

Between State and Capital: Asia's Media Revolution in the Age of Neoliberal Globalization

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The media revolution that has swept across Asia since the 1990s is often characterized as a technologically driven phenomenon. At a deeper level, it has been animated by a multifaceted neoliberal political project and economic globalization, which has in turn fueled the rise of satellite, broadband, and mobile media. As technologies and cultural options proliferated, policy makers in many countries of East Asia and the Middle East have shifted their priorities from the regulation of distribution and personal consumption to the promotion of favored commercial partners and hybrid state media institutions. Focusing on Arab and Chinese screen media, this article examines the profound tensions between transnational commercial media capital and nationally based official media capital, delineating some of the complex dynamics that are remediating Asia in ways that were previously unimaginable.

Keywords: globalization, media capital, satellite television, China, East Asia, Arab, Middle East

The very notion of "Asia" springs from millennia of civilizational encounter and conflict, rendering the concept highly politicized and intellectually tenuous at best (Chen & Chua 2007; Said, 1979). During the postcolonial era, states have favored national priorities over regional unity, or they have employed the concept of Asia in a limited and strategic manner, such as "Asian values." Consequently, audiovisual media in Asia (film, television, and radio) have operated largely as state institutions: managed by elites, funded by official sources, and shaped by government regulations and import quotas. However, these national infrastructures were disrupted at the end of the 20th century by a "media revolution" that arrived via satellite television and digital media, profoundly refiguring social and cultural dynamics across the continent. Although technological changes were indeed the most palpable symptoms of this transformation, we should inquire at a deeper level about the forces that stimulated technological innovation and institutional change. Rather than suggesting that satellite and digital technologies transformed Asia (or the mediation of Asia), we need to inquire about the capitalist projects and processes that mobilized and shaped the development of these technologies.

This article contends that, since the 1980s, the logics of capital have extensively reorganized the spaces of media production, distribution, reception, and use (Curtin, 2003, 2011). Focusing on dramatic

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transformations in Arab and Chinese media, the following analysis examines the dynamic and intricate relations between transnational commercial media and nationally based official media. In doing so, it offers a comparative history of forces that have profoundly transformed the cultural geography of Asia. I focus especially on satellite television as a primary site of struggle, where contending forces converged, key institutions were transformed, and new ways of imagining media and audiences coalesced.

The opening section offers a brief account of the 1991 launch of Star TV, the first pan-Asian commercial satellite service, which consequently unsettled national media institutions and policies in many parts of the continent, including the People's Republic of China (PRC). The challenge posed by Star and the PRC's response provides an opportunity to delineate some of the categorical distinctions between commercial and official media. The second section turns to similar contestations that unfolded on the other end of the continent as investors began to roll out pan-Arab television services that were likewise met with official consternation and institutional realignments. As we shall see, Arab media entrepreneurs hopped across frontiers searching for friendly regulatory environments that would allow them to grow regional services that were crucially reliant on their ability to access restrictive, but lucrative national markets, such as Saudi Arabia. Although some of these new commercial services proved immensely influential and profitable, national regulation did not simply wither in the face of technological and globalizing forces. Instead, policy makers in countries such as Dubai and Qatar shifted their priorities from restricting media consumption to the promotion of favored commercial partners and hybrid state media institutions. The final section returns to East Asia, where similar transformations were taking place as officially sanctioned media organizations embraced commercial strategies and transnational ambitions while retaining their allegiance to national priorities and institutions. It is this ongoing tension between commercial and official forces—and their consequent impact on technological innovation and adaptation—that have been remediating Asia in ways that were previously unimaginable.

Pan-Asian Television and Commercial Media Capital

During the early 1990s, Star TV was the harbinger of pan-Asian media, its footprint stretching from the Pacific to the Mediterranean and from Siberia to Sarawak. Star initially took flight as a modest and very speculative venture of Hutchison Whampoa, a multifaceted conglomerate run by Li Ka-shing, a Hong Kong billionaire with a penchant for building or buying core infrastructure in shipping, shopping, utilities, and real estate. During the final decades of the 20th century, the company invested in mobile phones and high-speed data networks, and, in the spring of 1990, it launched AsiaSat 1, the region's first privately owned telecommunications satellite, providing services for transnational merchants, manufacturers, and financiers (Curtin, 2007).

Yet despite Li's penchant for core infrastructure, his 23 year-old son, Richard, was far more intrigued by the prospect of transnational television, creating what would become the first television service aimed at audiences spanning the world's most populous and diverse continent. Only a year later, Star TV claimed to be serving 11 million homes in 47 countries—figures that were impossible to verify. Nevertheless, anecdotal news accounts touted the burgeoning popularity of Star, which in turn spurred criticism from politicians and opinion leaders who complained about the unbridled commercialism and sensuality of its programming. Richard Li, who then fashioned himself as a McLuhanesque visionary,

stoked the embers of media revolution by making bold pronouncements about the twilight of mass broadcasting and the dawn of pan-Asian television. According to Li, Star TV promised to erase spatial barriers and national frontiers, bringing together far-flung audiences that were yearning to participate in a continental turn toward global modernity.

