to draw on knowledge and approaches from other disciplinary traditions, and to make "common causes across the disciplines and professions, as well as across the seas," all the more important.

While Polunin frames her contribution explicitly in terms of "looking back, looking forward," a key aspect of Colin Sparks' contribution can perhaps be described as "looking sideways" — that is, to reflect upon China's media in a comparative perspective. Specifically, Sparks offers lessons to be learned from the comparative study of the media in China and in the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the successor states to the Soviet Union. Despite the apparent differences, most markedly the divergent paths of post-1989 development between China and these post-communist countries, Sparks demonstrates striking similarities in the patterns of media development, showing how an understanding of the processes of post-1989 media change in the former Soviet bloc can provide a point of entry for better understanding the Chinese case.

The China case, then, is not so unique, in this view. Since much research about China's media and communication has been pursued as an implicit comparative exercise with Anglo-American media in any case (Zhao, in press [a]), it is perhaps, indeed, high time to make comparative media analysis a more explicit and more systematic endeavor. A comparative historical analysis with the process of media transformation in Russia, in particular, will be extremely valuable and revealing. Perry Anderson's (2010) recent comparative essay about the Russian and Chinese revolutions, in my view, offers a useful general framework for a more media-specific comparison. Natalia Roudakova's (2009) effort to "bring culture back into the state" and her innovative approach of bringing the post-structuralist "anthropology of the state" perspective to bear on the study of the Soviet press may also spark the scholarly imaginations of those working on Chinese state-media relations. One can also easily imagine comparative analysis of media between China and the two other members of the BRIC countries, namely, India, and Brazil. Of course, smaller countries can offer equally revealing cases of comparison. Singapore's market authoritarianism in Asia and Venezuela experimentation with "socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" in South America come to mind.

Yet even the best available comparative approach the current literature has to offer needs to be approached with care and caution when one considers its applicability to countries and regions beyond the sites of its origination (Hallin & Mancini, in press). Sparks, for his part, develops his own comparative framework on the basis of a critique of Hallin and Mancini's (2004) comparative models. Specifically, Sparks argues for a broader conception of media content and role beyond a narrowly-defined concept of political communication and a more conflict-centered view of societies. Still, I would go one step further to argue that, while comparative analysis has much to offer, the very method itself has limitations. For one thing, different countries and their media systems exist in a structural relationship with each other in a world system at particular historical junctures. While it will be illuminating to comparatively analyze different media systems as distinctive and comparable units, it is also important to study them in relational terms. In studying the media in China and its ongoing transformation, for example, one must study not only how the Soviet Leninist model cast a long shadow on its development, but also how, as I have argued in a number of places (Zhao, 2008, in press [a], [b]), the Chinese leadership learned a lesson from the collapse of the Soviet Union, especially what they conceived to be the "failure" of the Soviet political elite in maintaining control of the media and ideological fields.

The importance of studying our subject matter in structural and relational terms within concrete world historical contexts underpins the argument for a critical approach to issues relating to communication and China in my own piece. Although terms such as “Chinese media studies” or “China media studies” sound more elegant, or simply, more “natural,” I consciously avoid these terms and opt for the less elegant and more open “communication and China” as my subject area. In doing so, I want to foreground the communication disciplinary orientation, rather than an area studies orientation. This is not to simply avoid Orientalist and Cold War intellectual constructions about anything China or Chinese in the area study tradition. In fact, I believe communication scholars have much to learn from China studies in other areas. Nevertheless, speaking of “communication and China” provides a more conducive basis for the transcendence of methodological nationalism and for posing structural and relational questions at the national, regional, international, and transnational levels. Such questions may concern the nature of the current global information and communication order in which China is taking an increasingly important role (Schiller, 2007; 2008[a],[b]), the mutually constitutive and transformative U.S.-China communication relationship, or Chinese-Indian, or Chinese-African communication interactions, as well as the structural and relational inequalities between urban and rural China, coastal and inland China, “first world” and “fourth world” China, as well as upper-, middle-, or lower-class China.

As well, I foreground history, or the temporal dimension, as my point of entry and my privileged analytical dimension. This is evident in my concern with the mutually constitutive relationships between communication and China and global capitalism as a world historical social formation, and more specifically, with the current moment of economic crisis. This is also evident in my insistence on the relevance of collective memories and the ancient or recent historical legacies of Chinese nation-state formation. At the same time, I have always been wary of any teleological view of history. I insist on the open-ended nature of history, the importance of historical contingency, the centrality of social struggle and individual agency. It is with this in mind that I call for critical self-reflections on our own biases, commissions, and omissions as researchers, and speak of the potential political implications of the analytical perspectives we use to understand China’s ongoing social struggles.

