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VOICES FROM ASIA AND BEYOND

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RESEARCH REVIEW

VOICES FROM ASIA AND BEYOND

Centre for Communication Research at City
University of Hong Kong

Chin-Chuan Lee

Introduction

The Centre for Communication Research was founded in the College of Liberal Arts and Social Science at the City University of Hong Kong in 2005 (<http://com.cityu.edu.hk/ccr/>). The funding derived from the University, supplemented with external grants from such sources as the Research Grants Committee of Hong Kong and the Taipei City Government. The core members include Professor Chin-Chuan Lee (Director), Professor Jonathan Zhu, Professor Tsan-kuo Chang, Dr. Zhou He, Dr. Francis L. F. Lee, Dr. Fen Lin, Dr. Fei Shen, and Dr. Mike Yao, all of whom have migrated back to Asia after many years of training or decades of teaching in the United States. Closely affiliated with the Department of Media and Communication, the Centre has collaborated with a wide network of interdisciplinary scholars from around the world.

The Centre aims to develop an internationally and regionally recognized program of research and publication, investigating the cutting-edge issues under the forces of technological convergence and media globalization in the Asian context. Hong Kong is one of the focal institutional and cultural bases for studying the whole Greater China region as well as the process and phenomenon of globalization at large. As a platform to gather a critical mass of researchers, the Centre is keen on furthering exchanges and collaboration between local and international scholars.

Communication research has primarily been Anglo-American. The tradition is rich but also amazingly parochial: the interest of US media studies stops at the water's edge to the point that "international communication" means "non-US communication," whereas British cultural studies also attempts to universalize its Eurocentric insights. Neither stream has been sufficiently sensitive to the role of media and culture in the process of vast and rapid social transformation in the non-Western world.

The past decade has seen sporadic and somewhat *ad hoc* efforts to "de-Westernize" or "internationalize" communication studies (Curran and Park, 2000; Thussu, 2009; Wang, 2011); several core members of our team have published articles and books as active participants in this movement. Lee, Zhu, Chang, and He—four senior members of our team—have been former and current presidents of the US-based Chinese Communication Association. We endeavor to articulate an intellectual voice from a cross-point between East and West. We reject a dichotomous view of East and West, and seek to establish theoretical generality based on cultural specificity from Chinese settings, in the interest of a fruitful global dialogue.

Although the Centre's work is more broadly defined, this review focuses on journalism studies. Excluded from this review are data-mining and social network (Zhu),

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Internet privacy and gaming (Yao), epistemological and methodological issues in international communication research (Lee, Chang, He), as well as other non-journalism-specific media studies. We echo Zelizer (2011, p. 1) when she claims that the study of communication “could profit by acknowledging more fully journalism’s centrality in helping keep communication studies a singular and vibrant field of academic inquiry.”

The Terrain of Research

Chinese Press History

Chin-Chuan Lee has collaborated with visiting scholar Yong Zhang Volz from the University of Missouri on a program of research to address important issues that have received scant attention in Chinese press history. They first examine the social context in which the Protestant missionary press in China changed its primary orientation from gospel to news (Volz and Lee, 2009a). They argue that the missionary press provided an important foundation for the rise of the indigenous Chinese press at the end of the nineteenth century. Protestant missionaries in China invented certain journalistic practices and secularized their publications to appeal to Chinese readers. These innovations were not necessarily in line with mainstream Western journalism, but they inspired Chinese editors who later came to model after the language, content and format of the missionary press. The Chinese elite press was receptive to the missionary press model partly because they shared the goal of enlightenment and held business profit in contempt.

Next, they examined British–American press competition in the semi-colonial condition of China in the early twentieth century (Volz and Lee, forthcoming). As the United States was rising to be a world power, it began to challenge the British press monopoly in China by advocating an “Open Door Policy.” The British and American presses in China strengthened the cohesion of their respective expatriate communities. These papers also contributed to the colonial reconfiguration and power redistribution between Britain and the United States as they vied for influence with different ideas and practices of colonialism. The historical legacies of semi-colonialism are relevant to contemporary globalization where countries are growing more interconnected while constantly competing for power and privilege.

