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Recent Trends in Mainland China's Media: Political Implications of Commercialization

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This article reviews the findings of current literature on Chinese media. The central issue in this literature concerns the impact of the commercialization of Chinese media. This commercialization began in the early 1980s and accelerated after Deng Xiaoping's 1992 "Southern Tour." Commercialization has stimulated some degree of diversification, the introduction of new media technologies, and some measure of globalization. While preliminary assessments indicated that each of these changes would challenge the Party's control of the media, recent literature finds that the Party has managed to find relatively successful means of limiting or managing the impact of each of these trends. Despite this success in managing commercial media, however, the relationship between the Party, citizens, and information is changing in ways that have fundamental implications for Chinese politics. The Party's authority is increasingly indirect and diffuse. At least some citizens are gaining increasing access to information.

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Many commentaries on contemporary Chinese politics mention in passing that Chinese citizens' increased access to information is an important source of pressure for political reform. The literature on Chinese media over the last few years carefully considers this claim in ways that the broader literature would do well to consider. While almost everyone agrees that increased access to information is a good thing, literature on Chinese media strongly suggests that the link between changes in contemporary Chinese media and political reform is more complex than the broader literature generally recognizes. Namely, it may be possible for the Party to create and regulate commercial media in a manner that supplies more information, but still legitimates the Party's privileged position in Chinese politics. This review of the findings of that literature will consider that claim in some detail, with the goal of improving our understanding of the relationships between the Party, citizens, and information.

Literature on contemporary Chinese media explains the increasing flow of information as a result of reforms to Chinese media, of which the most fundamental is commercialization. Especially in the context of economic growth and increasing standards of living, commercialization has stimulated an enormous increase in the volume of media. The increased volume of media in turn entails some degree of media diversification. Commercialization has also stimulated other important changes to Chinese media such as the introduction of new media technologies—including television, recorded movies, and the Internet, each of which poses some potential as a "technology of freedom."[1] Commercialization has provided a stimulus for the globalization of Chinese media, both as Chinese media firms search for content and as transnational media firms seek to enter

[1]Ithiel de Sola Pool, *Technologies of Freedom* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard, 1983).

China's potentially lucrative media markets.

There are debates, often linked to broader discussions in media studies, about the implications of each of these changes. Is commercialization a step toward an autonomous media that could have a more independent role in political debates? Or does it mean, as elsewhere, that tabloid entertainment displaces meaningful discussion? Does diversification entail steps toward pluralism and meaningful debate? Or will censorship and constraints on ownership prevent such discussion? Are the technologies underlying new media so inherently liberating that censorship and control are effectively undermined? Or does that argument reflect a naive technological determinism? Does the increasing volume of images and ideas crossing China's borders offer the Chinese people access to new and liberating ideas? Or will transnational media firms compromise with China's leaders to gain market access?

How these questions are answered has an important bearing on assessments of the Party's prospects for managing these changes and, more importantly, for our understanding of the nature and prospects of authoritarian political power in contemporary China. Most literature concludes that the state still maintains enormous influence over the media, even if the range of topics that can be discussed and opinions that can be expressed in public is increasing. Much of the Party's control over media comes from the persistence of traditional institutional arrangements. There is still a dense network of ownership restrictions, licensing, post-production inspection, and post-distribution supervision that is backed up with credible threats of either shutting down publications that run afoul of the will of the leaders, or ruining the careers of or providing legal sanctions for individual journalists who do the same.

Yet while this literature chronicles reforms that have increased the volume of information available to Chinese citizens, it has also highlighted the Party's changing strategies for regulating and managing media. Old strategies have been extended to new media, such as the Internet. More importantly, the Party has developed new strategies for the increasingly commercial environment. For example, the Party regulates market access to insure the success of the media that stays within the limits of the Party's

preferences. After a period of increasingly diverse forms of ownership, the Party has more recently tried to consolidate diverse media into large conglomerates. The Party has matched enterprising Internet users with its own regulating technologies. More importantly, the Party has shifted both the style and content of its message to accord with the culture of the increasingly commercial media environment.