Anna Tsing's (2005) scholarship on the resource extraction economy of Indonesia argues that inflated claims and colorful rhetoric generally play a role in conjuring the potential for "spectacular accumulation," noting that spectacle has been a fundamental component of gold rushes, stock bubbles, and land grabs. It has also been a recurring characteristic of media revolutions, especially at moments when the prospects for new technologies are so uncertain. Along with popular taste, patent claims, and political interests, spectacular discourse is a central factor in shaping the development and value of a "new" medium (e.g., Marvin, 1990; Spigel, 2001).

Thus, Richard Li assiduously fueled the fantasy of pan-Asian media to orchestrate the aspirations of transnational advertisers, corporations, and media enterprises. Star promised to reach almost three billion people, a truly unfathomable audience, but even if it rallied only a fraction of the whole, its potential was stunning enough to garner the attention of corporate advertisers and media competitors, such as Rupert Murdoch, who, after an extended courtship, took control of Star in 1993 for \$870 million, which at the time was a hefty price for a very speculative venture. Yet before he could fully savor his prize, Murdoch unexpectedly jeopardized it by publicly enthusing about satellite TV's capacity to transcend national borders and pose "an unambiguous threat to totalitarian regimes everywhere" (Curtin, 2007, p. 194). This veiled reference to the People's Republic of China created a stir within the Communist Party leadership, especially since it highlighted the fact that the first pan-Asian satellite service had fallen into the hands of a Western media mogul with neoliberal politics and global commercial aspirations.

In a swift and calculated response, Chinese leaders banned private satellite receivers and selectively showcased the prosecution of violators. Even more creatively, they began to roll out government-run cable TV as an inexpensive alternative to a home satellite dish. Over the next two decades, Chinese officials kept Murdoch at bay while focusing their attention on improving the productivity of mainland media, absorbing the creative capacity of Hong Kong, and reasserting control over diverse aspects of distribution. They pursued an uneven process of marketization that at once engaged with and challenged the historical project of neoliberal globalization (Davis, 2014; Hong, 2014; Lee, Zhou, & Yu, 2007; Zhao, 2008). This encounter between state and capital offers a useful entry point for considering tensions and distinctions between official and commercial media. It also encourages us to think spatially and processually about media institutions, policies, and technologies.

Over the past 30 years, neoliberalism, as a political project, has animated and facilitated economic globalization (Harvey, 2005), which has in turn profoundly refigured media geographies worldwide. This is not to say the effects of economic globalization have been uniform or that neoliberalism is a singular force that permeates every aspect of societies around the world—a perspective that has been insightfully critiqued by such scholars as Nonini (2008), Peck and Zhang (2013), and Flew (2014). Instead, as we shall see, neoliberalism has fostered an environment where it is almost impossible to forge national and local media policy without taking account of transnational institutions that embrace core

values of neoliberalism. Government officials and media executives are therefore encouraged to make policy while looking over their shoulders, and satellite television provides a lucid example of these dynamics.

In China, the state's initial response to Star TV was to tighten controls over distribution and consumption, but that impulse was later complemented by policies that incorporated a range of commercial tactics that have allowed the state to retain significant influence over Chinese media and amplify its resources. Consequently, Beijing has retained its preeminence as the central nexus of mainland media and even extended its influence throughout the region and, to some extent, worldwide. As we shall see, a similar story unfolded in the Middle East, as cities such as Dubai employed hybrid strategies to shore up media sovereignty and secure a position of prominence in the region. As national borders have grown more porous and media circulation has amplified, we have witnessed the emergence of new transnational centers that I refer to as *media capitals*—some of them informed by commercial logics, others by official influences. The spatial configurations of media have, therefore, changed significantly. These transformations are driven not by technologies, but by the deployment of technologies in the service of political, social, and economic actors that concentrate in particular locales. "Media capital" as a hermeneutic device directs attention to key features of this new era of multicentric media globalization.

The concept of media capital connotes another level of analysis as well—one that focuses on processes of accumulation that relentlessly reorganize spatial relations, at turns erecting or erasing barriers and concentrating or dispersing resources in the spheres of production, circulation, and exchange. For example, during the early 20th century, broadcasting policies helped to establish national media markets and fuel the growth of media corporations, some of which remain influential today. But toward the end of the century, those same corporations and their competitors chafed at national constraints and aimed to "unlock the potential" of more expansive markets. Initially, national policies facilitated processes of accumulation, but after national markets matured, these policies were perceived as constraints on the most powerful actors. Spatial configurations and media technologies are therefore manifestations of these historical moments of capital accumulation. This, however, is not to say they are epiphenomenal. For as Bourdieu (1986) suggested, capital takes various forms—financial, social, and cultural—that are subject to distinctive and sometimes conflicting logics, which are nevertheless convertible. That is, social and cultural capital can be turned into financial capital and vice versa. Significantly, he argues that we should understand capital as multifaceted and contradictory yet nevertheless operating within an analytically coherent field.

