Chinese Media Studies: The State of the Field

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This article maps 'Chinese media studies' from four angles: the academic traditions of journalism and communication studies; media and cultural studies; and cinema and cultural studies. The disciplinary division cannot be so clearcut, as most works attempt to converse with other disciplines or are by nature interdisciplinary. Using disciplinary mapping allows one to identify the shaping power and distinctions of academic disciplines. This article also attempts to provide an overview of comparative scholarship from different regions and historical periods, and on different media.

This article deals mainly with book-length publications from the English-speaking world, including edited volumes, but refers to research outcomes published in journals or in Chinese. It does not claim to provide comprehensive coverage of all the books on Chinese media, but rather to present a selective and focused account.

Journalism and mass communication: Media democracy and political economy of media

Scholarship on Chinese journalism is characterised by intense discussions around democracy. Among the few authors who have published books on Chinese journalism, the Taiwan-born and United States-based Chin-Chuan Lee may represent early studies or the dominant view on Chinese journalism. After publishing a critical intervention against media imperialism, he edited a trilogy that focuses mainly on press control and resistance in China in the 1990s. Published in the decade following Tiananmen, the trilogy was driven by a strong sense of political "abhorrence" about the authoritarian state's control of the media in Mainland China (Lee, 2000: 9). One of the characteristics of the trilogy is to include the United States in the mediascape of China, finding ideological support for this in concepts such as Tu Wei-ming's 'Cultural China', which embraces North American scholars (Tu, 1991).

In her work, the China-born and Canada-based scholar Yuezhi Zhao (1998, 2008, 2009) refines the dominant view that configures democracy within the liberalist ideological framework. While the authors in Lee's trilogy bring forward the tension between the media and state, Zhao highlights the deleterious effects from both party journalism and commercialism (Zhao, 1998). After media conglomerations were actively carried out from the 1990s, and in particular in the period of China's entry into the WTO in 2001, more scholars have discovered cooperation as well as tension between state and the market in various fields (Keane, 2001, 2007; Zhu and Berry, 2009; Qiu, 2009; Sun, 2009; Yang, 2009; Wang, 2008; Yu, 2009; Hong, 1998; Zhao, 2000).

The existing framework of communication studies is challenged by the contemporary media realities of China, which internalise decades of socialist history, ever-accelerating commercialisation and urbanisation, tight control of media, rapid popularisation of new media and the pool of cheap labour in media-related industries. Multiple sets of seemingly incongruous problems converge in Chinese media — for instance, problems of the party-state media and the marketised media; of the industrial age and the information age; and of the emergent 'global superpower' and the 'global factory'. That is why some scholars find Arif Dirlik's concept of the 'post-socialist' state useful in analysing the multiple layers and complexities of China's media (Yu, 2009: 5–7; Keane, 2002: 5). Some scholars seek to imagine a third way — that is, avoiding media models based on either commercialisation or propaganda. Ying Zhu asks whether this inevitably amounts, in reality, to an implicit acknowledgement of the authoritarian model (Zhu, 2008).

Some scholars explicitly express discontent with democracy-centred approaches to China's media. By including many authors based in Shanghai, New Media for a New China claims to be a representation of Chinese perspectives on the media and seeks to counter to 'a western view of the government' (Scotton and Hachtien, 2010: 3, 9). This...
book voices a sense of dissatisfaction with the censorship-oriented research trend in the West. However, it is questionable whether the contradiction posed between the Chinese and Western approaches can help the discussions on the progression and directions of China's media.

Early studies of mass communication inclined towards historical and empirical research methods. Alan Liu’s Communication and National Integration in Communist China (1971), John Hawkins’ Mass Communication in China (1982) and Wen Ho Chang’s Mass Media in China (1989) cover the communist period. While the books by Liu and Hawkins are heavily inflected by their political concerns, the Korea/United States-educated scholar Chang concentrates on presenting facts and data from a politically detached stance. James Lull’s book China Torned On presents the media landscape of 1980s China through discourse analysis and audience reception studies. Audience research has not been a strong point of Western scholarship with regard to Chinese media. Likewise, research into China’s radio is also not highly developed.

Studies of Chinese TV have, however, proliferated over the last two decades. Michael Curtin’s book, Playing to the World’s Biggest Audience, applies methodologies of human geography and cultural studies. Michael Keane has published a body of significant research on Chinese TV production from the perspective of creative industries (Keane, 2002, 2009). The volumes he edited contextualise the Chinese TV industry from an Asian perspective (Keane and Moran, 2003; Keane et al., 2007). With the increasing role of commercial entrepreneurs in China’s mass media, advertising has also received serious attention in a few works (Wang, 2008; Li, 2006).