While almost no one sees much risk of immediate instability, longer-term prospects are less certain. Almost everyone agrees that reforms to the media involve structural changes in the nature of the state. If Mao's China was, as one of the most important monographs on Chinese media argues, a "propaganda state," then what will the state become as media are increasingly driven by commercial concerns and devote ever less attention to the Party line?[2] One possibility is that the state will compensate for its declining ability to interdict "bad" information by increasing its ability to "spin" information in ways that legitimate its ongoing activities. This possibility invites comparisons with media in countries like the United States —where dissent may be tolerated and media institutions enjoy substantial autonomy, but where many communication scholars nonetheless find dominant media organizations acting in the interest of existing elites. Whether or not such a system is possible in China's complicated circumstances remains to be seen, however.

Seen from the bottom up, the development of commercial media requires us to think about fundamental issues in both the relationship between citizens and consumers and in modern media markets. One line of thought argues that markets empower consumers. Deborah Davis draws a close connection between citizens in Tiananmen Square in 1989 and consumers in post-Tiananmen China.[3] Both expect to make choices about their own lives. From other perspectives, however, consumption-oriented media do

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[2]Daniel C. Lynch, *After the Propaganda State: Media, Politics, and "Thought Work" in Reformed China* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999).

[3]Deborah S. Davis, "Introduction: A Revolution in Consumption," in *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China*, ed. Deborah S. Davis (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 1-22.

little to empower citizens. Rather, the promise of consumption is and may well remain a mainstay of legitimacy for China's resolutely authoritarian state.

In sum, current literature on Chinese media tells an important story of dramatic reform and attempts to cope with its consequences. It may be that the Party can successfully manage commercial media to avoid immediate instability, but the commercialization of the media may nonetheless entail structural changes in the relationships between state, citizens, and information that have critical long-term consequences. There is no consensus about the ultimate implications of these changes, and in this author's opinion, it is too soon to draw such conclusions. Considering the range of possibilities should, nonetheless, help us to understand much about the changing nature of state power in contemporary China.

Mapping the Literature

Before proceeding, I will briefly list some of the literature included in this review. Jianying Zha's 1995 book, *China Pop: How Soap Operas, Tabloids and Bestsellers Are Transforming a Culture*, deserves special mention as a seminal work on the commercialization of Chinese media.[4] While the media and intellectuals that Zha discusses are no longer the most recent, her book is still useful. There are two additional monographs of late that offer broad views of Chinese media that also merit close consideration: Yuezhi Zhao's 1998 book, *Media, Market, and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line*,[5] and Daniel Lynch's 1999 book, *After the Propaganda State: Media, Politics, and "Thought Work" in Reformed China*.[6] Chin-chuan Lee has rendered yeoman service as the

[4]Jianying Zha, *China Pop: How Soap Operas, Tabloids and Bestsellers Are Transforming a Culture* (New York: New Press, 1995).

[5]Yuezhi Zhao, *Media, Market, and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

[6]See note 2 above.

editor of a series of four useful anthologies, the latter two of which, *Power, Money, and Media* (2000) and *Chinese Media, Global Contexts* (forthcoming), will be featured in this review.[7] Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, Michael Keane, and Yin Hong have recently edited another anthology of similar scope, *Media in China: Consumption, Content and Crisis* (2002).[8] *Journalism Studies* published a special issue on Chinese media in November 2000. Beyond these there are numerous articles scattered in various journals and anthologies. The journal *Gazette*, for example, regularly publishes articles on Chinese media. The February 2002 issue of the *Journal of Contemporary China* deserves special mention for a series of articles on Chinese television.[9] Yuezhi Zhao has published a series of fine articles which significantly extend and update the material in her book.[10] Joseph Man Chan deserves mention for a series of articles on globalization in Chinese media.[11] Finally, literature on the Chinese Internet is growing so

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[7]Chin-chuan Lee, ed., *Power, Money, and Media: Communication Patterns and Bureaucratic Control in Cultural China* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2000); and Chin-chuan Lee, ed., *Chinese Media, Global Contexts* (New York: Routledge, forthcoming 2003). The author is grateful to Chin-chuan Lee for sharing copies of the manuscript of *Chinese Media, Global Contexts* prior to publication.

[8]Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, Michael Keane, and Yin Hong, eds., *Media in China: Consumption, Content and Crisis* (London: Routledge/Curzon, 2002).

[9]Michael Keane, "As a Hundred Television Formats Bloom, a Thousand Television Stations Contend," 5-16; Li Xiaoping, "'Focus' (*Jiaodian Fangtan*) and Changes in the Chinese Television Industry," 17-34; Alex Chan, "From Propaganda to Hegemony: *Jiaodian Fangtan* and China's Media Policy," 35-52; and Ian Weber, "Reconfiguring Chinese Propaganda and Control Modalities: A Case Study of Shanghai's Television System," 53-75—all in *Journal of Contemporary China* 11, no. 30 (February 2002).

