
Editorial

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It has been four years since our last *WPCC* Chinese media issue was published. In that time, the People's Republic had gone through a dramatic period, mixed with joy and hope as well as devastation. The year 2008 marked the 30th anniversary of the Deng Xiaoping-led Economic Reform. At the same time, it witnessed China's successful Beijing Olympic Games, despite much controversy over the 'typically Chinese' manipulation that characterized the opening ceremony. Last year, the Chinese Communist Party celebrated the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic; although the most intriguing picture of the celebration was still a magnificent display of military weapons alongside with a massive but highly ordered dancing party held in Tiananmen Square, it seemingly received much more positive coverage within international press than previous celebrations of this kind. In March 2008, a series of riots and demonstrations took place in the Tibetan Autonomous Region and adjacent Tibetan-inhabited areas of the country. The demonstrations not only turned into intensely violent situations in Tibet, but also triggered a global-scale anti-Beijing Olympics row, mainly organized by the Tibetans in exile. Two months after the Tibet incident, on 12 May, in Sichuan province of southwest China, a deadly earthquake that measured at 7.9 on the Richter scale took place, leaving at least 87,000 people dead. This great earthquake immediately made headline news in the global media system; as it had been heavily criticized for preventing the foreign press from freely reporting on the Tibet unrest, the Chinese government provided foreign journalists with much more freedom to cover the earthquake. On 5 July 2009, a series of violent riots over several days took place in Ürümqi, the capital of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. The riots started as a protest involving at least 1000 Uyghurs, but later escalated into violent attacks which mainly targeted *Han* (ethnic Chinese) people. Armed police were deployed to put down the violence and, two days later, hundreds of *Han* people clashed with both the police and Uyghurs. According to the Chinese government, 197 people died, with 1721 others injured and many vehicles and buildings destroyed in the riots. Uyghur groups, on the other hand, say the death toll was far higher.

These 'big Chinese stories' repeatedly remind us that, while its economy is

growing rapidly, China is also facing tremendous social and political challenges. The term ‘risk society’ (*fengxian shehui*) has become more and more popular for Chinese academics to use in response to all sorts of social or environmental crisis. Although the theory of risk society, which was first introduced by Ulrich Beck in 1986, is widely referenced within Chinese academia, the Chinese intelligentsia seem to have a lack of critical engagement with the theory itself.

As far as the Chinese situations are concerned, to use this Western-originated concept uncritically can be quite problematic. In contemporary Chinese society, any kind of social and economic reform is illegitimate unless it is ultimately approved or led by the Communist Party, even though there may exist disagreement and conflict about it among the senior Party officials; the ‘party-state’ plays a dominant role in controlling and mobilizing political, social and economic resources. Therefore, in the West, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, the term ‘risk society’: ‘is an important societal conceptualization – risk being a key concept of economics – that also found a political resonance in environmental circles’ (Therborn, 2007, 77), whereas in China, it should be primarily associated with the authoritarian state. In other words, whatever sphere a certain risk occupies in China, be it social or environmental, it always poses a fundamental challenge to the legitimacy of Chinese government.

Pervasive as it is, party-state intervention is becoming increasingly complex and tactical in China. This is well reflected in the mass communication sphere. After the Tibet unrest, for example, the Chinese government decided to introduce a new rule for dealing with breaking events (*tufa shijian*). That is, immediately after a particular breaking event occurs, the main body involved in the event should hold a press conference; more importantly, news media should ‘report the fact quickly, but be cautious on the causes behind the fact’ (*kuaijiang shishi, shenjiang yuanyin*). For some, this ‘new’ rule can be considered as a step forward, made by the government itself to improve the free flow of information. For others, it is still an old version of news control in a new guise. From this, it can be seen that Chinese media continues to be subjected to a refiguration of party-state power, coexisting with a strong tendency to embrace and sometimes negotiate with an international information order.

