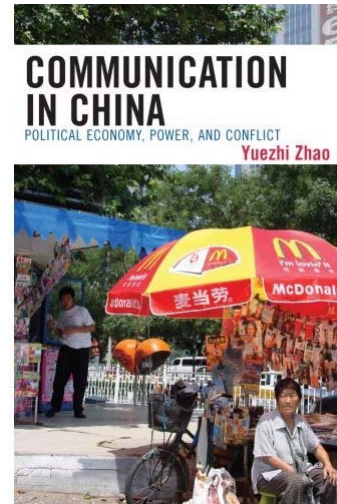


Yuezhi Zhao, **Communication in China: Political Economy, Power and Conflict (State and Society in East Asia)**, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008, 384 pp., \$26.95 (paperback).

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The field of Chinese media studies has grown exponentially over the last decade or so and has given birth to some high impact works, but blind spots exist. Some so-called cultural studies practitioners are preoccupied with the cultural landscape of the urban middle class, and see little need to draw on political economic insights, particularly in relation to subaltern experiences. Some industry and policy scholars internalize, and in turn feed into, rather than critique, the hegemony of neoliberalism, thus passing up a precious opportunity to engage in critical analysis. All the same, the temptation to continue to see the Chinese party-state as a monolithic ideological monster remains as strong as ever. For all students of Chinese media and communication, particularly those still hampered by these limitations, Yuezhi Zhao's latest book *Communication in China* is compulsory reading.



In his endorsement on the cover of Yuezhi Zhao's latest book, Dan Schiller predicts that, upon publication, the book will become "instantly indispensable." While clearly a good choice of words in terms of promoting sales of the book, it has the added merit of being true, not only of this book, but also of Zhao's earlier book, *Media, Market and Democracy in China*. Published in 1998 and containing research findings from Zhao's Ph.D. dissertation, Zhao's first single-author book has been a must-read for anyone who is interested in learning about the relationship between Chinese media, economic reforms, and processes of democratization. That book provides a compelling, critical and authoritative account of the tensions, contradictions, paradoxes and complicities between the "party line" and the "bottom line" in the realm of Chinese media during the first two decades of economic reforms. A decade later, and following an impressive series of high-impact journal articles, book chapters, and collaborative edited volumes, Zhao has come up with a sequel to her first monograph, which, while certainly matching her first book by way of empirical richness, has also surpassed it in terms of its intellectual depth and interdisciplinary breadth. Starting where the first book leaves off, the new work documents the ascent and the entrenchment of neoliberalism and its impact on Chinese media and communication during the third decade of China's economic reform. If the first book put Zhao in the forefront of international scholarship on Chinese media and communication, her second book further consolidates her standing as the brightest shining light and indisputably the most authoritative political economist in the field – a scholar whose influence and impact nevertheless extends far beyond the field of political economy.

This gigantic tome – both literally and figuratively – comprises six lengthy chapters plus an introduction and a conclusion. In the Introduction, Zhao sets out the topic and context of her research, outlines the scope and framework of the book, and explains its chief objectives and organizing principles. This chapter makes the reader aware that behind the simple title – *Communication in China* – lies an extremely ambitious project which promises not only to consider “the making of authoritarian formations in the Chinese communication system and the role of communication in the constitution of ‘China’s new order’ but also [to] analyse the unfolding dynamics of communication politics and the uneven terrains over which various social forces struggle for their respective stakes during China’s epochal transformation” (p. 10). These promises are doubly impressive when it becomes clear to the reader, upon finishing the book, that the author has indeed faithfully delivered on them. It also becomes increasingly clear that the title of the book, while deceptively simple or even somewhat vague at first glance, is a remarkably apt and accurate description of the book’s intention, and is, in fact, carefully chosen to reflect the book’s wide-ranging concerns.

The book begins, and indeed ends, with a lengthy profile of an ordinary Chinese woman vendor in Beijing who ekes out a living selling newspapers and magazines. The choice of the story of this woman – whose image also adorns the book cover – to start the book is emblematic of Zhao’s innovativeness as a political economist, in that she consistently strives throughout the book to demonstrate how systemic inequality and discrimination affect individuals, as well as how individuals affect policy changes and social transformation at the macro level.

