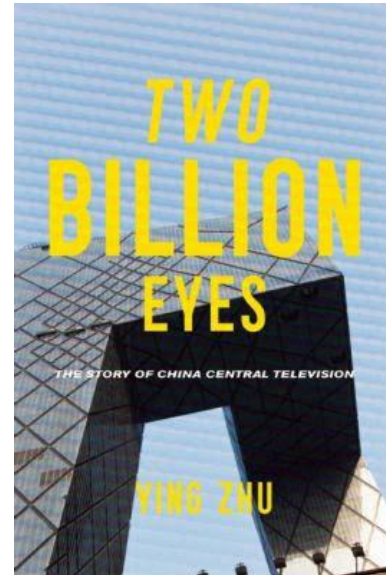


Ying Zhu, **Two Billion Eyes: The Story of China Central Television**, New York, NY: The New Press, 2012, 304 pp., \$27.95 (hardcover).

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As a model of state capitalism, China has attracted increasing attention for its uniqueness. One of the most commonly held beliefs is that China's special history and culture make it exceptional. This China-specificity theory becomes more viable as traditional democratic capitalism in the United States and Europe has in recent years been reduced to chaos and market crashes. Is China really an exception in the world's capitalist system? How does China manage its hybrid state capitalism—a free market without democracy? In ***Two Billion Eyes: The Story of China Central Television*** author Ying Zhu gives us the answers to the above questions by critically examining a microcosm of a Chinese-style capitalism—China Central Television (CCTV).



Positioned as a monopoly in China, national television broadcaster CCTV engages the world's biggest audience. However, this powerful TV network remains little known to the world. Ying Zhu's *Two Billion Eyes* is an exiguous study of the inner operation of CCTV. The book illustrates how, as a state-controlled yet commercially operated entity, CCTV has become the very archetype of the Chinese model. Zhu shores up her argument through a "thick description" of CCTV that is based on extensive interviews conducted from 2008 to 2009. This book features an introduction, 11 chapters, and a conclusion.

In her introduction, Zhu outlines the significance, goal, and structure of the book. For Zhu, the 20-year evolution of CCTV from "a primitive channel of state-funded polemic drudgery to an aspiring player in China's newly commercialized media industries" (p. 3) reflects not only the complex dynamics of China's radical post-Mao reformation, but also has contributed to this reformation, since CCTV is always the critical site of negotiation between the state and its people. Therefore Zhu has paid a great deal of attention to CCTV practitioners, who are the operators and shapers of CCTV.

Before revealing the stories of CCTV staff, Zhu first gives a detailed account of the history of CCTV. From chapter 1, we can see that propaganda has been a continuing mission for CCTV from the very beginning. Founded in 1958, Beijing Television—which is CCTV's predecessor—served as the mouthpiece of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) during the a time of continuous political movements ranging from the

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Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1958 to the Great Leap Forward campaign of 1959 and finally to the 1966–76 Cultural Revolution. Beijing TV was renamed China Central Television in 1978, coinciding with China's economic reform. The economic reform has brought many changes to CCTV. Yet its political mission as mouthpiece of CCP remains a first priority for CCTV, reinforced by successive Chinese leaders from Deng Xiaoping to Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and the new leader, Xi Jinping. Zhu uses two cases to illustrate how CCTV managed propaganda while also maintaining credibility for commercial profit. The first case is the 2013 SARS epidemic. Under the rigid control of CCP, CCTV's inefficient progovernment SARS coverage led angry citizens to turn away from the network and seek alternative and oversea news sources, which caused a credibility crisis. After the SARS incident, both CCP and CCTV changed their approach to the second case—the Sichuan earthquake. The CCP began to allow CCTV to broadcast the disaster at its own pace. As a result, CCTV successfully guided public opinion to support the party-state through its efficient and selected transparent coverage of the earthquake.

