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Looking Back, Looking Forward: The Ecumenical Imperative in Chinese Mass Communication Scholarship

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When China's new development strategy emerged in the late 1970s, repudiating the campaign-style ideological mobilization that had dominated politics and economics in Mao's time, giving increasing scope to market forces, and promoting growing engagement with the rest of the world, the scholarly literature on mass communication and media in contemporary China consisted of a handful of works. The scholarship was handicapped, of course, by the prolonged blockade on access to China, both externally imposed and domestically maintained; by the opacity of Chinese politics and the untrustworthiness of PRC information; and, less obviously but no less important, by the geopolitical alignments and ideological propensities of the times. The resulting window on communication actors, attributes, structures, processes, and effects was exceedingly narrow, admitting partial, often partisan, and sometimes acrimonious interpretations.

Much-improved access, collaborative opportunities, new technologies, and changing national and global environments have led to far more extensive, complex, and nuanced scholarship on China's media and mass communication from the 1980s onward. Yet the legacy of past approaches remains important and, in a broad public sense, influential. Even if academics have surmounted both practical obstacles and ideological presumptions that had impeded understandings of China in the past, these influences endure in politics, popular apprehensions, and media representations. It seems worthwhile, therefore, to periodically remind ourselves of supposedly outmoded views that still cast long shadows. Briefly, this essay offers such a reminder, along with a more heartening assessment of new vistas opened up by contemporary scholarship.

The stamp of the Cold War, expressed through visions of a totalistically controlled Red China, is most evident in earlier works, such as Houn's *Propaganda and Indoctrination in Communist China* (1961) and Yu's *Mass Persuasion in Communist China* (1964), but subsequent works also bear its inflection. Liu's *Communications and National Integration in Communist China* (1971) and Pye's writings on Chinese political culture (1971) incorporate discussion of attitudes and values into portrayals of a highly integrated communication system infiltrating every level of society.

Even early on, a new generation of Asia scholars began to produce critical scholarship; yet the academic field of communication seems to have remained remarkably insulated from this development. Schurmann's *Ideology and Organization in Communist China* (1968) devotes part of his analysis to

communication apparatus and policy, seeing this sector as crucial in the creation of new organizational structures. In taking the goals of China's social revolution seriously and giving credence to efforts to counter bureaucratization and privilege, his work did provide a partial corrective to Cold War viewpoints, but it had little influence on political and international communication research generally, or on the study of Chinese media and mass communication in particular.

As the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath unfolded, yielding extreme examples of both dissonant communications and consolidated control, and with U.S.-China rapprochement holding out prospects for first-hand inquiry (albeit subject to the supervision of handlers), other, more nuanced analyses appeared — such as Chu et al.'s *Communication and Development in China* (1976) and other East-West Center conference volumes edited by Chu, *Popular Media in China: Shaping New Cultural Patterns* (1978), and by Chu and Hsu, *Moving a Mountain: Cultural Change in China* (1979). Especially noteworthy in this latter collection is White's (1979) reinterpretation of local media during the 1950s and 1960s, which challenged conventional wisdom with its findings of "signal incoherence," content variation, and controversy in the transmission of messages from center to regions. Yet the lack of on-the-ground access and limited transparency remained significant impediments to research and understanding; this work continued to rely mainly on inferences about content and interpretations of official rhetoric.

Today's scholarly landscape is vastly different. The literature addressing China's evolving media has expanded steadily through the post-Mao period; the work of expatriate Chinese trained abroad in theory and methods has greatly enriched the field; and homegrown scholarship, while still encumbered by domestic political exigencies and subject to fluctuations in the research climate, has developed into an important source of data and analysis. Audience studies promising at least a modicum of reliability and validity became possible in the early 1980s, with fieldwork opportunities expanding from the late 1980s onward. (As a beneficiary of this new climate, I conducted dissertation research during 1987–1988 into the debates, complaints, and experiments associated with China's "journalism reform.")

Researchers could now study and document dramatic changes, as well as continuities, in Chinese mass communication in meaningful ways; foreign scholars finally had the wherewithal to work closely with Chinese colleagues and gain some entrée to the daily practices of mass media organizations and personnel. After the temporary hiatus that followed the Tiananmen debacle of 1989, as China resumed its economic reforms, accelerated its market-driven quest for prosperity, and became ever more enmeshed in global manufacturing and commerce, research likewise continued to advance.

Today's media landscape is also vastly different from a mere three decades ago, globally as well as within China. Not surprisingly, the dynamism of media industries and technologies interacting with social and cultural change across time, space, and levels of analysis has provoked research on an ever-expanding range of subject matter. The versatility and expansiveness of communication as a field have proved useful for the interdisciplinary study of new questions and phenomena related to media production, dissemination, content, interpretation, and use, giving rise to a subfield characterized by considerable diversity of both theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches.