While the elite Ivy League universities generally despised journalism education, China’s premier Peking University lost little time in embracing it only 10 years after the University of Missouri established the world’s first journalism school in 1908. Volz and Lee (2009b) delved into a huge mass of original materials to understand why the Missouri model conquered China without resistance. They maintain that Chinese intellectuals looked to the craft of journalism as a vital part of China’s modernization and enlightenment project, while journalism education bore the imprint of values descending from the American Progressive Movement. Borrowing the concept of “paradigm,” from Kuhn (1962), Volz and Lee (2009b) argue that the Missouri model was so successful in China for three major reasons: (1) as a constellation of ideas, Missouri’s focus on news ethics and morality came to be accepted as a timely diagnosis to redress China’s journalistic malaise; (2) as an exemplar, Missouri’s primary emphasis on practical skills training was easy to emulate; (3) the intensive and sustained efforts of the charismatic Founding Dean, Walter Williams, to transplant the Missouri curriculum and disciples in China.

Besides these topical studies, two international conferences have been held under the auspices of the Centre by assembling a team of distinguished historians from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, and the United States to offer their insightful analysis on modern Chinese press history, particularly in the pre-1949 period. The first conference has resulted in the publication of a generously acclaimed anthology, available in both mainland and Taiwan editions (Lee, 2008). The mainland edition of this volume has sold over 10,000 copies, while the second anthology is being edited for publication as a sequel. The major concerns of these two volumes include (1) How were traditional Confucian scholars transformed into modern intellectuals, who took advantage of the press institution to enlighten a poor and ignorant population? (2) What did different camps of liberal intellectuals have to offer in the way of visions—imported either from John Dewey's version of pragmatism and American liberal democracy or from the Fabian and Harold Laski's conception of British social democracy—for rebuilding China? (3) Why did they, collectively and individually, fail in the face of Communist onslaught? (4) How did the ruling Kuomintang try to co-opt liberal intellectuals and critical journalists? (5) How did the nascent commercial press and its attendant news professionalism emerge alongside the party press, take root, and collapse? (6) How did the Communist press struggle against the Kuomintang press during the civil war? (7) How did the structural and editorial changes occur in the press after the Communists took power? (8) In what ways is the Chinese concept of *gong* akin to Habermas's "public sphere," and to what extent did the Chinese press contribute to the growth of public sphere?

Party Publicity Inc. and Clientelism

Turning our attention to today's China, it should be noted that the press has been in vast and rapid flux under the cross-pressure of political control and economic liberalization. Instead of acting purely as a state propaganda instrument, it now functions as a "Party Publicity Inc."—a profit-seeking institution that legitimates Party mandate and promotes party image. The accelerated pace of media conglomeration following China's accession to the World Trade Organization has sharpened this trend. Lee et al. (2006) examine the impact of press ecology in Shenzhen, a national trend-setter for the Party Publicity Inc., before and after conglomeration. They observe that press conglomeration has (1) engendered a more centralized management structure and operation; (2) replaced duopolistic competition with market monopoly and greater price-fixing abilities; (3) continued to rely on state office subscription; (4) dampened journalists' enthusiasm for political reform in favor of economic interest; (5) developed a two-tier Publicity Inc. to serve both the Party and the market; and (6) provided an opportunity for overseas expansion. Marketization does not trigger political reform, but preempts pressure for political change. The Party Publicity Inc. in its conglomerate form represents a complicitous accommodation between power and money as engineered by a post-Communist bureaucratic-authoritarian regime.

By the same token, why does Shanghai, China's economic capital, have a remarkably more timid media system than its sibling cities of Beijing and Guangzhou? Lee et al. (2007) examine the political economy of the Shanghai media from the perspective of clientelism in the post-Communist milieu of what they call "party-market corporatism." The key feature of clientelism is severance of all horizontal ties, thus restricting the media's loyalty vertically to the Party authorities. Based on extensive field work they analyze four patterns

of clientelism, including media conglomeration, elite circulation, resource allocation, and (lack of) media professionalism. They conclude that Shanghai is at once a “big city” and yet a “small place:” a resource-rich city governed by one layer of power authority, hence the distance from the epicenter of power to various media organizations is so short and direct as to make media control through clientelism very effective and powerful. Clientelism represents one of the three major patterns of party-market corporatism in China’s media sector.

In a case study Yang (2008) and Yang and Lee (2010) focus on how the Guangzhou press negotiates with the state, market, and what economists refer to as rent-seekers. The variance of state power determines the press’s trade-off between economic benefits and political costs, and this trade-off further affects the paper’s editorial slant. Editorial slant may also favor the highly competent interest groups (rent-seekers) that are capable of drawing on the coercive power of the state to manipulate the press.