In response to the rapidly changing dynamics of the industry, scholarship on Chinese TV delves into issues related to the internationalisation of the medium. The main topics include media imperialism and the global/local question. One of the common problems pointed out in the studies of Chinese TV production is the cultural trade deficit (Zhu, 2006; Keane, 2007; Wang, 2008). While products ‘made in China’ occupy the globe, the cultural products ‘created in China’ make little impression on global audiences (Keane, 2007). Moreover, there is a general sense of dissatisfaction with the programs among Chinese audiences (Lull, 1991; Hong, 2002).

An important topic for mass communication studies is governmental policies. Since the 1990s, the main directions of governmental policies on TV can be defined as conglomeration and decentralisation in parallel with the long-term direction of marketisation. Research into governmental policies has paid attention to the actual application and implementation processes of policies at local grassroots levels, often through interviews and fieldwork (Zheng, 2008; Keane, 2001; Hong, 1998). Junhao Hong, with extensive experience at Shanghai TV, concentrates on changes in governmental policies in the post-reform period (Hong, 1998). The new policies - such as a quota system for program imports - were aimed at protecting and promoting domestic TV programs under the notion of 'cultural security' (Hong, 1998: 125-25; Wang, 2008: 249). Such policies received a positive response from Chinese TV industry workers (Hong, 1998: 124).

**Politics and sociology: ICTs – new societies and subjectivities**

The exponential development of China’s information and communication technology (ICT) since the 1990s has invited scholarship on the question of how it has been effecting social (Yang, 2009; Qiu, 2009), political (Hughes and Wacker, 2003; Zheng, 2005), economic (Wong and Ling, 2001) and cultural (Yu, 2009; Meng, 2009) change.

There are some noteworthy differences between studies of Chinese TV and studies of the internet. In studies of Chinese TV, governmental control and censorship have not been taken as seriously as they have in studies of the internet. Above all, if research on TV – a form of traditional mass media based on one-to-many communication – centres primarily on political economic inquiries into production and consumption, research on the internet – a form of social media based on many-to-many communication – provokes discussion on the emergence of a new society and subjectivity. Among the models of this (new) society and subjectivity, the ‘digital civil society' and 'working class network society' merit special attention.

The development of ICTs and a new internet technocluture has advanced discussions of the civil society, posing a new set of questions, such as how the new technologies influence the dynamics between the state and society; how the ways in which public opinion and contention are created and reflected have changed in the age of digital media; and definitions of the characteristics of online activism.

After a long period of neglect, the discussions on civil society developed around 1990s with two translations of the term as chinina and mingjian (Chen, 2003: 877-96; Ma, 1994: 180-93). The discursive indifference to civil society has been observed not only in China but also in East Asia, which implies that it is related not only to the formation of a bourgeois class but also to the historical discursive backgrounds. For instance, Japanese imperialists aggressively propagated the state-mixnou (mizoku or minjok, ethnic-nation) model of society as state-society in East Asia during the 1930s and 1940s, in alleged defiance of the Western model of society (Doak, 2001). For different reasons, scholars like Philip Huang (1993), Frederic Wakeman (1993) and Michael Keane (2001: 785) object to the application of the concept of civil society to China. Yuzhi Zhao also pronounces the need to ‘account for the complicated politics of class and nation, inequalities and exclusions within civil society' (Zhao, 2009: 187).

Zheng Yongnian responds to the questions related to ICT from a perspective of politics. In his book Technological Empowerment: The Internet, State and Society in China (2008), he argues that both state and civil society are keen on utilising ICT. He believes that ICT is another space of political struggle. He stresses that information control weakens the state and economy as well as society (Zheng, 2009: 136-55). As a specialist in Chinese governmental policy, Zheng often assumes the perspective of the state and pursues such questions as how the state can govern ICT for the betterment of society.

Zipeng Wang (2005) and Guoqin Yang (2009) draw attention to the growing power of civil forces and a new type of social activism engendered by the development of the internet. The book presents a rare sociological study of the Chinese internet in the West, and stresses the emergence of lively and subversive civil activism using this medium. He finds patterns of permanence, multiplication and organisation amid ephemeral, spontaneous and scattered online protest (Yang, 2009).

If many scholars have traced the emergence of (bourgeois) civil society and activism in their studies of the social impacts of ICTs, Jack Linchuan Qiu's interest lies in the formlessness of the new working class in the information age. In his work, which is supported by a large amount of ethnographic research, Qiu studies workers in internet cafes, secondhand equipment markets, and stores selling prepaid phone cards and pirated DVDs (Qiu, 2009: 14).

In line with Castells’ analysis of ‘mass self-communication’ in the globalised network society (2007: 238-66), Qiu explores the less rigid concept of a working class that is mobile, heterogeneous, variable and active or choice-based, and presents the notion of the ‘haves-less'. He examines the patterns of their ways of interacting with digital media and anticipates the difficulties that may arise and the prospect of forming the new collectivity of China’s urban working class.

