



Scaling Chinese Media: A Geographic Turn to Future Research

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Trained in critical media and cultural studies, and having taught undergraduate courses in media and communication in the tertiary sector in Australia for over a decade, I have always been interested in identifying simple, effective ways of teaching analytical methods and concepts. In this process, I have found cultural theorist Richard Johnson's (1986) notion of the "circuit of culture" useful. His circuit features four dimensions — production, texts, readings, and lived cultures — all of which are articulated in relation to one another, and are subject to conditions of social relations.

A decade on from Johnson's schema, a group of cultural studies scholars headed by du Gay and Hall (1997) took on board the circuit of culture, refining it further. The new circuit of culture now features five *processes* — representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation — which any analysis of a cultural text or artifact must consider if it is to be adequately studied. These five processes are articulated, forming a linkage whose relationship is variable and contingent, rather than determined or inevitable. Therefore, a concern with one particular process in this "circuit of culture" requires examining all the others in their articulations.

As much as I am appreciative of the simplicity and elegance of this model in cultural studies, especially for the purpose of teaching, at the same time (and as a student of the Chinese media, which is arguably one of the most dynamic and fastest-changing fields of study around), I have found the model to be increasingly inadequate. This is because I see the exceptionally large-scale movement of people, capital, technologies, and media images in China as having resulted in an array of reconfigured scales of media production, representation, regulation, and consumption, as well as identify formation. And furthermore, the changing nature of the Chinese state means that, in addition to these factors, one can never comfortably reconcile the relationship between the national interest and various local, provincial interests. This thought piece is driven by a desire to "renovate" this circuit of culture by adding a scaffolding that is structured around, and informed by, a spatial perspective, all in the hope of nuancing each of the five processes, as well as their articulations.

A Geographic Turn

Economic reforms over the past three decades have wrought profound social stratification in China, so much so that, in order to fully understand its impact and implications, we have no choice but to

recognize that inequality, often measured and quantified in economic terms, is, in fact, intrinsically social-spatial. As a result of this social-spatial stratification, there are now many Chinas within the entity that is often referred to as the People's Republic of China. In the domain of Chinese media studies, there exists ample empirical attention to media practices at local and regional levels in China, as well as to the issue of central-local dynamics. In her recent book, *Communication in China*, Zhao (2008) illuminates a number of concrete ways in which local and regional media operate in relation to each other, as well as in response to central policies. Her account of how local officials in Jiangxi ordered the police to confiscate an official publication containing various policies banning illegal fee levies against farmers is a telling example of how local media practice is integral to local politics. Similarly, her account of how Guangzhou Daily Group's local political allegiance to the Guangzhou Municipal Party Committee inhibits its expansionist inter-provincial ambitions as it illustrates the ways in which place and location are crucial factors in the political economy of the Chinese media. In terms of local consumption, we have, on the one hand, examples of low-end mobile communication technologies playing a crucial role in social networking among migrant workers (e.g., Qiu, 2009), and, on the other hand, of ethnic communities in remote villages constructing meanings around "the nation" through watching central television (e.g., Guo, 2005). Increasingly, the construction of local and provincial identities in myriad media productions (e.g., Lei, 2003; Sun, 2005) contributes to the formation of place hierarchy in China. For this reason, the production and consumption of place imaginary via media becomes a crucial research direction to pursue in critical studies of Chinese media.

Not in spite of, but precisely because of this mounting body of empirical evidence, there is a genuine and urgent need to take stock and develop a conceptual framework, as well as a methodological focus, which would enable us to "spatialize problems and theories" in Chinese media. I am advocating this "break it up" and "tear it apart" approach to the study of Chinese media, not as a purely academic exercise in order to sound "new" or "different," but because, in the study of social, economic, political, and spatial arenas, "China" has already been "broken up." It has already been explored as consisting of many regions, provinces, and localities, and as comprising a multiplicity of scales. Just as a "spatial turn" was slow in coming to the China studies field (Wang, J., 2005; Cartier, 2005), it has been even slower in coming to Chinese media studies. Thus, Chinese media studies may have some catching up to do, conceptually and methodologically, if not empirically, vis-à-vis the other disciplines in China studies. I see two major reasons for this curious time lag. The first is a structural disaggregation between what is traditionally referred to as "area studies" (e.g., China studies, Japan studies, Southeast Asian studies) and media studies, one leading to the unfortunate situation of China studies scholars and Chinese media studies scholars mostly talking past and/or remaining unaware of each other's existence. The second is the nebulous status of media studies as a discipline and its uncomfortable relationship with other, more traditional, established disciplines, such as history, anthropology, and geography.

