Communications Technology and Media in China under Xi

Yu Hong, **Networking China: The Digital Transformation of the Chinese Economy**, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017, 238 pp., $28.00 (paperback).

Daya Kishan Thussu, Hugo de Burgh, & Anbin Shi (Eds.), **China's Media Go Global**, London, UK: Routledge, 2018, 324 pp., $44.95 (paperback).

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China's rise is often framed in terms of the global shuffling of political, economic, and military power. However, China's influence on the global mediascape has received relatively less attention. The two complementary books reviewed here examine the enormous efforts that the Chinese government and Chinese media have expended in shaping the global communications order. Yu Hong examines the transformation of China's internal ICT infrastructure from a political economic perspective, while Daya Kishan Thussu, Hugo de Burgh, and Anbin Shi focus on the contemporary Chinese media's relationships with the external world. Communication researchers who are interested in China studies, political economy, and international relations will find these books relevant and inspiring.

In the early economic reform period, China opened up its market to foreign ICT companies in exchange for their technology. In addition to contributing to the development of an export-oriented economic system and the formation of a deep rural–urban divide, this resulted in China becoming overly reliant on overseas equipment. Yu Hong's *Networking China: The Digital Transformation of the Chinese Economy* focuses on China's ambition to transform itself into a global ICT leader. Throughout her book, she tactfully shows how the state has played an active role in shaping the market and how, at various times, the goals of the state and the private sector have coincided and parted.

In the first two chapters, Hong sets up her discussion by tracing the development of the ICT manufacturing sector and ICT infrastructure in western China. Given the geopolitical importance of Central Asia in securing China's energy supply, the Chinese government has long sought to develop the western regions. However, in the early market reform period, the western provinces received less state financial support and foreign capital than the coastal provinces. To facilitate the development of western China, after 1992, local governments started charging installation fees and construction fees to raise capital for constructing the rural telephone network. The Chinese government also required telecom operators to provide a certain
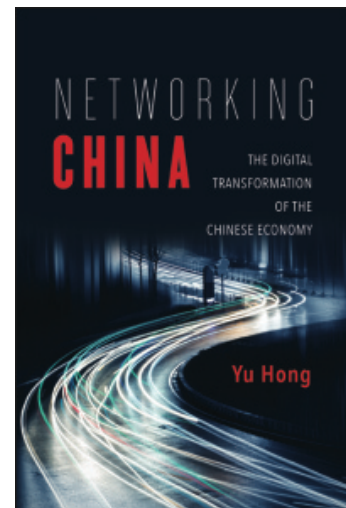
standard of service in the rural western regions. In 2005, the government introduced tax incentives to encourage ICT manufacturing enterprises to move to western China from the coastal cities. Subsequently, foreign ICT manufacturers such as Intel, IBM, Microsoft, and Dell began setting up their assembly lines in western China, such as in the Sichuan province. However, Hong argues that "the present development of western China around ICT export processing does little to alter the existing political economy of transnational capitalism" (p. 33) because this sector still depends almost exclusively on exports, thus rendering the economy vulnerable to global market instability. Furthermore, the western provinces have had to pay the price for hosting these global industrial complexes. In particular, as the factories consume increasing amounts of farmland, the farmers have little choice but to work in the factories for a minimum wage.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 examine three specific ICT sectors: broadband Internet, 3G mobile communications, and digital TV. These three chapters illustrate how the state's endeavors have not always coincided with the market's imperatives. For example, having observed how South Korea's broadband infrastructure enabled the country to successfully emerge from the Asian financial crisis, the Chinese government wanted to replicate that success. Chinese broadband operators also began persuading individual customers and large organizations to use the higher speed Internet connections. In 2002, the Chinese government began moving many of its administrative functions online to increase small and medium-sized enterprises' interest in the Internet, and local bureaus began giving guidance to local enterprises to trigger sector-wide adoption. However, the development of the fiber-optic broadband network after the 2008 economic crisis was not without obstacles. In particular, many Chinese real estate developers and owners had exclusive contracts with one nonstate Internet service provider. As a result, the network operators did not have complete control over or access to the network, which made the task of replacing copper lines with fiber-optic cables increasingly expensive.