In the context of media globalization, I would offer a slightly different formulation, suggesting that the spatial dynamics of media concentration, influence, and dispersion are shaped by interactions between commercial and official capital, both of which are animated by processes of accumulation that operate through actors, institutions, and technologies to continually refashion space to capture, accumulate, and sustain power.

In recent decades, the spatial and processural dynamics of capital have breached the relatively stable boundaries of national media, hastening a scramble to refashion the institutions and geographies of production and circulation. During the 1980s and 1990s, satellite television augured this momentous shift,

sparkling fears at the time of cultural homogenization under the auspices of Batman and Mickey. Yet rather than a singular Hollywood hegemony, we live today in a multinodal and networked global media environment of commercial and official media capitals that invite us to compare their distinctive qualities. Whereas the following sections of this article will delineate some of the particulars, it is perhaps best to begin with some broad comparisons between these two forms of capital.

Commercial media capital tends to flourish where companies show resolute attention to commercial calculation and mercurial audience tastes. The bottom line for successful firms is always popularity and profitability, engendering hybrid aesthetics that tap cultural influences from near and far. Employing an industrial mode of production and distribution that is fashioned around stars and genres, motion picture enterprises aim to manage cultural volatility and make texts intelligible to diverse audiences. Although often criticized for pandering to the lowest common denominator, commercial firms are relentlessly innovative as they avidly pursue the evanescent nuances of fashion and pleasure. Profitability is derived from structured creativity that feeds expansive (and expanding) distribution systems. Thus, marketing considerations are woven into the conceptual stages of project development, ensuring that profitability is purposefully articulated to the protean logics of popular taste.

Commercial media capital therefore tends to thrive in cities that foster entrepreneurial endeavor and cultural experimentation (Florida, 2005; Scott, 2000). It is also worth noting that the most successful commercial media enterprises emerge in port cities with long histories of transcultural engagement (Lewis & Wigen, 1997). Far from the centers of state power, these cities (e.g., Los Angeles, Lagos, and Mumbai) are in many cases disdained by political elites, since their products often probe the boundaries of censorship and good taste. Therefore, commercial media capital tends to situate itself, both geographically and metaphorically, at arm's length from the state.

Official media capital is, on the other hand, guided by national elites and therefore tends to be more monological and territorial.¹ As a category, it encompasses various institutional forms, but generally refers to the deployment of media resources that substantially accommodate national interests as opposed to market forces. If commercial media capital tends to operate out of cities that serve as cultural crossroads, then official media capital tends to be based at the confluence of national political power. In its most radical form official media capital is an instrument of propaganda, subordinated to political rather than popular agendas. It may otherwise be employed as a tool of social and economic development, aimed at constituting and mobilizing a productive national populace (Lerner, 1958; Schramm, 1964). Less obtrusively, official media capital may take shape as a public service that aims to overcome failures of the market and/or foster a common cultural heritage (Garnham, 2000; Scannell, 1996). Public service media embrace the overall objectives of the state, but may be insulated from explicit political pressures and operate in the context of a public charter. In Asia, the Soviet system evolved as one of the first modern iterations of propaganda media, whereas Indian broadcasting during the postindependence era offers an example of public service media. In both countries, policy makers also embraced social and economic development priorities, as was true in most Asian nations during the 20th century. Thus, official media can

¹ "Official" is inspired by Seton-Watson's (1977) analysis of official nationalism.

take various forms, but generally they aim to *guide* audiences according to a set of political principles rather than *follow* popular tastes in pursuit of market opportunities (Hilmes, 2011).

Yet these categorical distinctions between commercial media capital and official media capital do not constitute a simple binary; rather, they should be considered as points on a continuum. Hollywood and Beirut are obvious examples of cities where commercial media capital prevails, whereas at the other end of the spectrum, media institutions in Moscow and Riyadh could be considered emblematic of official media capital. In between lie cities such as London, Seoul, Beijing, and Dubai, where official and commercial forces intertwine. Moreover, it's worth noting that Hollywood's institutional practices have never been purely commercial, and media in Moscow today employ market mechanisms to achieve official objectives. Therefore the distinction outlined above should be used as a hermeneutic device designed to reveal the ways in which the mediation of Asia since the 1990s has been overdetermined by escalating tensions and interactions between commercial and official media capital, thereby offering more refined and contextual understanding of media globalization.²

Mobile Capital and Transnational Arab Television

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, governments in the Middle East expressed concern about the burgeoning ambitions of Western satellite services such as Star TV and HBO. Yet the most significant challenge was ultimately posed by Arab entrepreneurs intent on reaching a regional audience of 400 million. At first glance, this sizable transnational audience seemed impressive, but these nascent services could only achieve commercial viability if they gained access to Saudi Arabia, a country of 26 million people with the highest per capita income in the Arab world. Television in the kingdom was, however, tightly restricted due to decades of struggle between modernizers and fundamentalist religious factions. In cultural affairs the latter held sway, so that Arab investors envisioned satellite television as an end-run on the ruling national regime.