Time and space, history and geography — these are the fundamental dimensions of human society and human communication. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that I have found Wanning Sun’s piece an indispensable complement to the critical approach I try to advocate. However, if it is more a matter of scholarly intuition or an ingrained assumption based on my own political economy orientation that I find myself prioritizing history in both my initial “Rethinking Chinese Media Studies” piece and my current contribution, Sun’s call for a “geographic turn” and her introduction of “scale” as an analytical concept for future research is explicit and theoretically well-developed. As she points out, this effort to “spatialize problems and theories” in Chinese media represents the articulation of a conceptual framework that allow us to explain a mounting body of accumulated empirical evidence in the field. Indeed, reflecting Polunbaum’s call for the field to draw on knowledge and approaches from other disciplines, this heralds the field’s belated “catch up” with the “geographic turn” in social theory in general. Rather than treating “China” as a monolithic entity, Sun advocates a “break it up” and “tear it apart” approach, because, as she points out, “in the study of social, economic, political and spatial arenas, ‘China’ has already been ‘broken up,’ explored as consisting many regions, provinces, localities, and as comprising a multiplicity of scales.”

Like myself and many others, Sun concerns herself with growing social-spatial inequalities within and beyond Chinese borders, and she foregrounds conflict and contestation, noting how the “Chinese media landscape is now marked by scalar contestation, conflicts and contradiction.”

To paraphrase a point made by Zhongdang Pan in his contribution, as we try to explicate Western-based theoretical constructs in the Chinese context, we also aspire to enrich such theoretical constructs through our China-based research. Thus, Sun develops the spatial perspective explicitly to “renovate” media and cultural studies’ well-known “circuit of culture” formulation, featuring the five processes of representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation. In his contribution, Jack Linchuan Qiu comes close — in my reading, if not in his conscious articulation<sup>2</sup> — to “renovating” the famous and more classical “who-says-what-through-which-channel-with-what-effects” formulation in empirical American communication research with a class perspective. The historical irony and the critical implications of Qiu’s effort, of course, are not to be lost. Mainstream communication research in the United States was developed explicitly as an anti-class and individualistically oriented intellectual enterprise. Similarly, many contents and subjects of Chinese communication research, developed during a reform period when the once-prevailing class discourse is deliberately suppressed, as Qiu observes, “are blatantly anti-class.” Having drawn upon his own empirical work, and inspired by Wright (2009), Qiu, a young scholar who was brought up in reform-era China and trained in the United States (in fact, at USC Annenberg), proposes to bring “class back into Chinese communication studies.” Rather than subscribing to a singular Marxian conception of class, Qiu, however, advocates an integrated and multi-level approach that analyzes class from “all three classic sociological perspectives,” namely, Marxist, Weberian, and mainstream American stratification research. In indentifying and interpreting communication-based class formation processes, Qiu’s perspective reflects well-established observations about the centrality of communication in contemporary global capitalism. His emphasis on the spatial and temporal dimensions of these processes, meanwhile, resonates well with the historical and geographical lenses that I and Sun find important in our respective pieces. While my piece conveys a sense of historical urgency for the development of a critical approach to the field at the current moment of capitalistic crisis, perhaps one can ill-afford to disregard Qiu’s call for attention to “a fundamental re-configuration of class power in the PRC,” resulting from a historical turn in the supply of Chinese labor in 2012. Here, labor power, which lies at the center of the Marxist concept of class, registers as a key analytical dimension.

### **Technology and Society, Culture and Democracy**

Like a number of pieces I have introduced so far, the nature and directions of social change and media transformation in China figure prominently in the remaining four pieces in this collection, whether the subject matter is the broad media and communication field for Zhongdang Pan and Daniel Lynch, or the more specific area of Internet research, as in pieces by Stanley Rosen and Bingchun Meng, respectively. The question of whether China’s media reforms “carry a compass pointing toward a democratic future,” as Pan put it in his contribution, remains a central framing issue, even if the answer is

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<sup>2</sup> Jack Linchuan Qiu read an earlier draft of this essay and offered thoughtful comments, for which I am grateful. He also commented very generously on my interpretation of his piece on this point, “You obviously understand my piece much better than myself.”

now often uncertain, complex, and even negative, as in Pan's own case. That this question remains an overriding concern, and is expressed explicitly in the very title of Rosen's contribution, is testimony to the centrality of democracy as a normative concern in research on communication and China. It also once again underscores the enduring framing power of the "twin teleologies of marketization and democratization," a formulation that now often exists in negative terms — that is, something we write against, even if we wish it otherwise.