As part of the corporatist practices, the party-state in China not only punishes journalists and news organizations for deviating from the approved line, but also exercises softer social control by bestowing journalism awards as a badge of professional honor. Based on extensive fieldwork, Huang (2011) seeks to tackle six questions: (1) How are different layers of state institutions set up to control and operate such official awards? (2) How does the Party name national awards after two iconic journalists, with what intended ideological implications? (3) How well are official awards received by rank-and-file journalists and their organizational superiors? (4) What is the gatekeeping process of judge selection, assessment criteria, and submission review? (5) How are the awards presented in the form of a ceremony? (6) What are the professional and ideological profiles of awardees?

Chinese Journalists

Lee (2005) compares the Confucian-liberal, Maoist, and what he calls Communist-capitalist conceptions of Chinese journalists. He argues that due to the underdeveloped political democracy and market order, the modern Chinese press has not treated the audience as public citizens. The Confucian-liberal model treats the audience as a target of education, guidance, and enlightenment; the Maoist model, a target of mobilization and indoctrination; and the Communist-capitalist model, a target of ideological conformity and exploitation for profit. Likewise, the role of the journalist is seen variously as a Confucian-liberal enlightened teacher, a Communist revolutionary cadre, and increasingly a profit-making ideologist. Left out in these formulations has been the crucial concern for democratic citizenship. Examining the tortured history in the concept formation of journalists and audience is tantamount to tracing the lack of democratic governance in modern China.

In examining the complexity of localized journalistic professionalization, Lin (2010a) claims that the emergent professionalism amidst authoritarian journalism in China is modified by the literati tradition. Analysis of survey data shows that journalists in China who hold *laissez-faire* economic values tend to look positively toward Western professionalism, while those strong on nationalist attitudes are more receptive to party journalism. In this context, Lin (2010b) presents a portrait of journalists in Guangzhou—a city noted for journalistic vigor—as younger, better-educated, more likely to be female, and less likely to be Communist Party members than the national average. Many of them

possess liberal attitudes but do not engage in political action. Journalists value the professional logic when they encounter legal, economic or political conflicts, but not over moral or cultural issues. However, political pressure takes command over professional or commercial considerations when sensitive issues are involved.

Along this line, Shen and Zhang (2009) study how investigative journalists in the *Southern Metro Daily*, one of the most outspoken papers in China, deal with political censorship and market pressure. Through interviews and field observation, they find that journalists take several routinized strategic practices to circumvent censorship: (1) to exploit the equivocal phrases in official directives and play an "edge ball game;" (2) to run a sensitive story before officials have time to ban it; (3) to gain room for maneuver by negotiating with advertising and business departments; and (4) to boost their social and political capital by forming a loose network of collaborators across news outlets.

Chinese Press Discourses and Effects on Public Attitudes

The Centre has undertaken many projects to investigate various discourses of the Chinese press and the impact of such discourses on public attitudes. Lee (2010) analyzes commentary essays published in the *Global Times*, a newspaper targeted at elite audiences that features the most extensive international news coverage in China. The paper is furthermore the primary site for public commentary and discussion of the country's role in global politics, culture, and economy, especially with respect to China's "peaceful rise" to the status of global superpower. Lee's analysis shows that discussions of globalization are most frequently framed with respect to US–China relations. While globalization is greeted as the best opportunity for China to rise, the United States is seen as a stumbling block to China's ambition. Even though these press essays seem to represent open deliberation regarding China's future on the global stage, they in fact correlate with the policy positions of the Chinese leadership. There was virtually no room to express dissenting views. Rather than enhancing public discussion of globalization, the *Global Times* echoes the Communist Party line and therefore fails to introduce fresh ideas into important policy debates.

China's economic liberalization reforms and quest for global status have raised concerns over ideological inconsistencies (the adoption of market economy is discrepant from China's avowed belief in socialism) and image problems (the world that China wants to embrace perceives her as a menace). Official news discourse makes frequent reference to globalization and uses it to manage the inconsistencies and to bolster China's global image. These discursive functions merit analysis. Ng et al. (forthcoming) provide a theoretical discussion of the functions derived from social psychological research on inconsistency justification and inter-group relations while drawing on relevant articles from the *People's Daily*.

Political pressure and market reform have produced ideological contestation in China. As a case in point, Zhang (2010) compares the press coverage of overseas human-rights protests against China during the torch relay for the Beijing Olympics, by the *Global Times* (a subsidiary of the *People's Daily*) and the *Southern Metro Daily* (the most "liberal" paper in China), two papers that altogether define the ideological boundary of official tolerance. In a sensational and nationalistic tone, the former constructs the torch relay as a showcase of China's prowess and achievements while attacking protestors as anti-China

elements. The latter, on the contrary, frames the incidents as an opportunity to reflect on how China could strive to play according to international norms.