Such cultural skirmishes stretched back to the early 1930s, when the modern kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established by warriors from the House of Saud who consolidated their power through an alliance with followers of the 18th-century cleric Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. The discovery of oil in 1933 and the king's decision to forge a joint venture with U.S. oil companies unleashed an avalanche of royalty payments that not only swelled the purses of the ruling family, but escalated pressures to modernize elements of Saudi society, requiring a tense balancing act between conflicting interests and worldviews (al-Rasheed, 2010).

Nowhere was this more apparent than within the House of Saud itself, a sprawling extended family that mushroomed during 1930s, when the king married women from each of the leading tribes. Today, the ruling family is composed of thousands of members with often-diverging interests. Some are

² News reporting is riven by similar although distinctive tensions (El-Nawawy & Iskandar, 2003; Lee et al., 2007), as are online and mobile media (Qiu, 2009). The same is true of local and regional media (Sun, 2012; Y. Zhang, 2009), diasporic media (Naficy, 2001), and noncommercial, politically motivated forms of expression (Kraidy, 2016; Sienkiewicz, 2016).

very devoted followers of Wahhabism and wedded to local customs, whereas others have been educated abroad and travel widely. The latter tend to be modernizers who believe the security and wealth of the kingdom depends on education and social change. Some have even advocated a shift to constitutional monarchy and greater freedoms for women. Given this delicate balance, television in Saudi Arabia is, on the one hand, a tool of development and, on the other, an instrument of official protocol, obediently reporting on the activities of the royal family and faithfully conveying the wisdom of government policies (Boyd, 1999; Kraidy & Khalil, 2009; Sakr, 2009). It prioritizes the accumulation of social and political capital.

Modernizers in the kingdom have for decades chafed at these and other cultural conventions, seeking ways to navigate around them. Wealthy young men have shuttled off to school in Europe, which was also a frequent destination for their fathers with financial ties to London, the epicenter of the global oil market. European resorts have also been favored by elites pursuing entertainments that were proscribed at home (Socolovsky, 2002). When new commercial satellite services—such as Viacom’s MTV, TimeWarner’s HBO, and News Corporation’s BSKyB—started rippling across Europe during the 1980s, elite Saudi families were therefore well aware of their attractions. Moreover, during the first Gulf War in 1991, Ted Turner’s CNN blanketed the region with satellite news, earning credibility with Arab viewers and reportedly escalating demand for home satellite dishes (El-Nawawy & Iskandar, 2003).

Although many of the Western satellite channels launched during the 1980s and 1990s were divisions of established media conglomerates, some of the most aggressive and successful ventures were operated by swaggering entrepreneurs like Turner, Murdoch, Robert Maxwell, and Silvio Berlusconi, each renowned for breathlessly promoting media globalization and market economies. Moreover, Murdoch and Berlusconi both had ties to the inner circles of the Thatcher and Reagan governments, and all four were outspoken proponents of neoliberal principles, largely because they legitimized the circumvention of national regulatory regimes.

Some members of the Saudi royal family were no doubt alarmed by these trends, whereas others seemed to appreciate the chance to pry open national television territories. They were aware that satellite channels were already reaching Arab households via clandestine receiver dishes, offering families unprecedented access to a growing range of media options (Sreberny, 2005). Some were also sympathetic to neoliberal campaigns for regulatory reform and structural readjustment. Sensing the opportunities, these modernizers wanted to plunge into the television business, but reasoned that they would need to position their operational headquarters abroad if they were to succeed at home.

In September 1991, only six months after the end of the first Gulf War, Walid al-Ibrahim, a brother-in-law of King Fahd, launched the Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC) out of studios in London, which at the time seemed a sensible location given the city’s role in the global oil economy and its prominent position in the European satellite TV industry. Moreover, the city harbored a pool of talent from pan-Arab publications that operated far more independently than their counterparts in the Mideast. London was also home to advertising agencies that were then buoyantly expanding their global operations (e.g., Grey, WPP, and Saatchi & Saatchi). Thus, London offered access to creative and administrative talent, ad agencies and their clients, and technical infrastructure. Only 8% of MBC’s employees were Saudi

citizens. Many were Lebanese, Egyptian, and Palestinian expatriates from the pan-Arab press and national broadcasting services, whereas others were media professionals from the West (Kraidy, 2010; Mellor, Ayish, Dajani, & Rinnawi, 2011).

In its early years, MBC featured talk, game, and variety shows as well as news and information. It also included syndicated fare from international distributors, such as Egyptian feature films and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Although MBC's satellite footprint targeted Arab viewers throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe, its programming focused on wealthy audiences in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, offering a menu of family entertainment and officially palatable news reporting (Al Toraifi, 2014; Flanagan, 2014; "The World," 2005). Despite MBC's cautious programming philosophy, it nevertheless experimented with form and content in ways that national TV services could not. For example, news presenters interacted more informally on camera, and Western game-show formats were adapted to accommodate pan-Arab sensibilities.