[10]These include (but are not limited to) Yuezhi Zhao, "Watchdogs on Party Leashes? Contexts and Implications of Investigative Journalism in Post-Deng China," *Journalism Studies* 1, no. 4 (November 2000): 599-616; "From Commercialization to Conglomeration: The Transformation of the Chinese Press Within the Orbit of the Party State," *Journal of Communication* 50, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 3-26; "Media and Elusive Democracy in China," *The Public/Javnost* 8, no. 2 (June 2001): 21-44; and "The Rich, the Laid-off, and the Criminal in Tabloid Tales: Read All About It!" in *Popular China: Unofficial Culture in a Globalizing Society*, ed. Perry Link, Richard Madsen, and Paul G. Pickowicz (Totowa: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 111-35.

[11]Joseph Man Chan, "Media Internationalization in China: Processes and Tensions," *Journal of Communication* 44, no. 3 (Summer 1994): 70-88; Joseph M. Chan, "Television in Greater China: Structure, Exports, and Market Formation," in *New Patterns in Global Television: Peripheral Vision*, ed. John Sinclair, Elizabeth Jacka, and Stuart Cunningham (London: Oxford University Press, 1996), 126-61; and Joseph M. Chan, "Disneyfying and

quickly as to almost qualify as a sub-field in its own right.[12] In this article I will pay special attention to two recent works, a 2002 anthology edited by Zhang Junhua and Martin Woesler, *China's Digital Dream*,[13] and a short 2002 monograph by Michael Chase and James Mulvenon, *You've Got Dissent! Chinese Dissident Use of the Internet and Beijing's Counter-Strategies*.[14] More articles will be discussed in passing, but unfortunately, space has forced me to omit many that deserve mention.

One way of organizing this literature would be according to the authors' theoretical perspectives. There is controversy between liberal and critical media scholars over phenomena like the commercialization of media in Chinese media studies as in media studies in general. Critical media scholars have argued that "the market limits social discourses and reinforces dominant ideologies," with critical materialists "stressing moments of determination of the media by the political economy," while critical culturalists "stress the hegemonic articulation ... and especially ideological processes."[15] Liberals, on the other hand, have been more accepting of the market as a necessary means of providing autonomy from the state, but have also expressed reservations about media monopolies and the displacement of meaningful political discourse by entertainment and tabloid journalism.

This approach, however, is complicated by the difficulty of transferring theoretical commitments first developed in the context of liberal capitalist media to Chinese media. For example, Donald and Keane, who

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Globalizing the Chinese Legend Mulan: A Study of Transculturation," in *In Search of Boundaries—Communication: Nation-States and Cultural Identities*, ed. Joseph M. Chan and Bruce McIntyre (Westport, Conn.: Ablex, 2002), 225-48.

[12]Randy Kluver has compiled an extensive bibliography of works on the Chinese Internet which is available at <http://www.china-wired.com/field/kluver/bibliography-kluver.htm>, accessed by this author on February 17, 2003.

[13]Zhang Junhua and Martin Woesler, eds., *China's Digital Dream: The Impact of the Internet on Chinese Society* (Bochum, Germany: University Press Bochum, 2002).

[14]Michael Chase and James Mulvenon, *You've Got Dissent! Chinese Dissident Use of the Internet and Beijing's Counter-Strategies* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand Corporation, 2002).

[15]Eric Kit-Wai Ma, "Rethinking Media Studies: The Case of China," in *De-Westernizing Media Studies*, ed. James Curran and Myung-Jin Park (New York: Routledge, 2000), 25.

consider themselves critical media theorists, argue that the literature has staked out an opposition between "undemocratic authoritarian media systems and plural market-oriented public spheres" which assumes "that the Western liberal tradition represents global best practice for the media."[16] This may be true in some instances, but seems more often unfair. Yuezhi Zhao's *Media, Market, and Democracy in China*, which they cite as an example of this literature, carefully cultivates an awareness of problems arising from the commercialization of Western media and makes this commitment even more explicit in subsequent articles.[17] Chin-chuan Lee, editor of a highly influential series of anthologies on Chinese media, admits to the "paramount liberal underpinnings" of his work, and argues that liberal-pluralist criticism is the most effective means of establishing media that are "free from the political subjugation of authoritarian and transition states." Nevertheless, he allows that "the market may betray the ideals of democracy" and that "radical-Marxist" perspectives provide effective criticisms of media in Western liberal states.[18] Almost everyone writing in English about Chinese media has some concern for promoting media that are more open to the diverse voices and perspectives of a larger cross-section of Chinese society. It is conversely difficult to map theoretical perspectives to substantive findings.