The central concepts for earlier studies of PRC communication were propaganda and persuasion, with the normative propensities of Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm's *Four Theories of the Press* (1956) situating China firmly in the Communist-Soviet brand of the "authoritarian" mode. As Nerone et al.'s critique *Last Rights* (1995) points out, the four theories are more aptly described as one theory with four variants — the theory being the fairly obvious supposition that press systems (or more broadly, media systems) reflect political systems. The figment of a monolithic Chinese nation controlled uniformly from the center was much easier to maintain, of course, when centralized planning indeed governed major economic and social arrangements, nationwide ideological campaigns propelled politics, and larger-than-life leaders commanded authority. But the media-politics equation and the focus on concerted projects of indoctrination, if they ever had clarifying potential, do little to help us make sense of today's much bigger and more complex canvas.

We have entered an era, therefore, in which the objects of inquiry are as varied as the undeniably variegated realities. The fruitful and promising topics, concepts, and themes of research pursued by scholars and students now cover the gamut, from the political economy of media to technology policy and law; from interactivity to cultural hybridity; from news practices and occupational identity to discourses of gender, ethnicity, and class; from representation to public memory; from hegemony and resistance to bureaucratic conflict and control.

Moreover, in the past two decades, efforts to elucidate the workings of China's mass communication institutions, groups, and individual actors; their interrelationships with other realms; and their local, national, regional, and global ramifications have moved steadily from the descriptive to the explanatory, and then on to what we might call the imaginative — in the best sense of Mills' *The Sociological Imagination* (1959). The overarching challenge is to promote study that helps make the link — or sometimes the leap — between individual experience and social institutions, that connects biography with history, that burrows through existential confusion to collective meaning. At the top of my pantheon of pioneers, I would put Chin-chuan Lee — quintessential facilitator of the work of others, as well as a brilliant scholar in his own right, and Yuezhi Zhao — whose zest for high-level theorizing in defiance of conventional wisdom, combined with her energy for meticulous fieldwork, makes her the most genial provocateur imaginable; but many other scholars come to mind, and the list is growing all the time.

It is no wonder that some of the most exciting work in the field grapples with the perennial tension between the constraints of structure and the exercise of agency, a dilemma that has always been salient to studies of the sociology of news work. Intriguingly, the accumulated literature on U.S. and Chinese journalism offers the following contrast: Despite the prevailing rhetoric of individual freedom and independence for journalists in the U.S., research tends to reveal the decisiveness of macro-level constraints, both political and economic; while in the Chinese system, with its overt political controls, individual agency often plays a crucial role in surmounting limits on news coverage. In other words, the quandary of structure versus agency plays out differently in the two contexts. That's a modest discovery, already being superseded by better informed, more penetrating and sophisticated work, but it's the sort of quixotic finding that might stretch our comprehension just a bit.

The most exciting work in the field also draws on knowledge and approaches from other disciplinary traditions. With good reason, communication research may be charged with shameless whoredom: Our field has always begged, borrowed, and stolen from any quarter that might supply direction, information, ingredients, or techniques. In my view, other than attributes specific to mass media — attributes whose determination is surely subject to debate — the study of mass communication has nothing to call its own; it is entirely what we make of it, and in the process, we should be steeping ourselves in history, political science, anthropology, sociology, geography, economics, law, computer science, poetry — indeed, any realm that furthers knowledge and inspires ideas.

At the same time, our subject matter is, and should be, fair game for scholars in any branch of study. There are several reasons for this. First, "the media" is one of those subjects — like sports — about which everyone has opinions; mass communication scholars may deem themselves the experts, but in actuality, nobody can be excluded from comment (and still less so in a society whose media claim a foundation of expressive freedom!). Second, scholars across the academy use media products and messages as sources of data, and logically have interest in how this content may be produced and/or received. Finally, every area of study incorporates concerns about communication in some respect — ours is an interdisciplinary field, because communication itself has no boundaries.

Of necessity, we must continue to be omnivores and accomplices, grateful for the labors of remarkable scholars in many disciplines with more established traditions of China studies, as their work adds to our knowledge base and sheds new light on questions that transfix us. I think of Schoenhals' *Doing Things With Words in Chinese Politics* (1992), as his observations on the tremendous power of words and their attributions in the Chinese context was further driven home to me by the new translation of Zhao Ziyang's secret journals, *Prisoner of the State* (2009). But countless other examples should remind us of the importance of making common cause across the disciplines and professions, as well as across the seas.

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