In the past couple of years, a new corpus of academic work has built up, addressing the latest developments in the Chinese media, with much emphasis on party-state intervention (e.g. Berry, 2009; Sun and Zhao, 2009; Zhao, 2008). Yuezhi Zhao (2008), in her substantial book *Communication in China*, not only attempts to ‘describe the making of authoritarian formations in the Chinese communication system and the role of communication in the constitution of “China’s new order”’ but also [to] analyze the unfolding dynamics of communication politics and the uneven terrains over which various social forces

struggle for their respective stakes during China's epochal transformation' (p. 10). The book covers a full range of prominent topics mainly concerning the political economy of Chinese media and society, from Chinese media's integration with global capital to the Chinese domestic entertainment TV industry, from civil rights and legal justice to the rise of Chinese neoliberalism. Chris Berry (2009), in his work on Shanghai Television's Documentary Channel, interrogates the Documentary Channel as a specific kind of public space in the culture of Shanghai and China. He argues that Chinese televisual public space exists under the conditions of the party-state apparatus and global marketization. On the one hand, there has been much effort made by the journalists of the Documentary Channel to make the channel a public space using their programming, but the party-state apparatus still 'has ultimate control over what gets aired' and 'the collaboration between the journalists and viewers must fit in with its values' (ibid.: 85). On the other hand, as in the United States and the United Kingdom, as Berry comments, 'the reconfigurations pursuant upon the new multi-channel environment and the increased emphasis on market dynamics and the trading in audience-as-product' have become important factors 'in shaping the ways in which both journalists and viewers can participate in televisual public space as the state' (ibid.: 89). Sun and Zhao (2009), in their provocative article "Television Culture with "Chinese Characteristics"", take China Central Television's (CCTV) 'emotionally powerful and morally lifting' coverage of the Sichuan earthquake as their starting point (ibid.: 96); they view that kind of 'television storytelling and subject making' as something that 'articulates with the broad political economy of China's ongoing social transformation during the era of a worldwide "neoliberal revolution"' (ibid.: 97). It is the production of the neoliberal subject in the current Chinese socio-political climate that they find deeply problematic here. They point out that Chinese television always treats 'human tragedies as either incidental or inevitable', and avoids touching upon 'the social and political causes of individual's suffering' or the flaws of China's social welfare system (ibid.: 104). What they try to argue here to a large extent echoes my argument against an uncritical use of the theory of risk society within Chinese academia; it takes a great deal of empirical effort and in-depth analysis to study the ambiguities and paradoxes of Chinese media in relation to the Chinese state, which is sustained by both socialist legacies and neoliberal strategies. In my opinion, that is also an important goal for a critical Chinese media studies. This special issue of *WPCC* on media and China wishes to make some contribution to the achievement of that goal.

This issue comprises six original articles and one book review. These six articles fall into three categories of topics on media and China. The first two articles deal with two interesting cases of China's communication policy, Digital Rights Management (DRM) on the one hand and the digital television switchover on the other.

Benjamin Bates and Tao Liu's article considers how China could implement DRM approaches within the international copyright structure that could maximize social value and acceptance. Between the Confucian emphasis on sharing cultural materials and a more politically motivated treatment in both Imperial and Maoist periods, there has been little basis for the intellectual property rights approach favoured by the West and pushed in international trade agreements. Some scholars have questioned whether Western property rights approaches are appropriate for all cultures, and have suggested that DRM systems can offer an alternative approach. Delays in the implementation of copyright procedures and processes in China, particularly in the electronic media, provide an opportunity to develop new approaches. In the article, they argue that China has an opportunity to consider how DRM systems and approaches could be developed to enable an alternative approach to intellectual property rights consistent with traditional cultural values.