Therefore, this review will be organized according to the substantive problems that authors discuss rather than the theoretical positions they adopt. Toward this end, the analysis begins with a history of the commercialization of Chinese media, then moves on to a series of sections on the most important controversies in the literature—namely, debates over the implications of commercialization and the extent of diversification, debates about the implications of new media, and debates about the impact of globalization. A concluding section summarizes what this literature

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[16]Stephanie Hemelryk Donald and Michael Keane, "Media in China: New Convergences, New Approaches," in Donald, Keane, and Yin, *Media in China*, 9.

[17]See notes 5 and 10 above.

[18]Chin-chuan Lee, "Chinese Communication: Prisms, Trajectories, and Modes of Understanding," in Lee, *Power, Money, and Media*, 9, 26-36.

tells us about the relationships between the Party, citizens, and the media.

Commercializing Chinese Media

While reaching critical mass after Deng Xiaoping's (鄧小平) 1992 "Southern Tour" (南巡, *nanxun*), the commercialization of Chinese media actually began in the early years of post-Mao reforms. Yuezhi Zhao dates the beginning of commercialization to the introduction of a business management model at the *People's Daily* and some other Beijing newspapers in 1978 and the return of newspaper vendors to city streets in 1980.[19] Prior to these reforms, newspapers and other media organizations were administrative units that were not expected to return profits. Media organizations subsequently became "administrative units with enterprise management," meaning that government and party organs still maintained various forms of administrative oversight, including, for example, appointing leading personnel. Media organizations were, however, required to meet financial targets, many of which were gradually raised. At first these organizations were only responsible for a portion of their operating costs, but many were eventually required to return significant revenues to the organs which had been their administrative supervisors but which came to be their owners. For example, by 1996 one regional television station returned over a billion *Renminbi* (人民幣, RMB) per year in advertising revenues while only receiving 2.5 million RMB in state subsidies.[20] By 2000, China Central Television (CCTV,中央電視台), the national television network, had advertising revenues of over US$600 million, and only received a token subsidy so that the state could claim to be its patron.[21]

The revival of advertising was crucial to this process. The first ad-

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[19]Zhao, *Media, Market, and Democracy in China*, 52-54.

[20]Yu Huang and Andrew Green, "Forty Years of Television in China," in *Television in Contemporary Asia*, ed. David French and Michael Richards (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2000), 267-91, 276.

[21]Lee, "Chinese Communication," 9, 11.

vertisement—a plug for a Chinese wine—appeared on Shanghai TV in 1979 and was so far beyond viewers' expectations that many called the station to see what was amiss.[22] Advertisements soon appeared in many newspapers and magazines, leading to the rapid growth and development of an advertising industry. According to Ian Weber, China's "advertising spend" reached 2.5 billion RMB in 1990, and 185.6 billion RMB in 2000, with television and newspapers receiving the lion's share of advertising revenues.[23]

The "four level" television policy of 1983 was another important reform that spoke to decentralization and stimulated competition.[24] The four levels that were to collaborate in providing national television coverage were the county, city, provincial, and national stations. While the intention was that county-level stations would rebroadcast programming from other stations, city-level and especially provincial-level stations gained increasing levels of autonomy from the center in matters ranging from personnel to what content to broadcast, including the right to create and approve content. Decentralization accelerated with the growth of television stations, not only as localities rushed to establish their own stations, but also as localities that already had stations introducing competing stations. In Shanghai, for example, the original Shanghai TV was required to provide technical personnel and management support to assist in the establishment of Oriental TV, a second station.[25] Oriental TV was expressly intended to have a more youthful, innovative, and daring image. The introduction of cable TV, often carrying programming from rival provincial stations and

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[22]Qing Liu, "The Political Economy of Media Reform" (Unpublished paper, 2002). While this advertisement is widely recognized as the first since the Cultural Revolution, Liu states that there may have been an advertisement in a newspaper in Tianjin earlier that same year. Ran Wei reports Chinese audiences to be more receptive to commercials by the end of the 1990s. See Ran Wei, "Embracing Advertising: Chinese Consumers Show a New Attitude in the 1990s," *Asian Mass Communication Research and Information* 12, no. 1 (2002): 58-76.