In 2006, the government began developing a proprietary technological standard for China's mobile communication network. In the early 1990s, the European GSM cellular network and American CDMA network were adopted in China due to the influence of overseas companies. Local companies lacked the technical knowledge and technology needed to build such systems. When China Unicom began building the CDMA network, the majority of the contracts went to foreign companies. The one successful domestic vendor was only granted a contract after China Unicom lowered the standard for its network so that the vendor could participate. To reduce the reliance on foreign companies, the government decided to set up its own standard, called TD-SCDMA. However, because the standard is somewhat unusual, the leading Chinese vendors only support the standard with certain conditions.

In chapter 5, Hong shows that the market reforms that began to be introduced in the 1980s forced cultural institutions to rely on the market. Nonetheless, the government has continued to exert cultural leadership. In the early 2000s, the government decided to free the operational arms of media companies from direct state ownership. This marketization drive resulted in unprofitable companies being driven from the market. However, around 2005, state-financed public institutions began to return, and the government declared that the fundamental task of China's cultural system was to promote core socialist values. For example, in the process of digitalizing the television network, the government decided to

expand the public service system to rural areas by distributing programs free of charge. However, because of digitalization, many people living in the western provinces are no longer able to watch local programs.

In chapter 6, Hong provides a summative evaluation of the related measures and policies and their implications for the development of China's ICT sector. First, while the economic restructuring via the development of the ICT sector has created macroeconomic advantages, it has also produced many low-paid, precarious jobs, such as delivering online shopping. Second, although the state has been pushing the manufacturing sector to replace overseas components with those domestically manufactured, the upstream enterprises have not been entirely satisfied with the components produced by the downstream enterprises. Finally, in recent years, China has been challenging the U.S. hegemony and become increasingly involved in the international governance of the Internet. The government is currently building a China-centered global optical network that will connect Asia, Europe, and the Pacific. Chinese companies have also become major data centers for overseas companies. In addition, the government has been supporting the globalization of Chinese Internet services. For example, Baidu bought a controlling stake in the largest e-commerce company in Brazil in 2014.

This final point concerning "going out" is paramount. To become a truly global ICT leader, it is not enough for China to develop its internal ICT—it must also go global. This is also the theme of *China's Media Go Global*, edited by Daya Kishan Thussu, Hugo de Burgh, and Anbin Shi. Recently, Chinese President Jinping Xi urged China's media to go global and tell a better Chinese narrative and spread the Chinese voice. Against this background, this volume, which consists of 19 chapters, "is explicitly concerned with the globalization of China's media and seeks, at its core, to interrogate how the rise of media in China will impact on global communication" (p. 5).

The five articles that make up part I of the volume, titled "Conceptualizing the Rise of China's Media," offer a variety of interpretations of the rise of China's media in the world. In chapter 1, Daya Kishan Thussu points out that China's emphasis on cyber sovereignty through "establishing domestic cyber properties and protecting them from competition from global digital giants" (p. 26) is characteristic of Sino-globalization. At the same time, the government has sought to restrict the freedom of the press and impose strict cyber censorship to dilute public reactions and grievances. Although the Western media and governments have criticized these policies, Hugo de Burgh (chapter 3) provides an alternative, provocative interpretation of the government's practices. De Burgh suggests that a central value of the Chinese media is "communitarianism," in which individuals are considered to be members of a community. In addition, he argues that whereas China's media sector was developed to "revitalize China so that it might withstand imperialism" (p. 53), Western media are concerned with monitoring the powerful. Given this historical and ideological background, Chinese journalism can be seen to be built on the idea of promoting peace and development rather than being a witness of the truth.

In chapter 2, Anbin Shi interprets the China-initiated global ICT projects not as an anti-United States move, but as the fulfillment of what the New World Information and Communication Order and the World Summit on the Information Society had failed to accomplish. In particular, the aim of Sino-globalization is seen to bridge the gap between the Global North and South. In a similar vein, Zhengrong Hu, Deqiang Ji, and Yukun Gong (chapter 4) consider the establishment of the first overseas office of CCTV in Kenya, Africa, as a sign that China has prioritized underdeveloped markets. Indeed, one of the major communication goals of China's drive to establish a global media presence is to eliminate the impression that the rise of China is a threat to the West. In chapter 5, Suzanne Xiao Yang suggests that China's lack of discourse power in global politics led to the distorted image of China portrayed in the Western media. However, she argues that the globalization of Chinese media will not only enable China to collect firsthand information on the global economic and financial markets but also help define its cultural and ideological values and therefore provide a better Chinese narrative.