What does the word “news” mean in China? As part of a 10-nation study of news definition, Zhang and Zhu (2006) examine what news is covered in the press (content analysis), and how news is perceived by journalists, PR professionals, and ordinary citizens (survey). Two divergent versions of news have emerged. The official press version tends to emphasize positive, normal, and regular aspects of political and economic events. The public, however, perceives news as associated with truth, timeliness, and personal relevance—a far cry from the press’s definition of news. If the government is successful in setting the media agenda, the press is not effective in setting the public agenda.

How would the consumption of news discourses affect public attitudes? Analysis of large-scale survey data (F. Lee et al., 2009) reveals that the attitudes of urban Chinese people towards globalization are largely consistent with the views propagated by the state and the news organizations, at least when certain key themes are concerned. They tend to believe that globalization has more positive than negative impacts on China, and concerns with national strength were positively related to positive attitudes towards globalization. This finding should come as no surprise because the state’s discourses about globalization were inflections of the century-old theme of modernization through Westernization, and they were also built upon the rise of nationalistic sentiments since the 1990s. Furthermore, F. Lee et al. (2011) find that foreign media use tends to reinforce people’s pre-existing pro-Western or anti-Western attitudes.

Cross-cultural and Comparative Press Discourses

How does the world’s leading press interpret China? In examining the *New York Times*’s editorial discourse on China policy from 1990 to 2000, Lee (2002) proposed the concept of “established pluralism” to describe the paper’s display of a plurality of perspectives within the orbit of the established order or the power circle. If the US elite press believes that the United States is “bound to lead” in the post-Cold War era (Lee, 2002), the elite Chinese press advocates that China is “bound to rise” in the age of globalization (Lee, 2010).

As part of a larger and continuing study, Lee et al. (forthcoming) examine how two of the most preeminent US newspapers—the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*—editorially invoked Tiananmen as a “news icon” in the past 20 years. The Tiananmen crackdown on the pro-democracy movement in 1989, as a decisive event, has provided an enduring prism for the world media to interpret China. The discourse analysis shows that the meanings of Tiananmen, reconstructed over two decades, were substantially but not wholly in line with the United States’s policy shifts toward China. Specifically, Tiananmen symbolized Communist dictatorship in the initial years after 1989 and then became an example of China’s human rights abuse in the late 1990s. Into the 2000s, the significance of Tiananmen faded. But it remained as part of the United States’s ritualistic memory of China’s repression that invokes the moral bottom-line of US foreign policy. In theoretical terms, a news icon may exhibit, in the course of an extended life cycle, both continuities and changes in its meanings, and there can also be subtle variations in the relationships between a news icon and the dominant power structure over time.

Song (2010) compares editorial discourses on globalization by the elite Chinese and Indian presses since both countries have departed from their socialist routes and been chief benefactors of the globalizing process. If the Chinese press discourse is interest-based, the Indian press discourse is identity-based. First, the elite Chinese press is inclined to accommodate economic globalization but reject Western political hegemony, and in this context to play down the adverse effects of globalization on disadvantaged groups within China. The elite Indian press is, however, more critical of the new international trade order and is quick to fault the Indian government for failing to cope with the threat of globalization to the country's economic and military security. Moreover, the Chinese press tends to emphasize historical continuity as if globalization sets a stage for China to rise to great-power status and to revive its cultural glory. The Indian press emphasizes historical rupture and seldom refers to its cultural splendor. Thirdly, the Chinese press is less critical than the Indian press of the United States's dominant role in the global trade and economic system.

Ongoing Research

Chinese Media Ecology and Investigative Journalists

We have proposed the concept of "party-market corporatism" (Lee et al., 2007) to account for the interlocking of the state and capital in China, on the one hand, and the management of the state-media-capital tripartite relationship, on the other. Furthermore, we have identified three prototypes of party-market corporatism. The first type—clientelism—is vividly displayed in Shanghai and Shenzhen, where the media exchange political silence for economic prosperity (Lee et al., 2006, 2007). We shall try to complete our investigation of the other two prototypes with a view to developing a monograph. The second prototype is characterized by "marketization of political management" in Guangzhou, where the press is driven by vibrant if not cutthroat market competition, albeit within the party-state ideological limits. Standing at the national forefront of journalistic courage and marketing innovations, many journalists in Guangzhou prefer the Party to recede to the background as a passive and benign entity. The third prototype is "political absorption of media marketization" in the national capital of Beijing, where power is supreme and the managed press diversity is maintained through a precarious balance of the emerging interest politics among counterbalancing power bases. Many news outlets, for lack of political backing, were pushed into the violent ocean of commercialism; once they become commercially thriving, however, they crave to be incorporated into the protective umbrella of the power circle.