Comparable to the piece by Sparks in theoretical ambition and scope, Pan's contribution, which characterizes the changes in China around an appropriated concept of "articulation" from cultural studies, offers a comprehensive agenda for future research. This multifaceted agenda encompasses contextual location, institutional study, representational analysis, and the study of people's everyday practices. Pan outlines three goals for such a research agenda: theory development, social and cultural criticism, and finally, "practical instigation," which means, in his own words, that "our research must address action issues and provide discursive means that could enable alternative actions and alternative voices, especially those voices that are institutionally silenced." At the risk of over-interpretation, I venture to "translate" Pan's third goal as one that comes close to an implicit commitment to a "moral philosophy" and "praxis" — that is, an acknowledgement of the centrality of visions and values in social analysis, and of the unity of theory and practice, two of the defining features of critical political economy (Mosco, 2009). While it is impossible for me to do complete justice to Pan's rich text here, I would like to call attention to many of his insights regarding the development of critical scholarship in this area. These insights range from his recognition that the China case serves as a powerful reminder that "most of the theoretical propositions framed in universalistic terms are abstractions from case studies of non-Chinese others" to his critical reconsideration of the social power relationship underpinning the kind of journalistic improvisation and "arts of resistance" that he had written about in his previous work, and his self-reflexivity on the urban bias of the survey method he recently employed in researching the Internet in Shanghai. In a field that is still under the spell of teleologies and determinisms of various kinds, Pan's call for ethnographic knowledge and the study of everyday life of the people "on the ground" is also especially compelling.

The imperative to engage with "on the ground" knowledge — specifically, knowledge about China's Internet world and the creative and disparate everyday online discourses and subversions, including the phenomenon of "spoofing" or "parody" (*egao*) — is also, among other insights, what Stanley Rosen and Bingchun Meng offer in their respective pieces. The way in which Rosen poses the question in his title appears to not only resonate with the teleology of democratization, but also reminds me of technological determinism and the propensity to isolate one "cause" in the analysis of social change — be it a series of changes in state policy or a new technology. However, in his text, Rosen is careful to locate this question in a more nuanced discussion of the changing dynamics of state-society contestation in China, the sources of political legitimacy for the Chinese state, which is a key issue in my own piece, and the complicated processes of elite and popular "bargaining" and "negotiation" in politics, society, and culture. Furthermore, as Rosen points out, these processes are no longer contained within "China" proper.

Beginning where Rosen ends, Bingchun Meng introduces the sociological conception of "mediation" to challenge any simple technological determinist view of the power and impact of the

Internet in China. Her critique of the limits of the dominant “democratization” approach to Chinese Internet research resonates well with a line of analysis that I have developed elsewhere — that is, my critique of what I described as the “liberal democratization perspective” in discussing the impact of foreign capital and information technology on Chinese politics (Zhao, 2008, pp. 143–148). Meanwhile, Meng’s argument against a narrow understanding of politics, and her insistence on understanding the mediated experiences and culture of average Internet users on their own terms echoes important points made by Sparks in his piece. These include both his caution against overpoliticization and his suggestion for understanding a phenomenon such as *Super Girl* as a cultural issue, specifically, as part of the processes of middle class cultural reconstruction and individual and collective identity formation.

However, this should not lead us to abandon the feminist insight that the personal is political, and to ignore the ascendancy of the neoliberal politics of depoliticization “from East to West” since the late 1960s, an issue that Wang Hui (2006) has discussed. Nor should we lose sight of the intricate connections between the political and the cultural. Indeed, there is “an urgent need to bridge the gap between political and cultural analysis to achieve a fuller picture of media democratization in the context of globalization” (Zhao & Hackett, 2005, p. 26). After all, one of the most profoundly *political* events in recent Chinese history is known as the “*Cultural Revolution*.” At the heart of this, I think, are the necessarily contested and multifaceted meanings of concepts such as “public sphere,” “civil society,” and “democracy.” Here, I am reminded of the following question, posed elsewhere in a discussion of, among other things, the cultural role of media, including entertainment media: “*To what extent is democratization not simply a political process but also a cultural one, involving the media in processes of identity formation much broader than the provision of political information?*” (Zhao & Hackett, 2005, p. 25, emphasis in the original). In explicating my fourth “R” (Zhao, 2009), “reengage with meaning and community,” I drew upon both the work of (media and non-media) sociologists and the lived experiences of the 1989 pro-democracy movement in China to argue that it is necessary to correct the rationalism and cognitivism of most theorizing about “civil society” and the “public sphere.” Rather than mere socio-political categories, these concepts can be understood in a more abstract and holistic sense, to mean a form of life (Zhao, 2009, pp. 187–189). Viewed from this perspective, perhaps the matter before us is not so much one of “moving beyond democratization” as it is one of moving beyond a particular notion of democracy and the specific “liberal democratization perspective” to entertain different notions and dimensions of democracy and the different paths of democratization. Indeed, as American sociologist and China scholar Richard Madsen argues, defined in a more holistic way, the concept of the public sphere presumes that “there may be different concrete forms of democracy... Far from presuming that a society like China must become like the West, it assumes that the West itself needs to search for new ways of revitalize its public sphere.” Reflecting the best intentions of China scholars in the United States, many of whom, identified themselves as “concerned Asian scholars” during the Cold War, struggled against Cold War machinations and their debilitating impact on China scholarship, Madsen continues: “The search for new ways of institutionalizing a public sphere under modern (or postmodern) circumstances brings China and the West together in a common quest” (Madsen, 1993, p. 187, cited in Zhao, 2009, p. 187).

