



For a Critical Study of Communication and China: Challenges and Opportunities

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Armand Mattelart wrote that there are certain “privileged” moments of history that “particularly favour critical analyses of reality” (1979, p. 25). For Mattelart, who wrote in 1979, these included the “heated moments of the revolution,” the “cold moments of fascism and dictatorships,” as well as “the periods of economic crisis”:

The Great Depression of the thirties and the structural crisis which the world capitalist economy is presently undergoing are moments characterized by a complete re-organization of the entire capitalist State and economic apparatus. New political forms are being elaborated, the partitioning of both surveillance and discipline is being extended, and new mechanisms of social control attempt to make citizen-consumer-producer accept the new international division of labor as well as the new conditions for achieving surplus value. (ibid.)

The two subject matters before us, communication and China — specifically, commercial and technological revolutions in communications and China’s reintegration into the new international division of labor since the late 1970s — were among the then-“new conditions” that contributed to overcoming the structural crisis that Mattelart was writing about. Today, Dan Schiller’s prediction that global capitalism’s successful exploitation of communications and China as the two related “poles of growth” might contribute to “a resurgence of the very economic crisis that promoted their own prior development” (2007, p. 197) has unfortunately turned out to be true, and we have arrived at yet another period of economic crisis, compounded by a profound ecological crisis. What modes of thought and what ways of posing and resolving questions concerning communication and China might be useful in meeting the multifaceted challenges of our times? I explore some of the challenges and opportunities that China’s ascending role in a crises-laden global political economy pose for communication scholars.

Exploring the Political Economy and Cultural Politics of the Chinese State

Although the reform-era Chinese state’s policies and practices are capitalistic in orientation, this state owes a historical debt for its political and ideological legitimacy to the aspirations of China’s lower social classes, and to a concept of “people’s democracy.” This raises the question of whether China’s ruling political class can completely shed the PRC state’s communist colors without losing its legitimacy to rule.

In fact, mounting domestic economic and social problems and the ongoing economic crisis have compelled the Chinese state to readjust its developmental policies. Within this context, important research questions can be raised regarding the class nature of the Chinese state, the realm of communication as a site of struggle between competing fractions of the ruling political class, and the dynamic articulation of élite and popular politics in and around communication policies and practices. Questions can also be posed regarding the "relative autonomy" of politics and ideology vis-à-vis the economy and technology in Chinese communication developments, the extent to which the Chinese state's socialist legacies are still present in the realm of communication policies and practices today, and the specific ways in which these legacies are selectively re-appropriated and re-deployed in fashioning "new political forms" and new mechanisms of economic and social mobilization. The Chinese state's ongoing efforts to secure a nationally-controlled cyberspace and promote cutting-edge technological innovations in ICTs, as well as increased investments and subsidies to selected sectors of the communication and culture industries, including possible communication industry manifestations of the general process of renationalization and state-led market consolidation, are important sites for investigating the tension between a more autonomous national development course and a path of sustained market and financial dependence on the West, especially the United States.

Hung (2009) has argued that China's export-oriented development model has created "a powerful urban-industrial elite from the Southern coastal regions" that has not only come to dominate Chinese politics, but also has attempted to sabotage the current state effort to rebalance the Chinese developmental path by raising peasant income and industrial wages and redirecting state funds to Western (Chinese) provinces and regions. If so, important questions need to be posed regarding the role of communication in and around this process, from the new patterns of distribution in state investments in communication infrastructures and the developmental priorities of Chinese state communication firms to ongoing media discussions of the strategies for economic recovery.