In chapter 2, Zhu examines the heads of CCTV. Though Yang Weiguang is not the first president of CCTV, Zhu believes he is the person most important to the organization. Working as an innovator, Yang initiated various reforms that transformed CCTV from a state-funded proselytizer to a commercial broadcaster during his 14-year reign. Before joining CCTV, Yang had worked for the national radio station for 24 years. Yang's experience in central radio made him a safe choice to lead central television in 1985 when the party established its radical media reform. From the beginning, Yang made a series of bold decisions to expand ad revenues when the state reduced its subsidies. One move was to air commercials during the *National News Bulletin*. As the flagship prime-time network news program, the *National News Bulletin* was monitored and controlled by CCP. By then, Yang was aware of the risk, and started out with great care, only attaching a 30-second spot to the news program. Once the decision proved to be safe, Yang immediately expanded the commercial slot. Moreover, Yang's effort to increase the quality of the news reporting earned wide recognition. During his reign, Yang pioneered several profitable controversial news programs, including *Oriental Horizon*, *Focus*, and *News Probe*. According to Zhu, these programs "modeled the kind of boundary-testing self-censorship" (p. 38) at that time. In February 1999, Zhao Huayong was appointed to replace Yang as the president of CCTV. During Zhao's term, CCTV stepped into the path of accelerated commercialization. The most glaring example is a survival-of-the-fittest policy introduced by Zhao in 2003. According to the internal regulation police, "with the exception of the News Channel, all CCTV channels were be judged as commercial specialist channels, meaning the success or failure of individual programs would be measured on the basis of advertising revenue"(p. 33). As Zhu notes, both Zhao and CCTV were criticized for the relentless pursuit of profit at the expense of cultural value. In February 2009, a major fire broke out at the new CCTV tower complex, which threw CCTV into turmoil but also brought about Zhao's demotion to. Jiao Li, formerly a vice minister at the Propaganda Ministry, replaced Zhao as the new head of CCTV. According to Zhu, Jiao tried to slow down the path of commercialization and rebuild the reputation of CCTV by increasing the number of news programs. However, Jiao's reign was very short. He was dismissed in November 2011, not long before the author published this book.

Chapters 3–8 tell the stories of these famous CCTV practitioners. Zhu organizes her narrative around CCTV's channels. She first shares the story of the newsmen, the people who worked in CCTV's news channels. From Zhu's interview with Zhang Jie, the producer of *New Probe* (China's version of 60

Minutes), we can see CCTV's newsmen are conscious that they are different from their Western counterparts. As Zhu writes, CCTV's newsmen "remain officially tied to the party-state, but they are now equally disciplined by the market," and "the professional calling that they are instinctively drawn to is a public service" (p. 59). How do they manage these competing forces? Zhang Jie, like most of his colleagues, treat "enlightenment as a balancing act between increasing pressure from the state to conform and pressure from viewers to do more hard news" (p. 65). For Zhang Jie and the other newsmen the author spoke to, the goal of media is to help the party-state to build harmony in society. They positioned themselves as "mediators" between the state and society. Besides the producers, Zhu also interviewed the three most influential news anchors in China, Bai Yansong, Jing Yidan, and Cui Yongyuan. Zhu shows their aspirations, successes, and frustrations. From Zhu's narrative, we can see that political censorship has influenced these anchors so strongly that self-censorship is ingrained in their professional code.

Under the process of commercialization, CCTV's comprehensive arts channels, especially channel-3, have "undergone countless programming reforms in the past decade amid ratings pressure" (p. 143). Zhu interviewed the producers and the hosts of two representative types of programs, game shows and *Lectures*. Compared with game shows like *Lucky 52*, *6+1*, and *Dream China*, *Lectures* was supposed to be less vulgar and more cultivated. Yet these two different types of programs shared the same ratings pressure. As a result, Wan Wei, the producer of *Lectures* reconstructed the program format and content to cater to middlebrow audiences when he found that educational and inspirational lectures led to poor ratings. The new *Lectures* went up in the ratings, though it received fierce criticisms from scholars and the cultural elite for misleading and misinforming the public. Wan was promoted to take the position of deputy director of the education division within CCTV. Granted excessive access to CCTV practitioners, Zhu tells the stories of the producers, the anchors, the journalists, and the documentary makers from the rest of CCTV's channels as well. By and large, Zhu found CCTV's staff had divergent views on programming philosophies and different identities, but they shared the same conviction of struggling against both political and commercial limits in order to serve the public interest.