Following on the heels of MBC's success, another member of the royal family, Al-Waleed bin Talal, launched a competing channel in 1993 called Arab Radio and Television (ART). Al-Waleed's father, Prince Talal bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, sometimes referred to as "the red prince," earned this nickname during the 1960s for advocating political reforms and social development, leading to his exile in 1961. His son, Al-Waleed, is an outspoken advocate of modernization, literacy, and women's rights, contending that young Arabs should engage with modern opportunities and Western ways while retaining their respective cultural identities. Three years after launching ART, he hatched a deal with Viacom to create Showtime Arabia and became involved in a cross-ownership arrangement with News Corporation, strengthening his financial and professional ties to Rupert Murdoch. Rotana, Al-Waleed's burgeoning media conglomerate, also signed a satellite distribution agreement with Lebanon Broadcasting Corporation (LBC), another service destined to become a regional leader (Della Ratta, Sakr, & Skovgaard-Petersen, 2015).

LBC is headquartered in Beirut, Lebanon's largest city, which has proven to be a cradle of innovation for commercial television in large part because of the chaos unleashed by the country's horrific civil war that lasted from 1975 to 1990. A multid denominational metropolis of Sunni, Shia, and Christian faiths, Beirut has a long history as a commercial crossroads, making it one of the most culturally diverse and cosmopolitan cities in the region. During the 19th century, European merchants were especially drawn to the city's thriving silk industry, which burgeoned even further with the construction of railroad lines inland to Damascus and Aleppo. After the end of World War I and the demise of the Ottoman Empire, the French government colonized the region, making Beirut the colonial center, which in turn strengthened its connections to Europe. Like Bombay and Hong Kong, Beirut was both a colonial enclave and a lively nexus for the flow of people, goods, and images between East and West.

The country exploited its ties to Europe, especially with respect to the fashion, tourism, entertainment, and media industries. Its liberal banking laws attracted an international clientele that included wealthy families from the oil-rich countries of the Middle East, most of them seeking to escape the restrictive culture and politics of their homelands. Beirut offered the amenities of Europe without having to travel too far. During the 1960s, the city was renowned for its stylish hotels and sybaritic nightlife (Harris, 2014).

Yet the multifactional politics of Lebanon erupted into civil war in 1975, pitting religious and ethnic groups against each other, with each faction developing its own militia and administrative infrastructure. These fiercely conflicting interests saw broadcasting as an indispensable instrument of struggle, and in the absence of a functioning national government, radio and television were open to unbridled experimentation. Programming at most stations was explicitly political and/or religious, as was the case with Lebanon Broadcasting Corporation, launched in 1985 by the right-wing Christian militia. To support its operations, however, the station also featured imported entertainment programming aimed at attracting audiences and advertisers.

As the civil war wound down, the station was restructured and rebranded as LBC, rolling out saucy variety and game shows that appealed to the senses and tested social conventions with respect to gender, class, and social identity. The formula proved successful when LBC began broadcasting to regional audiences on the ART satellite platform in 1996. Moreover, Beirut's reputation as a liberal and cosmopolitan metropolis no doubt distinguished the station among its peers. Consequently, Al-Waleed bin Talal began to buy shares in LBC, and over time he took a controlling interest, folding it into his growing portfolio of television, radio, music, and publishing enterprises that operate as part of the Rotana Group, which is now the largest media conglomerate in the Arab world. Originally a partisan propagandist for Lebanon's Christian militia, LBC ultimately transformed itself into a successful regional broadcaster that is now owned by an elite Arab modernizer (Della Ratta et al., 2015; Kraidy & Khalil, 2009; Sakr, 2007).

LBC's success mirrored the shifting fortunes of Beirut, which experienced a renaissance after the war as Arab investors from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States joined local entrepreneurs to rebuild infrastructure and restore the city's status as a cultural crossroads. This renaissance sparked reflection by neighboring governments, many of them dependent on oil extraction and wondering about their options for future development. This was especially true in the Gulf States, where diminutive indigenous populations have for decades relied on foreign engineers, managers, and low-wage service workers to prop up their national economies. Leaders in Dubai were especially alert to these concerns because their share of oil revenues was comparatively modest.

Dubai was a minor trading center in the Persian Gulf before the discovery of oil in the 1960s, but the burst of petro dollars allowed the government to invest in regional airline and port facilities as well as hotels and real estate. More recently, Sheik Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum has led an ambitious effort to make Dubai a regional leader in finance, transportation, tourism, media, and real estate. A passionate advocate of large-scale infrastructure projects, the sheik oversaw construction of two major airports (now among the world's busiest), becoming an important hub for regional and transcontinental air traffic between Asia, Europe, and Africa. It is therefore an attractive site for trade shows, conferences, and regional business operations. And like Beirut, Dubai is renowned for its liberal banking and finance laws, which have attracted investors from Russia, India, and Europe as well as the Middle East. Dubai has also become a shopping destination for international tourists and travelers, featuring more than 70 malls, the largest of which is located adjacent to the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building. Officials have furthermore sought to turn the emirate into an entertainment hub, featuring festivals, concerts, art exhibitions, and sports events (Ali, 2010; Krane, 2009).