In short, where China is heading is inextricably and increasingly linked to where the West, especially the United States, is heading. To adequately study communication and China also necessarily entails not only a critical interrogation of the China inside the West and the West inside China, but also a

critical self-reflexivity on the West itself. Of course, such a form of engaged and self-reflective scholarship may be considered by some as being too idealistic, if not misled, or perhaps even as being detrimental to some hegemonic "national interest," be it Chinese or American. After all, mainstream scholarship, still very much bounded by the nation-state, is often conducted in the service of dealing with either the "China problem" or "American problem." This brings me to the last piece in our special section, by Daniel Lynch, who appears to me in his previous work as a "detached" American social scientist trying to understand, in his own words, "where China was headed." In his current contribution, Lynch offers a retrospective view of his 1998 book on the Chinese media and telecommunications. Writing against transitology in political science, skeptical of attempts to apply the liberal civil society/public sphere framework to China then, and revisiting the relevance of his work now, Lynch is convinced that his primary argument, "which is that the party-state is losing substantial control over much of communication, but not to the forces of liberalism," "seems to be holding up fairly well." However, Lynch acknowledges that his model "still lacked the power to map China's political trajectory," and that there might be shortcomings in his initial conceptual framework on Chinese state-society relations. Specifically, he suggests that he had placed too much emphasis on state policies as "independent variables," to the implicit neglect of the dynamics and salience of Chinese society and culture. This emphasis on social and cultural context, of course, resonates with the observations of many other contributors. However, this insight eventually leads Lynch to question the search for general social science laws in studying China, saying that "students of Chinese communication in the decade ahead should be content with China being unique."

#### **Concluding Remarks**

I concur with Lynch that we should accept that China's trajectory is both complex and open-ended. However, I am not sure that I am content with a mere assertion of China's uniqueness. Among other things, this may lead to Chinese essentialism and Chinese exceptionalism, and even to Chinese chauvinism. In scholarly terms, this may close the venues for conceptual and analytical cross-fertilization, condemning "China media studies" or "Chinese media and communication studies" to academic cellularism. This also makes it impossible for the structural and relational analysis that I have tried to advocate. In the spirit of appreciating complexity and defying any simplistic dichotomy, I think we can be content with the contradictory assertion that China is both unique and not so unique.

Still, I am extremely content with the highly complementary nature of the pieces I have the privilege to introduce and overview here, with their overlapping analytical perspectives, and with the common aspiration to contribute to a constructive and mutually enriching dialogue between "Western" theories and "Chinese" experiences, while always remaining vigilant against any essentialized constructions of the "Western" and the "Chinese". To return to the last "R" in my "Rethinking Chinese Media Studies" piece, and in reference to Pan's citation of Pierre Bourdieu's idea of "realistic utopia" in his contribution, I think there is also a shared normative commitment to scholarship as a critical discursive intervention to create the conditions for the collective production of utopian imaginations (see also Wang & Zhao, forthcoming). If I was a bit frustrated for being behind in my new fieldwork as I tried to finish yet another book chapter more than two years ago, I am grateful for the opportunity to pause and compare our respective past trajectories and future road maps, to place our work in international and transnational contexts, and to appreciate our convergent as well as divergent paths as we move forward. Of course, I



am also mindful of the systematic constraints, regressive forces, and institutional and personal obstacles that may hinder constructive dialogues and the development of academic commons. Nevertheless, I am optimistic that we already have the solid foundations and necessary building blocks for the development of critical research on communication and China.

To close, let me thank both USC Annenberg for organizing the colloquium and the individuals who contributed to the creation of a stimulating academic setting in which these pieces, along with a number of other ones, were discussed: Ernest J. Wilson III, Wellen Sham as well as Ling Chen, Clayton Dube, Robeson Taj Frazier, Larry Gross, Guo Liang, Hu Zhengrong, Andrew Lih, Lu Ye, Daniel Lynch, Monroe Price, Susan Shirk, Daya Thussu, Jian Wang, and Carola Weil. I should also thank Mei Fong for her intellectual and logistic contributions. Last but not least, I should thank the many USC graduate student volunteers who provided indispensable logistic support and were busy blogging during the colloquium. They and their peers both inside and outside China are my "preferred audience" for this piece. May they find this special section a useful signpost on own intellectual journeys.



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