[23]Weber, "Reconfiguring Chinese Propaganda," 59.

[24]See Lynch, *After the Propaganda State*, 31-32.

[25]Weber, "Reconfiguring Chinese Propaganda," 65.

sometimes programming from international satellites, created yet more competition in China's television markets.[26] The number of television stations increased rapidly: there were 52 in 1983, 509 in 1990, and 943 in 1997.[27] CCTV, the national network, suffered a declining market share. The most watched CCTV channel ranked fourth and attracted only 31 percent of the audience in Shanghai, and ranked sixth with 11 percent of the audience in Guangzhou (廣州).[28]

Other media have generally followed a similar course, although previous patterns of organization have had an important influence on the process and outcome of reform. For example, the most important newspapers, known as "organ papers," were published by national, provincial, and city Party committees. While "organ papers" are required to prominently publish a high volume of political news such as leaders' speeches and the proceedings of official meetings, reforms permitted the introduction of such publications as evening and weekend papers, sports papers, book review papers, and digests. These papers are often, but not always, owned and published by the same organization that owns and publishes the organ papers. Organ papers have various advantages including subsidies and privileged distribution through Party channels to state-owned firms and institutions. This channel of distribution, however, has proven a mixed blessing, as the organ papers are almost entirely distributed through such channels and have come to be seen as part of the official world of work available at no cost to anyone who deigns to read them. In contrast, the more commercial and popular papers enjoy brisk sales at kiosks and via home subscriptions and have become an important part of "the media of the domestic sphere."[29] Guoguang Wu reports that while there were 270 organ papers and 10 other types of papers in 1979, in 1994 there were 460 organ

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[26]Mark Harrison, "Satellite and Cable Platforms: Development and Content," in Donald, Keane, and Yin, *Media in China*, 167-78.

[27]Ran Wei, "China's Television in the Era of Modernization," in French and Richards, *Television in Contemporary Asia*, 327.

[28]Ibid., 341.

[29]Ma, "Rethinking Media Studies," 30.

papers and 1,411 other papers.[30]

The development of the Internet, which accelerated in 1996, was even more decentralized.[31] While critical pieces of China's Internet—such as the cables that carry the data—remain in the hands of very few state-owned firms with close connections to the government, other portions of the Internet, especially content providers, have been open to private firms or firms with less direct connections with the government, including highly entrepreneurial firms with substantial operations overseas that raise capital in foreign equity markets.[32] The result has been that the Internet has enjoyed the most rapid growth of all China's media. Numbers of Internet users are estimated as having grown from 620,000 in 1997 to nearly 34 million in 2002.[33]

Film is the most important exception to this pattern of decentralization, commercialization, and growth.[34] Film was arguably China's most important media prior to 1980. Films were widely distributed in urban and rural areas, more affordable, and—for those with limited literacy skills—easier to consume. The result was that "film viewership ... was much larger than the readership of printed literature."[35] Perhaps as a result, film production, distribution, and above all licensing and approval processes were more tightly controlled and centralized than in other media. There were important steps toward decentralization in the late 1990s, but by then the damage had been done, as both the audience for domestic film was in drastic decline—movie attendances dropped from 34 billion spectators in

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[30]Guoguang Wu, "One Head, Many Mouths: Diversifying Press Structures in Reform China," in Lee, *Power, Money, and Media*, 56.

[31]For a useful summary of the organization of China's Internet, see Eric Harwit and Duncan Clark, "Shaping the Internet in China: Evolution of Political Control over Network Infrastructure and Content," *Asian Survey* 41, no. 3 (May/June 2001): 377-408.

[32]David Sheff, *China Dawn: The Story of a Technology and Business Revolution* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2002).

[33]Chase and Mulvenon, *You've Got Dissent!* 5.

[34]Ying Zhu offers a useful overview of reforms to the Chinese film industry. See Ying Zhu, "Chinese Cinema's Economic Reform from the Mid-1980s to the Mid-1990s," *Journal of Communication* 52, no. 4 (December 2002): 905-21.