These studies actively respond to the social or global interest in envisioning Chinese society under a distinctive new media environment. The main difference between the
Chinese studies: History and language

The main contribution made by China scholars to Chinese media studies must be in history. Scholars such as Joan Judge (1996), Timothy Brook (1998), Xiaoqing Ye (2003), Lucille Chia (2002), Kai-Wing Chow (2004), Christopher Reed (2004), Barbara Mittler (2004), Natasha C.G. Gentz (2006) and Rudolf Wagner (2007) and Xiantao Zhang (2007) have edited and written on history, mostly of printing. Most of these studies focus on Greater China, Ye, Reed) and the late Qing and early modern period (Judge, Ye, Reed, Mittler, Gentz, Wagner, Zhang). While concepts like Jurgen Habermas’s public sphere (Wagner, 2007: 3–5) and Benedict Anderson’s print capitalism (Reed, 2004: 8–9) are relatively loosely applied (but also see the more extensive discussion in Donald, 2000), the historical studies by China scholars are usually based on meticulous archival research. In this tradition, contemporary media such as the internet is also historically contextualised. Yongming Zhou’s Historicizing Online Politics: Telegraphy, the Internet, and Political Participation in China (2006) links the internet culture of political participation with the political culture created by telegraphy during the early modern political upheavals.

Other studies on contemporary Chinese media – for instance, by Godwin C. Chu (1978), Edward Gunn (2006) and Michel Hockx (2005) – bring to the fore language (Gunn), literature (Hockx) or popular culture (Chu). Based on the curricular emphasis on language, scholars from a Chinese studies background show strengths in microscopic investigation using methodologies of social history. China scholars’ approaches to the Chinese media often aim at discovering neglected areas or points, and at redressing common assumptions with concrete evidence. China scholars tend not to bring questions related to political and economic power to the forefront, and instead reaffirm the point of celebrating popular culture.

Cinema and cultural studies: Culture and power

Scholars from cinema and cultural studies backgrounds advance in analyses of techniques and content with their expertise in visual aesthetics. Researchers from cinema and cultural studies tend to be more outward looking, experimenting with more interdisciplinary methodologies in their study of Chinese media. Some scholars of cinema studies, such as Ying Zhu and Chris Berry, have shifted or expanded their interest into TV. We can also understand such an expansion in relation to the changes happening within the discipline of cinema studies. As the internet, digital media and mobile phones, as well as TV, gradually become more important, the disciplinary boundaries posed by cinema studies have come to be seen as confining.

We can compare the approaches to TV between communication studies and cinema and cultural studies. While the former’s main attention generally lies in the macro structure, the latter zooms in on individual programs and their content. With a series of books and articles, Ying Zhu has made a distinctive contribution to the study of Chinese TV dramas, contextualising the changes in TV dramas in relation to political, intellectual and cultural backgrounds. With a unique approach to TV dramas, with a focus on the theme of domestic workers (2009), from a broader perspective of Greater China, the authors of TV China provide multidimensional approaches, encompassing tradition, programming and reception. Haiqing Yu’s cultural approach to Chinese media, Media and the Cultural Transformation, can be seen as an exemplary interdisciplinary monograph of Chinese media. The key concepts – such as Douglas Kellner’s media spectacle, developed from Guy Debord’s critical concept of ‘the society of the spectacle’ – are advantageous for incorporating macro- and micro-level inquiries from media infrastructure to bodily experience of media.

The borders between area studies of Chinese studies and cinema and cultural studies are often indistinct, yet there seems to exist an important difference in their perspectives of culture. The difference, for instance, may be glimpsed in the discussion of the public sphere. Historical research on printed media and journalism in China by Rudolf Wagner and a group of researchers from the Sinology Department of Heidelberg University is greatly inspired by Habermas’s concept of the ‘public sphere’. However, it is only after significantly transforming the concept that Wagner applies it to the premodern Chinese media landscape. Wagner argues that the public sphere is by definition transnational: ‘Habermas, for one, treats the public sphere as being coextensive with a community within national borders.’ (Wagner, 2007: 4) He also unbinds the concept from the bourgeois class (2007: 3). For him, the public sphere is a heterogeneous and transnational space that includes different degree of openness, civilised rationality and different segments of the public. In his conception, the focus shifted from the rationality of bourgeois society into the heterogeneity of popular culture (for earlier analyses on cinema, Habermas and reworking the public sphere, see Donald, 2000 and Chia, 2005). The concept of the public sphere is used in order to highlight transnational and heterogeneous popular culture.