Because the state is inextricably linked to the nation, facing the "challenge of China" — a poor nation that has managed to rise up in the modern global capitalist order while dramatically increasing domestic spatial and social inequalities — entails a thorough engagement with both the political economy and cultural politics of Chinese nationalism. It also requires a critical examination of communication and the complicated intersections of class, gender, ethnicity, urban/rural, coastal/inland, and other forms of social division. The modern Chinese concept of the "nation" was heavily conditioned by imperial China's long history of political unity and ethno-cultural integration. The PRC state's solution to the "national question," for example, differs significantly from those employed by the collapsed Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. However, national integration is an unfinished business as far as the PRC state is concerned. On the one hand, Taiwan remains an unresolved issue, and the United States continues to be deeply implicated in this dimension of Chinese "national" politics. On the other hand, as ethnic conflicts in Tibet and Xinjiang in 2008 and 2009 have underscored, the challenges of ethno-nationalism, which has assumed a strong transnational dimension in the era of globally networked communication, have never been so formidable for the Chinese state. Researchers face an arduous task in analyzing the nature of various forms of nationalism and transnationalism within and beyond Mainland Chinese borders, the complicated intersections of urban/rural and coastal/inland dichotomies, religion, and ethnic politics from a communication and cultural perspective.

Finally, researchers need to address the cultural underpinnings of the Chinese state and critically assess its selective appropriation of nativist traditions in communication policies, practices, and discourses. On the one hand, as the Marxist heir to the European Enlightenment and the May 4 Chinese modernist tradition, the CCP-led Chinese state has relentlessly promoted a modern market economy and developed modern science and technology. On the other hand, the reform era has witnessed a state- and society-wide reassertion of Chinese cultural difference from Western capitalist modernity. There are reactionary and chauvinistic tendencies in this cultural/civilizational revivalism. Some versions are highly compatible with patriarchy and the political economy of globalized capitalism, "which for its own survival depends at once on a valorization of difference, and the convergence of difference into homogeneity through techniques of representation that carefully assign only to those practices that accord with the logic of ongoing capitalist expansion" (Dirlik, 2002, p. 21). However, a growing discourse has also laid claim to the transformational power of Chinese culture in transcending the problems of Western capitalist modernity, even a "Renaissance of the New Era," which will supposedly redeem humanity through the Chinese state's newly articulated "human-centric, all-rounded, coordinated and sustainable scientific developmental outlook" (Ye, 2009). Whether we consider this as a strategic discursive retreat from the Mao-era socialist internationalist discourse to win over national and global cultural leaderships, or as a cover for, and mystification of, Chinese capitalism and China's continuing economic dependency on Western markets, this is a new cultural politics that communication scholars must confront in grasping the "challenge of China" (Zhao, in press).

Overcoming Class and Urban-Coastal Biases in Research

Although much attention has been paid to China's ascending urban "middle class" and its potential political agency, empirical analyses on the media's role in the making of the "middle class" are sparse, as are those of the political consciousness and communicative practices of identifiable segments of this class. Studies of the communication and the domestic and transnational dynamics of capitalist class formation, meanwhile, are almost non-existent. At the same time, as Schiller (2008, p. 413) notes, the making of a gigantic Chinese working class during the reform era, along with its domestic and global political and cultural implications, demands the urgent attention of communication scholars. Indeed, the subjectivity and class consciousness of China's highly segmented working class has largely been neglected by communication scholars until very recently (Zhao & Duffy, 2007; Hong, 2008; Qiu, 2009; Sun, 2009).

One recent dramatic episode of class struggle serves to underscore the unremitting urgency of studying the subjectivity and agency of China's urban working class from a communication perspective. On July 24, 2009, thousands of workers gathering to oppose privatization at a steel mill in Jilin province shocked the nation by beating to death Chen Guojun, a private corporate executive who had come to symbolize the most exploitative dimensions of capitalist power in the minds of workers, who have strong collective memories of socialism and a deep attachment to public ownership of the means of production. What level of class consciousness and what concepts of justice underpin the words and deeds of these workers? What is the relationship between what Mattelart (1979, p. 28) would describe as forms of "defensive resistance" and the "offensive resistance" in the networks of urban working class communication that eventually led to this massive and, indeed, violent display of working class power?

What is the role of the Chinese media and Internet here? What are the political and ideological ramifications of media and Internet discussions of events such as this for the collective political agency of Chinese workers? Does this local event in any way symbolize the growing class power of Chinese workers in shaping China's ongoing developmental path at the national level? What are the communicative and ideological fissures and affinities between China's traditional urban working class and the "new working class" of migrant workers? What role can communication research play in facilitating the grassroots development of Chinese working class communication and cultural power?