In chapter 9, Zhu takes an outside look at CCTV. She examines CCTV's competitors, Hunan Satellite Television (HSTV) and Phoenix TV. Although CCTV is given preferential treatment by CCP, which gives it a monopoly on resources for content production, Zhu argues China's regional satellite TV stations are now challenging CCTV's long-standing dominance in terms of program quality, name recognition, and market share. HSTV is considered CCTV's leading competitor in the youth market. Zhu uses the *Super Girls* case to illustrate the competition between CCTV and HSTV. *Super Girls* was a singing contest launched by HSTV in 2004. It gained enormous popularity and enjoyed exceptional ratings in its second year. According to Nie Mei, the director of the Central Office of Hunan Group, the success of *Super Girls* was partly due to the interactive session between the players and the viewers. The show allowed viewers to vote for their favorite players via mobile phone. Feeling a threat to its hegemony, CCTV first fired back with its own singing contest show, *Dream China*. When *Dream China* failed in the ratings, CCTV obtained support from CCP. *Super Girls* was soon clamped down by official regulations. It was finally suspended after a three-year run from 2004 to 2006. The *Super Girls* case shows how official supports help CCTV secure its monopoly in market competition. Similar support was given to CCTV when it competed with Phoenix TV, a Hong Kong-based broadcaster. Zhu found that Phoenix TV was only allowed to air in some selected residential areas in China so that it would not present a threat to CCTV's monopoly.

In the next two chapters, the author examines CCTV through the windows of gender and nationalism. *Half the Sky* was said to be the only program on CCTV that explicitly positioned itself as a women's program. The name *Half the Sky* comes from Chairman Mao's revolutionary slogan "Women hold up half the sky." According to Zhang Yue, one of the program's most important hosts and producers, *Half the Sky* was established in anticipation of the Fourth World Women's Conference in Beijing in 1995. At that time, a lot of women's programs were initiated by central and local TV stations. Zhang Yue was proud that *Half the Sky* was the only one that survived after the women's conference. She admitted that at the very beginning, the program "unwittingly broadcast episodes from the perspective of China's male-dominated culture" (p. 221). For example, the program once aired an episode on female prostitution in which it blamed the women for "not respecting themselves" and swiftly turned a "women's problem" into "problem women" (p. 222). After several misguided episodes, Zhang Yue and her colleagues conducted gender-awareness training to improve the program's quality. Zhang Yue believed the training helped improve the quality of the program significantly. As she said, *Half the Sky* successfully functioned as a watchdog for gender equality over the last decades. However, *Half the Sky* began to face a new crisis. In the interview, Zhang Yue revealed her anxiety about ratings pressure after the program was issued warnings several times. Refusing to let the ratings dictate the program's content, Zhang Yue found it was very difficult to keep up with other programs on CCTV. *Half the Sky* was canceled one year after this book was published.

Nationalism is always a hot topic among Chinese citizens, and it reached its zenith during 2008 Beijing Olympics. From Zhu's narrative, we can see CCTV used a great deal of resources to broadcast the Olympics. It used seven channels to cover the events. But Jiang Heping, who oversaw CCTV's Olympics coverage, admitted that CCTV failed to deal with unexpected events during the live coverage. One example was the torch relay event. When the torch relay was interrupted by pro-Tibet demonstrators outside of China, CCTV simply dismissed the Western protesters instead of facing the challenge. Zhu thought it was a pity that CCTV missed the chance to exert its influence on foreign public opinion.

In the conclusion, Zhu links CCTV with Chinese-style state capitalism model. According to Zhu, CCTV is "the very model of China's post-command economy, a media conglomerate that is financially profitable, operationally autonomous, and yet ideologically dependent" (p. 256). In this sense, although *Two Billion Eyes* is largely focused on CCTV itself, readers can regard it as a prism from which they can see China's ongoing transformation.

Overall, the author offers a captivating analysis of China's central TV station. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in China's hybrid state-capitalism and contested transformation process. Yet it has some limitations. With access to CCTV's practitioners, the author gives an inner "thick description" of CCTV. However, readers may sometimes feel the author's analysis lacks focus, which makes the core contents obscured. The author could have paid more attention to linking empirical data to her theoretical concepts. How is the formation and development of state-capitalism conscious of CCTV's staff? How does the state-capitalism model make CCTV different from other major media conglomerates in the world? And is there any similarity between CCTV and Western market-driven TV stations in terms of operation logic? The empirical analysis should center on the theoretical concept: state capitalism. Another

weakness of the book is that the former staff of CCTV has seldom been interviewed by the author. The stories of the ex-serving staff would help to give a more complete picture of CCTV.