Chapter 1, “Reconfiguring Party-State Power,” “analyses the reconfiguration of the party-state’s regime of political, bureaucratic, regulatory, ideological, and normative power in the Chinese communication system in response to accelerated commodification, intensified ideological and social struggles, and rapid technological developments” (p. 12). While the account confirms a long established fact that the Chinese party-state is marked by a desire for asserting and expanding control, it is at the same time calling into question an equally widely held view that such desire is acted out in a top-down, heavy-handed, and one-method-fits-all manner. Instead, Zhao makes us realize that the party-state is adopting increasingly sophisticated and innovative techniques of discipline which are made all the more necessary due to the challenges and possibilities brought about by the growing prominence of the Internet and mobile technologies. Zhao guides her readers on a journey whereby the exercise of power and control over media and communication is explored in the everyday practices of the Central Propaganda Department, in the interface between the formal bureaucratic procedures and ad hoc rules on specific issues, and in the realm of managing and regulation of journalism as a profession. These spaces comprise the multi-nodal sites of control, and result in a gradual shift from a model of control that is “totalizing” to a model of domination. To Zhao and her readers, this is extremely poignant: “Thus, the party’s answer to the poststructuralist question of “how control exists after decentralization” is the decentralization of control (p. 33). The chapter also details a number of strategies of control which mark this new mode of discipline, including normalizing, synergizing, and rationalizing. These strategies of control and censorship are particularly useful, Zhao demonstrates, given the overriding tension and contradiction between socialist legacies on one hand, and determinedly neoliberal strategies on the other. By way of illustration and contextualization, the chapter ends with an examination of two cases of censorship and control, Li Datong and *Freezing Point* of *China Youth News* and some leftist grassroots Web sites.

Still continuing the effort to map out the political economic and ideological landscape of the Chinese communication system, Chapter 2, "Securing the 'Commanding Heights,'" moves from a focus on how the party-state re-invents control and power in a decentralized manner to a focus on how the party-state turns its media institutions and communication systems to sites of capital accumulation. The chapter shows that the economic transformation of state media and cultural institutions bears the imprimatur of the party-state, and has contributed significantly to the reconstitution of social relations in Chinese society, especially class relations. Various sections in the chapter, including its case studies, work toward what I see as an important thesis: that the media and cultural sector assumes a double role in the process of class formation. As Zhao puts it eloquently, "it affects class structure not only as an increasingly central vector of production and economic exchange, but also as the means of social organization and site of subjectivity formation" (p. 76). Again, this discussion of commercialization strategies in the media and culture sector is wide ranging, from television drama production to competition and conglomeration among newspapers. This chapter is particularly illuminating in helping readers grapple with the often asked but little understood question of whether the Chinese media are state-owned or privately owned, and the murky and fraught relationship between the party-state and media sector on issues of ownership, property rights, and corporate identity. To date, this is the clearest, most up-to-date and nuanced delineation of these issues available. The chapter also provides a sustained examination of how economic and political factors conspire to marginalize the subaltern voices of Chinese society, and as such, presents a powerful critique of the urban-centric, middle-class oriented nature of the Chinese media.

Chapter 3, "Dancing with Wolves?" also looks at the economic processes but shifts its focus to examine the political, ideological, and social implications of Chinese media and communication's integration with global capital. Zhao first offers a critique of what she identifies as two prevailing ways of understanding Chinese media and the impact and implications of transnational capital, i.e., the "Chinese nationalist and culturalist framework" and the "liberal democratization framework" (p. 138). Against the backdrop of China's accession to the WTO, and situated in a transcultural political economic framework, Zhao then outlines the processes and consequences of transnational capital in a number of media and communication sectors, including telecommunication, the Internet, print media, broadcasting, and the film industry. These processes and consequences are examined at both production and consumption ends, paying attention all the time to the question of how these industries produce socio-economic stratification and inequality, on the one hand, and a range of political and social subjectivities, on the other. The last section in the chapter considers the extremely complex and fraught relationship among class, nationhood, and transnational capital. Zhao argues that "transnationality has thus become an increasingly important aspect of class reconstitution in a globally reintegrated China," and "this has led to complicated articulations of nationalist, class, regional, and generational politics" (p. 167).

Moving on from discussions of the party-state and transnational capital, Chapter 4, "Entertaining the Masses," focuses on the domestic private sector, analyzing the "structural and ideological formation" of the sector "in the cracks of the party-state media system" and "under the shadows of transnational capital" (p. 195). The chapter starts with a very useful (useful because so far little information has been available about this period) historical account of the relationship between the party-state and the private sector prior to the economic reform period, extending as far back as the pre-1949 period and then the

decade of the Cultural Revolution. This is followed by a discussion of the intricate relationship between the state and the private media and cultural sector, highlighting the tensions and ambiguities in this relationship. This section includes a detailed political economic and institutional account of television drama production, the most watched genre on Chinese television. This is particularly illuminating, and should become essential reading for those who analyze television dramas as a cultural form. The second section of the chapter shifts from the production of culture to the culture of production. It comprises two case studies which profile the crucial role of two cultural entrepreneurs – Wang Changtian and his Enlight Media, and Lou Zhongfu and his Guangsha Group – in the growth of their individual enterprises. Zhao's narration, in these case studies, of how the ambitions and aspirations of individual personalities shape the corporate future, drives home a message that often eludes students of Chinese media: that the private media and cultural sector exists interdependently with, rather than in total opposition to or in isolation from, the party-state.