Part II, titled "Chinese Media Abroad," provides a detailed summary of the current status of China's overseas media operations. These include television news (chapter 6 and chapter 4 from part I), radio (chapter 8), documentaries (chapter 9), newspapers (chapters 7 and 10), and magazines (chapter 10). In chapter 6, Vivien Marsh draws on interviews with local journalists and staff to reveal the dual views on CCTV Africa among the local population. Specifically, while some see CCTV Africa as an extension of the Chinese state media and thus avoiding negative news about China, others see it as empowering because it does not always report negative news about Africa. In discussing the Chinese documentary industry, Guoqiang Yun and Jing Wu (chapter 9) point out that in the West, marketization killed the documentary film movement in the 1960s, whereas in China, marketization has liberated moviemakers from the state's control. However, they further argue that the increasing reliance on funding from international film festivals and presale purchases has imposed another form of hegemony on Chinese documentary makers. Although this part of the volume provides very detailed data about each industry, it does not cover important media industries such as film and music.

Part III of the volume, titled "Discourses of Sino-Globalization," explores the practices and reception of Chinese media overseas. In chapter 15, Qing'an Zhou and Yanni Wu provide a general commentary on these practices and point out three ways in which Chinese mainstream media have expanded their operations internationally: global distribution, cross-national cooperation, and technology acquisition. In terms of content, the Chinese media are portrayed as providing more detailed stories about China, appealing to sensitivity, and striving to construct dialogues. In chapter 12, Wanning Sun examines the specific practices of foreign journalists working in China and finds that journalists consider covering the new China to be exciting and feel they have a duty to discover the real China behind the seeming harmony, with some regarding being expelled from China as an honor. In chapter 14, Jingwei Piao analyzes the transformation of the financial media in China. She points out that the financial media have coevolved with China's economy and that due to their ideological alignment with the state, financial media are influential in shaping the state's policy. Xiaoling Zhang and Zhenzhi Guo (chapter 11) evaluate the effectiveness of the less-known Chinese cultural centers, with specific focus on the center in Benin, Africa. Yu Xiang (chapter 13) also examines the effectiveness of Chinese media in the African context. Her research on African university students studying in China reveals that although they are conscious of the ideological agenda of CCTV Africa, they agree with the message. This illustrates how elites in the

periphery are attracted to the messages broadcast from the center. These two chapters are particularly illuminating, given China's recent investment in Africa and the Belt and Road Initiative.

The final part, titled "Media with Chinese Characteristics," continues the discussion of various Chinese media, such as the advertising (chapter 16), social media (chapter 17), entertainment television (chapter 18), and regional media (chapter 19) sectors, in the global context. Shanshan Lou and Hong Cheng (chapter 16) and David Feng (chapter 17) together suggest that Western users have yet to become familiar with Chinese social media and that the Chinese voice on Western media platforms such as Twitter is still weak. In chapter 18, Hong Li and Rong Zeng argue that Chinese entertainment television has begun following the United States and European models in which shows are produced by independent production houses rather than in-house. Similar to parts II and III of this volume, the chapters in this final part provide an excellent overview of the current state of the Chinese media environment, although many of the theoretical discussions and implications are underdeveloped.

These two books provide up-to-date information about the rise of China's ICT and media sectors in the Xi era. Both works illustrate China's ambition to develop its soft power, particularly after the 2008 global financial crisis. However, the process of development has encountered many obstacles and is filled with contradictions. In *Networking China*, Hong rightfully states that while China is a strong developmental state, China's "power, unity, and rationality" (p. 152) cannot be overstated. Overall, these books show that the development of China's ICT and media sectors will continue to depend on the government's economic imperatives and political considerations, the market's assessment of the benefits and risks, global technological advancements, and international dynamics.