Michael Starks's article on digital television switchover in China is based on interviews he conducted in the country in 2008, together with good literature research. His article tries to explore why the Chinese route to switchover is different from that of most other countries. He identifies that, elsewhere, the priority has been to switch off analogue terrestrial transmissions to make more efficient use of spectrum, often against a background of satellite and cable growing in importance and a diminishing role for terrestrial reception, but in China, except for Hong Kong, converting analogue cable systems to digital has been the primary switchover activity. He finds that economic and political factors make a market-led policy difficult to design or apply. Moreover, China's motivation is different: rather than pushing to re-use analogue terrestrial spectrum, the government aims to support the interests of the TV-receiver manufacturing industry and, especially, to improve the managed communication of information to the Chinese people.

The next three articles bring to the fore the issues of 'autonomy' or 'independence' in China's media practice. Wusan Sun presents a nice case study of media supervision (*meiti jiandu*) in China. Following up on her article published in the last *WPCC* Chinese media special issue, Sun continues to critically examine a power struggle between the local and central levels of Chinese political structure through a journalistic event. Her article shows that, in the context of economic and bureaucratic decentralization, central and local governments, as well as central and local media, have respective interests in what is known as 'public opinion supervision' (*yulun jiandu*). In the specific media supervision event her article studies, every party involved will evaluate their own potential gains and losses, as well as their relationship to the other parties concerned, and make decisions accordingly. The result of such deliberation between the party-state and the media, according to Sun, propels the development of a public sphere in China. She concludes her article by arguing that the development of public opinion

supervision is a result of strategic alliances among government bodies and the media.

Haiyan Wang's article looks at the problem of local press autonomy in China. As Wang states, it is often mentioned that reform of the Chinese media since the 1980s, characterized by the withdrawal of state subsidies, has led to the tension of the media having to serve 'two masters', the ruling party and the market. Yet there has been little examination as to how journalists in local newsrooms operate in this milieu, and how they feel about and deal with various pressures. This article attempts to fill the gap by providing an insider's perspective. It casts some light on autonomy in China's local press, as well as bringing fresh insights to the dynamic between politics, marketplace and media. The article concludes that it is with tactics and guile that journalism at the local level in China struggles, survives, develops and thrives.

Moving away from journalistic practices, Rui Liu's article is about the development of independent TV production companies in China. Her article focuses on the evolution of independents and the changing face of the television market. It discusses the ecology of independent television companies in China, and how government regulations are impacting on the TV production market. It argues that independent TV is providing a new face for China's TV market, one often suspected of being imitative, propagandistic and lacking diversity.

The last fascinating piece is contributed by Greg Philo, an active figure at the Glasgow Media Group. Different from the rest of the articles within this issue, which generally talk about China on its own, Philo's article focuses on cross-cultural perceptions and the processes by which ideas and values move between societies. It is based on focus groups, responses to questionnaires and interviews with 140 Chinese students, cultural workers and teachers. It shows how the experience of living in the UK can both alter prior expectations of the country as well as generating processes of critical reflection about the nature of both China and Western societies. The participants focused on the evaluation of educational systems, the understanding of rights, law and social obligations, and how these affect the current status of women. Social change does not result simply from exposure to new ideas; cross-cultural contacts and experience can also be factors in the movement away from traditional structures, in that they highlight alternative ways of understanding the self in relation to others and new possibilities for social life.

This issue's book review is written by Philip Lin, a second-year doctoral student here at CAMRI. As a native of Taiwan, Lin provides a well-grounded understanding of Hsiao-Hung Chang's book *Fake Globalization* (2007) in the review. From a literature and cultural studies perspective, using a series of

examples drawn from contemporary audiovisual culture, Chang analyses globalization in four key dimensions – the global visual-image media, the flow of global commodities, the global empire’s control, and global popular culture within the Taiwanese context as well as a wider East Asian context.

Finally, just to say a few words on the launch of this special issue. The idea for this issue came from the success of our China Media Centre’s 2009 conference on the theme of ‘Creativity and Innovation in Chinese Media’, held on 22–3 June in London. Over 50 scholars and researchers from Europe, the US, Australia, mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan attended the conference. Although only two of the conference papers (Bates and Liu; Liu) are included in this issue, I would like to express my sincere gratitude towards all the conference participants who submitted their work.

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