[35]Perry Link, *The Uses of Literature: Life in the Socialist Chinese Literary System* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), 203.

1980 to 4.5 billion in 1999—and the numbers of films produced had followed a similar pattern.[36]

Finally, commercialization has changed the management and internal organization of media organizations. In addition to ideological guidelines, many media organizations face targets regarding how much revenue they should return to their owners. Staff compensation is determined by the organization's overall profitability—such that it may be more lucrative to have a lower-level position at a profitable popular newspaper than a higher-level position at an organ paper. Many media organizations now have some form of contracting or production targets in which compensation for editors, producers, writers, and so forth is related to their output. Reporters at a television station, for example, might vie for the right to cover a promising story as those who do may produce audience-attracting stories that will in turn result in increased compensation or at least improved job security.[37] These incentives provide impetus for media organizations and workers to distribute content that attract the audiences advertisers want.

As Yuezhi Zhao observes, prior to the Tiananmen demonstrations, commercialization was not as dominant a theme in media reform as it came to be in the 1990s. Namely, during the 1980s, reformers associated with Party leaders like Zhao Ziyang (趙紫陽) sometimes spoke of freedom of the press as an important means of democratization. For example, Hu Jiwei (胡績偉), a former editor of the *People's Daily*, stated that "The kind of press freedom we want to advocate is press freedom for all the people and not just press freedom for news workers. Freedom of the press for citizens is the right to be kept informed as masters of their country, their right of political consultation, their right of involvement in government and their right of supervision over the Party and government."[38] Themes associated with commercialization—such as less ideological journalism, greater ob-

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[36]Yingchi Chu, "The Consumption of Cinema in Contemporary China," in Donald, Keane, and Yin, *Media in China*, 43. See also Stanley Rosen, "Same Bed, Different Dreams: Hollywood and American Film in the China Shop" (Unpublished paper, 2001).

[37]See, for example, Li, "Focus," esp. 19-20.

[38]Cited in Zhao, *Media, Market, and Democracy*, 36. For Zhao's discussion of this theme in media reform in general, see Yuezhi Zhao, "The Trajectory of Media Reform," ibid., 34-51.

jectivity, more timely reporting, and increased attention to issues of popular concern—were compatible with both commercialization and democratization. Journalists were perhaps only second to students in their active support for the Tiananmen demonstrations.[39]

The Tiananmen crisis marked a decisive turn away from democracy and—after an interval of intensified repression—toward commercialization. The closure of *Shijie jingji daobao* (世界經濟導報, World Economic Herald)—a decision in which the post-Tiananmen leader, Jiang Zemin (江澤民), played a vital role—foreshadowed the crackdown on media that followed the Tiananmen demonstrations. Ironically, the Tiananmen demonstrations may have succeeded equally well in extinguishing the last sparks of ideological legitimacy in Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought. With the sharp decline of ideological legitimacy, not even the conservatives' vigorous reassertion of Party authority could return the "propaganda state" to its former status. The failed attempt to revive the "propaganda state" was abandoned in 1992 when Deng Xiaoping used his "Southern Tour" to give his personal approval to aggressive economic reform. Media organizations, like much of the rest of China, responded to the opportunity to make money with vigor and enthusiasm.

Controversy about Commercialization and Diversification

As noted above, scholars have expressed a range of opinions regarding the implications of commercialization. There are media scholars who argue that commercialization is compatible with, or even stimulates diversity and quality in, media.[40] This argument is not, however, dominant

[39]See, for example, "Fourteen Beijing Press Units Send Open Letter to CPC Central Committee and State Council," in *Beijing Spring, 1989—Confrontation and Conflict: The Basic Documents*, ed. Michel Oksenberg, Lawrence R. Sullivan, and Mike Lambert (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1990), 383-84.