Introducing Scale as an Analytical Concept

In the same way that economists see human activities largely through the lens of the exchange of value, and that political/social scientists see through the framework of structure versus agency, geographers in recent decades have mostly made sense of social order through the analytic lens of *scale*.

Defined, according to one geographer, as spatial areas for specific kinds of social activity, scales are “platforms of absolute space in a wider sea of relational space” (Smith, 2000, p. 725). For decades, political and economic geographers have tried to understand social activities through scale, which, in ascending order of size, consists of the urban, the regional, the national, and the global, with the global as the ultimate scale (Taylor, 1982). This scalar configuration has more recently been amended to incorporate the body and the home as the “smallest” places, which has enabled a range of feminist and post-colonial concerns to be addressed (Marston & Smith, 2001).

Without wanting to talk at great length about how scale is theorized and debated in the geographic literature, suffice it to say that scale gives the impression of embodying “the establishment,” or conventional standards, without, in fact, doing so. Social scientists working on China have, by now, reached a consensus around an almost taken-for-granted way of imagining and making sense of the Chinese space, one which fits into the fixed scales of the world, the nation, the region, the province, the municipality, the county, and the village. No doubt, scale informs both policy making and administration at the formal level, as well as in the popular imagination of place, as evidenced in colloquial sayings, such as *da difang* (big place) and *xiao difang* (small place), as well as *shang mian* (place above) and *xia mian* (place below). Yet China studies scholars, particularly geographers, have made it their core business to unsettle this deeply entrenched assumption. Taking their cue from insights in the geographic literature in general, and situating their work in the Chinese context, China studies scholars working with scale, place, and space (Oakes, 1998, 1999, 2005; Cartier, 2001, 2002, 2005, 2006; Foret, 2000; Oakes & Schein, 2006; Wang, 2005) argue, first, that scale is arbitrarily deployed and is not a given, natural, and unchanging attribute of space; second, that contrary to what many assume, scale is never fixed, but instead is subject to change and active maintenance by various forces of power; and third, that new scales are always emerging to displace the old. They have also established beyond doubt in this body of work that China has one of the world’s oldest and most enduring systems of territorial scale hierarchy (Oakes & Schein, 2006), and yet three decades of economic reforms and a market economy have brought about the most profound changes and unprecedented challenges to this spatial hierarchy. But what results from these changes is not a flattening of hierarchy of scale, nor is it an erasure of locality and place as an important point of identification. What has resulted from three decades of internal migration, urbanization, and industrialization is the emergence of a new “geography of inequality” on the one hand, and an unprecedented level of translocal linkages and connections on the other (Oakes & Schein, 2006). And to make grappling with these two related processes even more difficult, the nature and role of the Chinese state has undergone profound change, resulting in intense contestation and negotiation between scalar relations. And it is in response to this profound and far-reaching social change and transformation in China that social scientists — and geographers in particular — have taken to the analytical concept of scale as a matter of great urgency and with a renewed sense of appreciation.

China’s media in the socialist era, structured according to a multiplicity of scales — newspapers, radio, and television at the national, provincial, municipal, and county levels — both mirrored and were metonymic of that hierarchical order. Although studies of the Chinese media in the socialist eras uniformly focused on the national level and did not explicitly apply the analytical concept of scale, little nuance was lost in that process, since local and provincial media’s submission to forces at the national, central level was, indeed, almost always taken for granted. But such a picture of uniformity and total top-down

centralization no longer fits, and the Chinese media landscape is now marked by scalar contestation, conflicts, and contradictions. Although media studies scholars have kept themselves busy documenting these changes, a closer relationship with other disciplines in China studies, and, as I argue in my specific case, with geography, would be greatly beneficial. Using the circuit of culture outlined above as a heuristic device, we may find that a spatial problematic will enable us to analyze how: 1) scale is contested and redefined in each of the processes that comprise the circuit; 2) scale-jumping is responsible for, as well as the outcome of, some possible disjunctures among various processes; and 3) the politics of scale affects the articulation of these key processes in the media and communication sector.