Chapter 5, "Civil Rights, Legal Justice," and Chapter 6, "Challenging Neoliberalism," are extended case studies that examine, in the author's own words, the "substantive dimensions of the Chinese public sphere and uneven terrains of discursive contestation among different social forces" (p. 245). Chapter 5 centers on media controversies following the death of two individuals, Sun Zhigang, a university graduate who was mistaken for a beggar and was beaten to death while in detention, and Wang Bingyu, a rural migrant worker who was sentenced to death after having killed four people in a desperate attempt to claim wages owed to him. Chronicling the responses and reactions to these incidents from newspapers, and comparing them with discussions on the Internet, Zhao considers the possibilities of the Internet as a nascent public sphere in post-Mao China. At the same time, by juxtaposing public statements made about Sun Zhigang's death with those made about Wang Bingyu, Zhao is able also to demonstrate the inherent inequality in these contestations, and hence draw attention to the limitations of the Internet as an emerging public sphere. This chapter also includes a nuanced socio-economic profiling of Internet users in general, which most extant works on the Chinese Internet fail to take into account. Zhao observes that "class conflicts between the ruling elites and the disenfranchised workers and farmers, as well as the fact that the majority of Internet users belong to the bottom segment of urban-based 'middle social strata,' are the necessary places to start to understand Internet discourses in China" (p. 258).

Chapter 6, "Challenging Neoliberalism?" continues to examine Internet discourses and their relationship with mainstream media and intellectual discourses, but focuses on the topic of property rights and economic justice. Centering on the debates – or the suppression of debates, to be more precise – surrounding the party-state's policies of transforming state-owned enterprises (SOEs) into private businesses in the middle of this decade, Zhao traces the complex and intriguing ideological cleavages, divisions and complicities among various ideological and political forces including Marxists, the "new left," and neoliberals. According to Zhao, the marginalization of economist Lang Xianping, a vocal and staunch critic of the transfer of SOEs into private hands, reveals the extent to which neoliberalism has come to assume hegemony in Chinese economics, as well as the power of "elite economists in shaping China's transformation" (p. 326). In doing so, Zhao debunks the view of a monolithic political regime as the single-handed suppressor of dissident intellectual voices. Instead, the operation of a discursive regime consisting of expert knowledge, sustained with bureaucratic power and economic capital, holds the key to unlocking the hegemony of neoliberalism.

What is to become of China's developmental path from now on? Although Zhao provides no definite answers to this question in her Conclusion, she has certainly made her preference clear. It is the author's hope that China pursues a "human centred and balanced development" marked by "environmental sustainability, social harmony, and 'people's democracy'" (p. 354). Is there sufficient evidence to suggest that these might be achievable? Again, although no definite answers are given, an abundance of clues from throughout the book suggest caution against such optimism. However, as the saying goes, one lives in hope.

This is a lengthy book, consisting of lengthy chapters, all of which are jam packed with a breathlessly engaging narrative and often poignant facts, figures, and statistics, as well as detailed and critical engagements with media content, effective use of case studies, and revealing interviews and personal communications with key Chinese academics, policymakers, media practitioners, and industry personalities. It also makes extensive and effective use of Chinese language literature in a range of fields, including both academic popular media materials. Zhao does not hide her sympathy with disenfranchised social groups such as women, rural people, migrants, and laid-off workers, yet nowhere has she allowed this to compromise the integrity of her data, or undermine her unerring capacity for nuance and complexity. Throughout the book, a delicate balance is kept between critical, dispassionate analysis, on one hand, and compassionate and at times spirited interrogation, on the other. The end result is nothing short of remarkable: the book is an intellectual tour de force, unrivalled in its firm and comprehensive grasp of empirical materials and intellectual rigor. No doubt, it will become the most often quoted, cited and referenced book on Chinese media and communication. For students of media and communication, China studies, globalization studies, and anyone – journalists, industry people, and policy analysts – who seek to find out what is going on in media and communication in China, taking the time to absorb the content of this weighty book will be a very wise investment indeed.