Media have likewise been a priority. In 2002, the sheik launched Dubai Media City, pitching it as a “free zone” that offered tax breaks, subsidies, state-of-the-art technology, and flexible standards for content regulation. The timing was propitious, for in the midst of rising tensions after the World Trade Center bombing, many Arab businesses began to redeploy capital from Europe and North America to the Middle East. Dubai welcomed them with lower costs and a robust infrastructure that was self-consciously fashioned to meet the needs of regional enterprises with global connections. MBC and Rotana shut down their European operations, opting instead for studios and facilities in Dubai as well as other locations in the Arab world (Ryssdal, 2008). Regional and global competitors have joined them and Dubai’s Media City now features a diverse roster of tenants that includes Sony, CNN, Reuters, and Showtime.

The emirate has also made substantial investments in its own Arab- and English-language television and Internet services. Since only 10% of Dubai’s population is indigenous, these ventures are largely staffed by Lebanese, Palestinian, Egyptian, and Syrian talent, many of them displaced by political and economic conditions in their homelands. Overall, Dubai’s media infrastructure skews toward global and regional services rather than serving as an outlet for local creativity. Yet despite its designation as a free zone, media in Dubai tend to be deferential to the ruling regime with respect to such topics as drugs, politics, evolution, and homosexuality. MBC’s Al Arabiya news channel, which is headquartered in Dubai, has been chided by Rotana’s chief, Al-Waleed bin Talal, for serving ruling elites instead of its viewers, which is no doubt why Rotana maintains studios in Beirut as well as the gulf (Della Ratta et al., 2015; Kraidy & Khalil, 2009).

Dubai therefore offers a significant contrast to the freewheeling atmosphere of Beirut and might therefore be seen as a city where official media capital prevails, which in turn helps to explain why it has not emerged as an especially creative locale. One indication of the creativity deficit is that popular dramas on MBC and Rotana are either transnational coproductions or acquisitions from producers elsewhere, especially from Cairo, Damascus, and Istanbul. Turkish dramas have been especially popular since 2006, when *Noor* (originally *Gümüş*) was picked up by MBC and scored an unexpected ratings coup across the Arab world. Other Turkish TV series—dubbed into colloquial Syrian Arabic—have also become popular largely due to their lavish production values and glamorous stars who play modern Muslim characters facing conflicts and dilemmas that were previously out of bounds for most Arab producers (Kraidy & Al-Ghazzi, 2013).

Although the technology of satellite television was one of the most visible manifestations of globalizing forces in the Middle East, it was not the technology itself that was remediating Asia so much as the play of power between Arab political, religious, and commercial interests. MBC was, for example, launched in London by Saudi investors seeking to undermine the political and cultural capital of Wahhabi mullahs by embracing strategies and technologies that would facilitate the accumulation of transnational commercial capital. They were at the same time alert to the suppressed desires of viewers in homes throughout the region. Their success sparked a cascading rollout of services, so that today it is estimated that there are more than 1,200 satellite channels in the Arab world, offering a broad range of services and perspectives. Most are owned and operated by investors and institutions in the Middle East, many of them skirting the regulations of their home countries or transgressing the territorial sovereignty of neighboring states (“A Guttering Flame,” 2015; Sedarat, 2011). Consequently, it is this elaborate and dynamic play of

official and commercial capital that is remediating the Arab world and transforming relations between the Arab world and the West.

Official Media Capital in China

In China, a similar dynamic has unfolded, initially marked by the 1991 launch of Star TV, which took place shortly after the Beijing Spring and the fall of the Berlin Wall, both of which attracted extensive satellite news coverage, fueling suspicions the technology was intertwined with the political project of neoliberalism. Indeed, Rupert Murdoch's comments in 1993 about the transformative power of satellite TV conformed to a broader Western discourse about globalization, which was squarely at odds with the fundamental values that had informed Chinese media policy since the founding of the PRC in 1949. Print, radio, and film—which initially had been developed by commercial and/or colonial interests—were envisioned as instruments of the Communist Party that should be used to struggle against bourgeois and feudal residues of the past and secure the sovereignty of China against the intrusive machinations of Western powers. Media were seen as instruments of nation building—tools of instruction and propaganda—that acted as a bridge between the party and the people. Even after Mao's death, when party principles shifted under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, media remained a fundamental concern of party leaders, especially during periods of social and cultural ferment.

Murdoch's commercial and political aspirations for Star TV were therefore anathema to Chinese officials. Yet they also understood that they could not simply wield a menacing stick. They needed to tame inflation, amplify development efforts, and manage a tide of rising expectations. With respect to media policy this meant that, in addition to banning Star TV, they had to deliver viable alternatives, which is why the government made significant investments in cable television and domestic satellite TV services. Consequently, China Central Television (CCTV), the only officially recognized national network, expanded its channel offerings, and provincial TV stations were allowed to launch satellite services that were initially intended for local audiences, but soon became popular in neighboring provinces and in some cases nationwide. The government also began to develop a proprietary high-definition television system to circumvent foreign patents and nourish the domestic electronics industry. It subsequently did the same with cable, broadband, and mobile technologies (Diao, 2009; Hong, 2014).