China's "cheap" labor is not a natural condition of market development, but the result of "a developmental approach that bankrupts the countryside and prolongs the unlimited supply of low-cost migrant labour to coastal export industries" (Hung, 2009, p. 24). Constitutive of this developmental approach, Chinese communication research — with its Anglo-American derivative nature and the metropolitan bases and subjectivities of most researchers — also displays profound coastal and urban biases. Future research needs to place a higher priority in addressing the urban-rural divide and the coastal-inland dichotomy, as well as in advancing systematic critiques of the profound urban and coastal biases of Chinese communication institutions, policies, and discourses as the most salient feature in the existing structure of domination in Chinese society. Concomitantly, this entails much greater attention to research problems concerning urban-rural communicative relationships and the "triple problem" of agriculture, rural society, and the peasantry.

As recently intensified social struggles and environmental conflicts in China have highlighted, the "rise of China" cannot sustain itself politically in the long run without the rise of China's lower social classes. In particular, growth must include poor peasants in the rural inland areas and the economically, socially, and culturally marginalized populations in the Western provinces and regions, especially Tibet and Xinjiang. Only when China significantly reverses its urban and coastal biases in its developmental path and effectively deals with "the agrarian crisis" will the Chinese working class, as a whole, improve its bargaining power vis-à-vis domestic and transnational capital. Thus, overcoming the urban and coastal biases in Chinese communication and increasing the communicative capacities of Chinese peasants and ethnic minorities will have profound implications not only for domestic Chinese politics, but also for world politics. Minqi Li (2008, p. 92) has optimistically argued that the creation of a large working class and its rising bargaining power and organizational capacity in China will not only "turn the global balance of power again to the favour of the global working class," but will also put so much pressure on the capitalist rate of profit and accumulation that it will bring about the eventual "demise" of the capitalist world economy as we know it. If the earth's bio-capacities cannot accommodate the "rise of China" or, more generally, the "rise of the rest" to current levels of Western consumer capitalism, then the radical insistence of an earlier generation of critical communication scholars on the necessity of transforming capitalist production and consumer relations, as well as the capitalist regime of technological innovation, assumes more urgency today, not only for the Chinese, but also for the future for humanity as a whole.

This, in turn, raises further questions for communication scholars: What is the economic role of the information, communication, and cultural sector in the current economic recovery? What are the communicative and cultural dimensions of the Chinese state's project of "building [a] new socialist countryside," and what are the possibilities and limits of this project from a communication perspective?

Along with the further diffusion of the Internet, how do the ongoing massive rollout of 3-G networks and the digital transition of the Chinese television industry reshape the patterns of Chinese social communication? What is the potential of these changes aggravating the existing urban and coastal biases of the system? What are the trade-offs and opportunity costs in statist efforts at "going out" (i.e., the projection of China's "soft power" abroad) and "going down" (i.e., the communication and cultural enfranchisement of lower classes in the domestic hinterlands)?

Addressing the Transnational and Comparative Dimensions

I define this paper's topic in terms of "communication and China" rather than "Chinese communication" to overcome the pitfalls of methodological nationalism. This allows us to pose questions such as these: What are the class and ideological orientations of mainstream and alternative Chinese and Western media discussions of the current economic crisis? What are the challenges and opportunities for democratic communication and transnational solidarity at a time when commercialized media systems have themselves become victims of the global economic crisis due to the decline of advertising revenue? How will the new dynamics of communication politics between class, region, and various forms of nationalism/transnationalism play out among Chinese societies and communities across the globe?