Fei Shen and Zhian Zhang are investigating how social networks influence the dynamics of news transmission among China's investigative reporters both within and outside their own organizations. Specifically, they analyze (1) the shape, density, and clustering of journalists' social networks across different news organizations; (2) the relationship between journalistic ideology and social networking patterns; and (3) the extent to which social network might help to mobilize collective action and circumvent official censorship on sensitive issues. They have administered a questionnaire survey to 311 investigative journalists in 73 news outlets across 17 provinces, with a response rate of 80 percent to date. Field interviews will soon follow.

Global Journalistic Prisms of China

China has provided the world of journalism with a Rorschach card onto which various (even conflicting) images can be painted, provoking a debate over a paradigmatic shift from “weak China” to “strong China.” A workshop is being organized for major scholars from a dozen countries—China’s “significant others”—to share their analyses of journalistic portrayals of China. The study of news frames is to intersect with various theoretical perspectives, and to examine the enduring issues embedded in cross-cultural news discourses in relation to larger political, economic, and cultural contexts. In particular, we are interested in linking journalistic frames on China to a string of key values: democracy, market, capitalism, communism, human rights, China threat, nationalism, globalization, Asian values, Confucian values, the Cold War, and ideological conflicts.

As an extension of Lee et al. (forthcoming), we will compare how the elite US press (*New York Times*, *Washington Post*) and the elite British press (*The Times* of London, and the *Guardian*) have revisited the Tiananmen crackdown and the crumbling of the Berlin Wall—two defining events in 1989 that have changed the world—through commemorative coverage before and after each anniversary of the events in the past two decades. Journalistic commemoration does not simply revive collective memories of “foreign pasts” in people’s minds, but also recreates contemporary social realities by relating the past to the present in a variety of ways. Inasmuch as the Anglo-American news media share “universal” values but differ in national interests, they have invested similar-and-yet-different significance into these two global events. Besides, as “sites of memory” for the Tiananmen crackdown are not available domestically, foreign media play a critical role in sustaining and shaping the collective memory of this trauma.

US news coverage of China has historically oscillated like a pendulum swing between cycles of romanticism and those of cynicism, reflecting not only what was happening in China, but also what was happening in the United States, as well as what was happening to US–China relations. Chin-Chuan Lee and Tsan-kuo Chang have devoted a significant part of their academic life to investigating such issues (Chang, 1993, 2002; Lee, 1990, 1994, 2000, 2003, 2004; Lee et al., 2001, 2002, 2005). In the past three decades, many prominent US journalists have returned from their posting in Beijing to write telling memoirs, travelogs, and popular or topical books that provide an overall and changing prism of China. Following this scholarly tradition, Yunya Song (awardee of a Fulbright scholarship to study at the University of California, Berkeley for eight months) seeks to investigate the journalistic lens of China in her PhD dissertation through textual analysis of these books, coupled with interviews with journalists and scholars to gain first-hand understanding. Textual interpretation will be contextualized in the light of the Cold War and its ending, “decisive events” (such as the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989), the forces of globalization, and the “enduring values” (Gans, 1979) that undergirds the professional and political ideology of American journalism.

Conclusion

If the de-Westernizing project aims to challenge what Bourdieu (2001) calls “the imperialism of the universal,” we must not fall into the reverse trap of “the parochialism of the particular.” Based in Hong Kong and situated in greater China and Asia, we abhor the

Western-cum-universal hegemony, but we are not interested in creating any essentialized theories of Asian or Chinese journalism. We have nothing to do with any concept of "Chinese exceptionalism." We study Chinese journalism partly but not only because we are culturally Chinese. Nor because we are culturally Chinese can we only study Chinese journalism. The study of Chinese journalism is by no means intellectually self-sufficient or isolated; it should interpenetrate with the theoretical and methodological advances in the field of international communication and, more important, in the larger currents of humanities and social sciences.

What we aspire to establish is, in sum, certain general theoretical perspectives with Chinese characteristics that arise from and highlight cultural specificity in our problematic consciousness and interpretations, but ultimately emerge from this cultural reflection to develop a broader view of how the world works. If we succeed in establishing such general perspectives that allow internal differences, speak with a distinctive cultural accent, and yet transcend theoretical parochialism, we will be in a strengthened position to maintain an open-minded and mutually enriching dialogue with the Western literature on an equal footing.

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