Overall, party leaders displayed an enthusiasm for technological innovation and infrastructural development, but remained cautious about screen media content. Mainstream film and television were tightly controlled and therefore largely uninspiring (Keane, 2010; Y. Zhang, 2009; Zhu, 2012). The most adventurous material tended to be produced by independent filmmakers, who were subjected to official censure and scorn (Z. Zhang, 2007). As a result, black market imports and piracy flourished, encouraging party leader Jiang Zemin to anguish openly about cultural pollution from Hong Kong and Hollywood (Wang, 2003). On the other hand, Jiang was a huge fan of *Titanic* (1997), which he perceived as an epic and spectacular rendering of American ideology. *Titanic* was, he said, successful with audiences worldwide because it was an uplifting tale of aspiration, romance, and sacrifice. It furthermore indexed the creative and commercial power of American media institutions. He publicly entreated Chinese producers to study the film, because he appreciated both its aesthetic qualities and its ability to convey hegemonic cultural values. Nevertheless, party leaders considered *Titanic* to be an exception to what they otherwise

characterized as an incessant stream of trivial, violent, and salacious programming from abroad (Noble, 2000).

Throughout much of the 1990s, China was awash with pirated copies of Hong Kong and Hollywood fare, first on tape and then in digital formats. It was also on course to join the World Trade Organization in 2001, which would further complicate matters due to U.S. diplomatic pressure to loosen restrictions on media imports and strengthen intellectual property enforcement. These mounting pressures of media globalization spurred a halting, but momentous shift in Chinese policy. After the turn of the century, media that were once considered instruments of party rule would increasingly be seen as “cultural industries” led by national champions, such as China Film Group, China Central Television, and Shanghai Media Group. Chinese officials became enamored of the “creative economy” discourse that first flourished in the United Kingdom under Tony Blair’s administration (Keane, 2007, 2013).

After China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001, policy makers became even more attentive to the prospect that Chinese media would need to position themselves within the context of an increasingly competitive transnational cultural economy. Although the PRC had for decades prioritized an elaborate state apparatus to manage cultural distribution and consumption (quotas, censorship, and surveillance), it now began to place greater emphasis on strategies designed to nourish the work of creative talent in the context of media globalization. The government provided subsidies, promoted creative clusters, and built studio complexes to serve the needs of domestic talent and attract foreign producers. They furthermore encouraged joint ventures and coproductions, hoping to absorb the insights and experiences of globally renowned partners (Fung, 2008; Kokas, 2017).

Yet despite these new initiatives, policy makers continued to embrace an infrastructural bias and an official ideological agenda. They favored talent and enterprises that were loyal to the party and well connected to high-ranking officials (Nonini, 2008). This became especially obvious under the “going out” policy that lavished vast resources on three national champions—CCTV, China Film Group, and Xinhua News—that were explicitly charged with extending China’s “soft power” abroad (Hu & Ji, 2012). Likewise, the government spared no expense on the Beijing Summer Olympics in 2008 and the Shanghai Expo in 2010. By early 2010, Chinese policy was focused on the cultivation of powerful creative industries that could compete in global media markets while fending off cultural intrusions from afar.

The command center for much of this activity is the Chaoyang district on the east side of Beijing, where more than a thousand firms are now engaged in various aspects of media, ranging from content creation and financing to marketing and distribution (Huang, 2012). Most striking perhaps is the new headquarters of CCTV, a yawning arch of steel and glass (known colloquially as “big pants”) with more than five million square feet of floor space. Designed by Rem Koolhaas, this office and studio complex is an imposing tribute to the expansive scale of the government’s media ambitions.

Chaoyang negotiates relations between “official” and “commercial” media imperatives and institutions. Alert to transnational trends and considerations, it is at the same time ineluctably shaped by national policy priorities and dense networks of personal and political connections. Close to the seat of party power, it adheres to guidance from above while managing an impressive ensemble of creative

resources and a vast distribution infrastructure. As an official media capital, Beijing rewards compliant talent and punishes transgressive artists, but it also absorbs influences and ideas from around the world in an attempt to regulate processes of cultural innovation and taste-making according to prescribed objectives. In the PRC, official media capital superintends the national imaginary while seeking to promote Asian values to regional audiences and the Chinese diaspora. Ultimately, it aspires to even greater influence, someday on par with Hollywood.

This represents a historic shift in the geography of Chinese media. Whereas Shanghai was the cradle of Chinese screen media during the 1930s and Hong Kong was greater China's commercial media capital in the latter part of the 20th century, the Communist Party leadership has systematically transformed Beijing from a national propaganda apparatus to burgeoning media capital in 21st century. Beijing now resides at the center of a vast and growing media economy, laying claim to the world's largest television audience, second largest theatrical movie audience, and second largest media advertising market.

This precipitous growth has transformed the regional media business, exerting gravitational pull on Hong Kong's filmmakers, Seoul's TV producers, Tokyo's animators, and Singapore's video game producers. Although national and local projects still prosper throughout East Asia, media blockbusters must now be conceived with Chinese audiences (and therefore Chinese officials) in mind (Davis, 2014; Yeh & Davis, 2008).