Furthermore, if China's lower social classes were suppressed by the Chinese state while being bayoneted by a nationalistic discourse of China's triumphant rise in the world, can it be said that the American working class — whose bargaining power vis-à-vis capital has been undermined by transnational capital's mobilization of China's large and relatively well-educated reserve army of cheap labor — was materially (and temporarily) pacified by Wal-Mart consumerism while their sense of political and cultural superiority was reaffirmed by American media stories of Chinese censorship, human rights abuses, poor and dangerously made products, and discourses of "cultural genocide" in Tibet? If the "war on terror" has undermined civil liberties and curtailed the communicative freedoms of the American public (Schiller, 2007), will a possible substantive readjustment of China's developmental strategy in favor of domestic consumption and the welfare of China's lower social classes contribute to intensified class conflicts within the United States? Can a necessary complement to the strategy of using U.S. nationalism to displace class conflict somehow be to find the discursive means of managing today's crisis and frictions (preeminently between the United States and China) on behalf of a transnational capitalist class in formation which contains both U.S. and Chinese members? In this context, perhaps it is also worthwhile to ask what the communication politics are behind the discourse of "China's rise" — a discourse that has been so prominent both inside and outside China? Hung's (2009, p. 24) provocative question of whether China is "America's head servant" serves as a cool-headed antidote to the premature celebration of a re-centering of global capitalism from the U.S.-led West to the China-led East:

[The] dominant faction of China's élite, as exporters and creditors to the world economy, has established a symbiotic relation with the American ruling class, which has striven to maintain its domestic hegemony by securing the living standards of U.S. citizens as consumers and debtors to the world. Despite occasional squabbles, the two élite groups on either side of the Pacific share an interest in perpetuating their respective domestic status quo, as well as the current imbalance in the global economy.

As well, if one prong of the Chinese state's attempted strategies to overcome the crisis is to boost domestic consumption by increasing the welfare of China's lower social classes, and if the other is to export its surplus capital and productive capacities and infrastructure-building know-how to less developed countries in the global South, especially in Africa, how will such a development contribute to the reconfiguration of class, race, and national politics in these countries? As Franks and Ribet (2009) note, interesting work is already being done in the area of China-Africa media relations. What kind of media and telecommunication infrastructure development projects are being pursued by Chinese government and industry there, and does the ideological legacy of "Third World Internationalism," however compromised, play any role at all in either the policies or discourses of current Chinese economic and cultural interactions with countries in Africa or other countries in the global South and global East? More importantly, what are the implications of post-neoliberal national and regional media political economies for communication politics between China and other non-Western countries — for example, between China and India? A communication studies that reproduces the "hub-and-spoke" power relationship between the United States and the rest of the world is clearly no longer (if it ever was) adequate, as the new phase of economic and cultural globalization engenders more east-south and south-south financial, technological, and cultural flows.

Conclusion

As China is playing an increasingly important role in creating "the new conditions for achieving surplus value" in a crisis-laden global capitalist economy, the prospects for a fundamental reorientation of the Chinese developmental path to achieve both greater balance between domestic consumption and exports and greater equality across classes, regions, and other socio-economic divides within the Chinese nation in the short run appear dim. Among other new conditions, as Hung (2009, p. 25) argues, this entails "a fundamental political realignment that shifts the balance of power from the coastal urban elite to forces that represents rural grassroots interests." Essentially, this would mean the actual realization of what the Chinese socialist state aspires to be in its constitution — i.e., a "people's democracy" that is led by the working class and counts as its political backbone "the alliance of workers and peasants" — a phrase that has virtually been forgotten in the Chinese communication studies literature.

However, to once again return to Mattelart (1979), it is important not only to study the mechanisms of domination, but also the forms of resistance, and the struggles between the forces of domination and resistance. Arrighi observes (2009, p. 79) rightly that "Chinese peasants and workers have a millennial tradition of unrest that has no parallel anywhere in the world." It was this tradition and the unbearable conditions of Chinese peripheral capitalism that led in the first place to the formation of the PRC state in the middle of the last century. And it is this tradition and the injustices and inequalities of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" that has engendered the hydra-headed struggles that have compelled this state to begin to readjust its developmental policies in the past few years — however contradictory these policies are, and however much they have been sabotaged and resisted. The analytical perspectives which are used to understand China's ongoing social struggles — the official media's depoliticized language of "mass events," the liberal discourse of the struggle for "rights" and "civil society" formation, or a renewed Chinese socialist discourse of struggling for fulfilling the promise of "people's

democracy" — potentially have profound implications not only for Chinese politics, but also for world politics.



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