In his analysis of Shanghai Television’s Documentary Channel, cinema studies scholar Chris Berry suggests using the public space in place of the public sphere to describe the media of ‘marketised’ socialist China. He criticises the fact that notions of civil society and the public sphere lead us to understand ‘freedom’ mainly in relation to state ‘power’. By using the notion of space, he attempts to capture penetration of various forms of power into media. Drawing on Foucault’s notion of power as productive, he argues that ‘public space is produced by power and takes multiple forms, with differences and changes in such spaces corresponding to reconfigurations of power’ (Berry, 2009: 72).

Wagner and Berry draw the concept of the public sphere in very different directions. As Wagner magnifies the normative dimension of the concept and applies it to popular culture, popular culture is situated within a kind of power-free zone. In Berry’s conception of the public space, culture is situated within the complex dynamics of various forms of power.

Conclusion

By illuminating the methodological differences between disciplines, this article has attempted to show the range of the disciplines in the hope that it may contribute to better communication between them. In this disciplinary mapping, I have also tried to take into consideration geographical, temporal and political differences. Compared with other disciplines, the leading scholars of Chinese media are not heavily concentrated in the United States, but rather broadly scattered around the English-speaking world: Australia, Canada, Britain, Singapore and Hong Kong as well as the United States. Significantly, Chinese media have been enriched by interdisciplinary and ethnographic research. The notion of ‘interdisciplinary’ in media studies often means reaching outside academia as well as interrelations within academia. Some monographs, such as those by Jack Linchuan Qiu and Jing Wang, include extensive ethnographic research providing concrete empirical data. Some edited volumes and monographs have been written by individuals who have been professional workers in the Chinese media industry (Junhua Hong and Qiantai Hong) or in Western journalism (James Lull and Michael Keane).

Critical reflections on (Chinese) media culture are also carried out through media forms other than print, such as the internet, documentary films and blogs. Jian Yi’s documentary, Super Girls! (2007), and Ge Jin’s documentary, Gold Farmers (2006), may be considered as falling within Chinese media studies.
A significant methodological task may be how to combine macro- and micro-level questions—for instance, the structure of the political economy with the concrete dimension of the interface between the body and technology. What kind of new subjectivity will emerge in China’s distinctive media environment? How will the new media affect a massive group of urban workers, including ‘gray-collar (huliang) workers’?  

Notes

1 Voices of China: Interplay of Politics and Journalism (1990), China’s Media, Media’s China (1994), and Power, Money and Media: Communication Patterns and Bureaucratic Control in Cultural China (2000). The trilogy project was financially supported by the China Times Center for Media and Social Studies at the University of Minnesota.

2 For instance, China’s Media, Media’s China is divided into two parts: the first half on Chinese journalism and the second half on United States-China relations in the media. ‘Media’s China’ in the title, in this sense, means China represented in the US media.

3 The political economy of China’s mass media points to the changing power dynamics between the party-state and the market. For instance, Yongzhang Xing and Xiaoling Zhang say: ‘Competition between the market and politics becomes intensive. The government can make frequent attempts to limit the functioning of the market, but the market tends to prevail over politics eventually.’ (Zhang and Zheng, 2009: 3).

4 In a textbook format, it covers the recent changes in old media, including the Xinhua news agency, as well as new media such as the internet, mobile phones and blogs. Some works on Chinese media articulate the need to diversify our attention on Chinese media to aspects other than censorship. However, compared with journal and newspaper articles, censorship has not been the top issue in book publication.

5 In particular, a number of books written from the film and cultural studies perspective have been published in recent years. I will discuss TV China and Television in Post-Reform China later.

6 Despite the valiant title, the main part of the book does not centre on Mainland China but is devoted to media and film entrepreneurs in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore.

7 The conference volume, China’s Information and Communications Technology Revolution: Social Change and State Responses (Zhang and Zheng, 2009), includes essays written from various academic backgrounds in politics, sociology and cultural studies, and projects a multidimensional approach to the subjects related to ICTs in China.

8 The ‘have-less’ are those who have ‘limited income and limited influence in policy processes’ and are composed of heterogeneous social groups: ‘147 million internal migrants, more than 30 million laid-off workers, another 100 million or so retirees, and a large number of the 189 million youth between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four, including about 30 million students as well as school dropouts, unemployed and underemployed youth’ (Qiu, 2009: 4).


10 The ongoing involvement in media theory of renowned scholar of Chinese studies and contemporary literature, Lydia Liu—in particular, her re-reading of Claude Shannon’s Prouled English—deserves attention, although she does not directly deal with Chinese media (Liu, 2006, 2007).

11 ‘Gray-collar workers are graphic designers, database operators, technicians, software testers, and others who engage in repetitive work procedures in the production process.’ (Qiu, 2009: 105)

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