In many respects, the Chinese government seems to have succeeded by pursuing a policy of media marketization that emphasizes infrastructural investments and national champions. Through favoritism, firewalls, and surveillance, it has guided the development of what was once a media backwater into a robust ensemble of institutions that can plausibly lay claim to cultural leadership at home and soft power abroad. On closer inspection, however, the cultural output of favored institutions has been relatively mediocre. Feature films that the government supports tend to fizzle at the box office, and government television stations have trouble attracting young viewers, most of whom have migrated to video download and streaming services that offer a far greater range of programming options.

It is, however, remarkable that the government seems to be responding to these changes by escalating its investment in content that is entertaining, politically palatable, and potentially exportable. Officials are especially enamored with computer-generated imagery, launching a joint venture, for example, to build a huge studio complex in Shanghai with DreamWorks Animation, a facility that hosted the production of *Kung Fu Panda 3* (2016), which won critical acclaim and earned \$519 million in global ticket sales.

Just as significantly, the government seems to be loosening the reins on content creators and distributors, allowing trusted commercial enterprises to grow their influence. Hunan TV, a provincial broadcaster, has been a trailblazer in forging collaborative ventures with international and commercial production partners. Shanghai Media Group, although still owned by the government, has spun off quasi-commercial enterprises that produce television shows and online content. Indeed, the most popular shows on television tend to be produced by enterprises that exhibit popular and commercial instincts, even if

they still operate within official institutional structures. Wang Jianlin, reputedly China's wealthiest land developer and feature film exhibitor, has built a massive studio complex in Qingdao that aims to attract film and television producers, both domestic and foreign. Wang has extended his reach abroad, buying up production companies in Hollywood and theater chains around the world. Although Wang's conglomerate, Dalian Wanda, has extended its influence furthest afield, other firms are extending their reach as well, including Huayi Brothers and China Media Capital. The recent escalation of commercial activity in film and television is tied to the rising influence of the Internet tigers—Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent—in the field of streaming media distribution, where they compete for viewers by investing in production companies and engaging in fierce bidding contests for screen media content, much of it light entertainment that is disdained by cultural elites and party officials. Since most young Chinese now opt for theatrical or streaming media instead of broadcast television, these commercial enterprises now outstrip the influence of CCTV among the mainland's most significant audience demographic (Zhao & Keane, 2013).

Direct control over television and film seems to be inexorably passing out of the hands of the state and into the hands of burgeoning media conglomerates with commercial ambitions and political connections. Nevertheless, party leadership and political affiliations remain important, for the state still jealously protects its leadership prerogatives, as has become only too apparent under the leadership of Xi Jinping. So despite the heady growth of the media sector, creative talent and producers are skilled at the arts of self-censorship and deference to authority. Moreover, the most successful media enterprises share the government's most prominent ambition, which is to make the domestic film and television industries profitable at home and influential abroad.

Conclusion

As with the rise of the Chinese Internet tigers, Arab media today feature complex webs of content that are spun across film, television, audio, Internet, and mobile media. They also range across geographical frontiers, challenging existing hierarchies and generating fierce debates about national sovereignty and transnational reach. Although widely perceived as a technological revolution, the (re)mediation of Asia is in fact being driven by shifting conditions of capital accumulation under the most recent wave of globalization, which initially was fueled by the neoliberal political project that coalesced during the Reagan and Thatcher years. As we have seen, the ensuing media revolution that has unfolded across Asia is exceedingly complex and multiscalar, involving dramatic transformations in social relations, popular culture, and personal media use. This article argues, however, that the core dynamic behind this revolution is the interplay between transnational media enterprises and government institutions, which are the most palpable manifestations of contending regimes of accumulation that are analytically distinct yet thoroughly interwoven.

The article began by recounting Star TV's spectacular aspiration to remediate Asia under a regime of capital accumulation that would challenge national sovereignty and refigure geographies of cultural circulation and identification. Although Star never fully realized its ambitions, it nevertheless disrupted existing cultural and social relations, prompting Asian countries with historically restrictive media institutions—such as China and most states of the Arab world—to respond. Unable to stanch the growing flow of imported media, officials in such places as Dubai and Beijing drew inspiration from

creative economies discourse to fashion a new set of policy tools that would serve the objectives of official media capital while accommodating commercial influences. They have thus retained their focus on the accumulation of political and social capital while adopting strategies designed to manage external competitive pressures by refiguring professional practices and accommodating popular taste. The hybrid media institutions that have become the drivers of change in many parts of Asia are consequently contradictory and impure, contingently positioned on a spectrum of commercial and official capital.

Even though the foregoing analysis has focused on spatial and structural changes across long stretches of space and time, it is important to close by pointing back to the remediation of Asia as a multiscalar and multidimensional phenomenon that has tested (and reinvigorated) the social fabric of many societies. Without stretching the point, it is difficult to imagine the Arab Spring, Hong Kong Umbrella Movement, East Asian youth culture, or new modes of intimacy in the Arab world without reference to the imaginative spaces opened up by television melodrama, reality TV, and transnational feature films. These spaces have nurtured new affinities and positionalities, both cultural and political. So although the processes of capital churn relentlessly toward concentration and accumulation, the resulting friction—as Tsing (2005) puts it, “the grip of encounter”—can unexpectedly facilitate new potentialities at the margins and the interstices.

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