Further, I suggest that scaling our analysis of communication practices and technologies, as well as that of media formats, content, and practices, will in turn enrich and nuance the geographic understanding of scale. In other words, if fruitfully engaged, a spatial problematic may enable us to go *below* the national level and pursue the research of Chinese media within the context of two related social processes: a growing social-spatial stratification within China on the one hand, and the formation of widespread but uneven translocal linkages on the other. Additionally, it may help us gain a clearer appreciation of how communication technologies and media practices either assist or inhibit the activity of scale-fixing or scale-jumping, activities that are engaged in by various players: the state, capital, individuals, and of course, media institutions.

New Directions in Future Research

China's socialist modernity project aimed to eradicate three basic inequalities (*san da cha bie*): between the rural and the urban, between workers and peasants, and between manual labor and intellectual labor. Each of these inequalities has a spatial dimension, and each is linked to the state's *hukou* (household registration) system. Since its implementation in the late 1950s, the *hukou* system has effectively differentiated the entire population along urban-rural lines, with up to 70% of the entire population having rural *hukou*. While recent reforms in the system have made it possible for those with rural *hukou* to work in the city, the discriminatory nature of the system remains, since rural migrants to the city are still mostly not entitled to urban privileges, including employment (especially employment in the public service sector), public education, public health coverage, subsidized housing, and a wide range of other state-provided benefits (Wang Fei-ling, 2005; Solinger, 1999; Jacka, 2006; Zhang, 2001, 2002; Chan & Buckingham, 2008). The state's long-standing enforcement of the *hukou* system, fixing people to a place of a particular scale, and its recent policy of relaxing the system just enough to allow capital to exploit the cheap labor of rural migrants, is the most powerful illustration of the state's ongoing capacity to manipulate the degree of rigidity of scale. This also points to the collusion of interests between the party-state and capital in scale management.

Three decades of economic reforms have not eradicated these inequalities. Instead, they have given rise to even more dramatic disparities between north and south, east and west, coast and inland, and finally, but most importantly, rural and urban. The stratification is both spatial and informational, with people living in remote, mountainous, rural, and ethnic minority-dominated areas bearing the brunt of China's uneven and unequal development of media and communication. Zhao's (2008) study finds that

the imperatives of commercialization have, in the past two decades, led to a progressively higher proportion of television program content and perspectives catering to urban audiences — relative to the actual urban–rural population ratio — with rural topics and themes now taking up only a small percentage of the total media output, both on central and provincial television. For example, the least-developed region in China, western China, was originally intended to be the focus of coverage for CCTV 12, a newly launched channel from China Central Television. However, despite the center’s much-touted policy of “opening up the west,” this plan was thrown out in favor of a more profitable law channel when CCTV’s ratings-based policy of resource allocation was allowed to prevail (Zhao, 2008).

Since, as mentioned earlier, that scale is subject to renegotiation, we would do well to take future research in a number of new directions. First, we may want to explore how various forces — notably, in this context, the state, capital, individuals, and media institutions — engage in the business of fixing or maintaining existing scales on the one hand, and mount initiatives to contest scales, thereby “jumping scale,” on the other.

Second, it may be worthwhile to delve into the provincial level of media operations, as this will afford us the opportunity to appreciate the “mysterious” ways in which capital operates to push scale upward. Third, more than capital or the nation-state, the capacity of mass media content to transcend scale is intrinsic and taken for granted. However, although everyone, including the state, capital, and migrant workers, resorts to the use of communication technologies, the capacity and means by which scale can be transcended is differentiated along the lines of political allegiance and economic power. To re-embed Chinese media studies in the social terrain, as Zhao (2009) urges us to do, and to avoid the pitfalls of technological determinism, we must diligently ask the question of who has access to the means of scale-jumping.



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