[40]Tyler Cowen, *In Praise of Commercial Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998); and Benjamin Compaine, "Global Media," *Foreign Policy*, no. 133 (November/December 2002): 20-28.

in contemporary Chinese media studies. Jianying Zha's *China Pop* is one of a few works that unabashedly celebrates the commercialization of Chinese culture. Zha's very readable account of soap operas, tabloids, and bestsellers takes readers on a jaunty tour of China's popular culture. She approves of the increasing tolerance of sexuality and of writers and artists who make money. Zha does not approve of dour bureaucrats who would limit this creative fun and is critical of "serious" intellectuals who condemn popular culture. In a manner that recalls Milan Kundera, she seems to believe that commercialization can solve the problems raised in 1989 without the need for confrontation. She cites, for example, the case of *China Culture Gazette* (中國文化報), the official organ of the Ministry of Culture, which, when faced with declining circulation and falling revenues, introduced a weekend edition packed with pictures of nude and semi-nude women—mostly busty Westerners—and promptly became "the coolest paper in Beijing" and sold "like hotcakes."[41]

Others are skeptical that a quest for money will lead in positive directions. Zha and many others found the profitable 1990 television soap opera, *Kewang* (渴望, Yearnings), to be a breakthrough.[42] Michael Keane, however, expresses typical skepticism of the wave of commercial TV that followed. Keane finds that the enormous expansion of television created a demand for content which has been filled by copying formats from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Europe, the United States, and other shows in China. He finds the result—such as the 2001 television series *Shangri-la* in which three teams of six people went on a thirty-day trek across the fringes of the Himalayas supplied with only ten-days of matches and food—less than completely edifying.[43]

Yuezhi Zhao has surveyed China's tabloids, the format that may epito-

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[41]Zha, *China Pop*, 105.

[42]Ibid., 25-54. See also Lisa B. Rofel, "Yearnings: Televisual Love and Melodramatic Politics," *American Ethnologist* 21, no. 4 (November 1994): 700-722.

[43]Keane, "As a Hundred Television Formats Bloom." For another rich source of data on the development of Chinese television, see Junhao Hong, *The Internationalization of Television in China: The Evolution of Ideology, Society and Media Since the Reform* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1998).

mize the worst aspects of commercial media, and usefully connects with Colin Sparks' comparative work on tabloids.[44] Zhao reaches ambiguous conclusions. She writes that, "There is no single systematic, calculated, and coherent voice in the tabloid tales."[45] She finds tabloids often politically conservative, arguing that while they expose lurid examples of corruption, they generally present the state as benign and celebrate many hard-working and well-intentioned officials, including not least the police. The term "class" and discussions of inequality are missing. Moreover, she finds that tabloids frequently both reinforce traditional stereotypes (finding, for example, that rural migrants are a source of crime) and pander to patriarchal norms. On the other hand, she finds that they do celebrate entrepreneurs, including women who succeed against the odds. She concludes that tabloids are a mixed bag, neither "oppositional texts" nor "new opium handed down by the Party's propaganda department."[46]

Controversy over different interpretations of commercialization is closely related to different assessments of the extent of diversification. Commercialization has, as noted above, stimulated an enormous increase in almost all forms of media, but it is evident that there are still severe limits on what can be published or broadcast. How to assess the resulting situation is open to controversy. Some scholars use terminology that suggests a significant increase in diversity. Guoguang Wu uses the term "socialization" which he defines "as a breakup of the state-monopolized media structure and replacement by a new structure in which various nonstate actors play an increasingly significant role.... [S]ocialization of media structures means political reallocation of media resources from the state to some social sectors."[47] Daniel Lynch uses the term "pluralization," but characterizes the Chinese public sphere as "praetorian" and draws a sharp distinction between the pluralism of China's media and the pluralism of industrial

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[44]Colin Sparks and John Tulloch, eds., *Tabloid Tales: Global Debates Over Media Standards* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

[45]Zhao, "The Rich, the Laid-off, and the Criminal in Tabloid Tales," 129.

[46]Ibid., 132.

[47]Wu, "One Head, Many Mouths," 53.

democracies. He concludes that "Ongoing state efforts to eliminate 'bad' messages from the thought-work market, though far from completely effective, are somewhat effective, and the general climate of political repression does deter people from publicly circulating messages that directly challenge the legitimacy of Communist Party rule."[48] Yuezhi Zhao offers a pessimistic assessment, arguing that the consolidation of media into large conglomerates during the latter 1990s has blunted the diversity that Wu found earlier.[49]

Investigative journalism, which is by all accounts a commercial success, is one of the most important test cases for debates about the extent of diversity. Yuezhi Zhao's analysis—evocatively titled "Watchdogs on Party Leashes"—argues that "Through traditional media management mechanisms, the central leadership is able to set the media agenda and tell the media watchdogs in which directions to look and what targets to look for."[50] Zhao further notes that most investigative journalism targets individual abuses of power (usually by low-ranking officials) rather than criticizing major state policies. She concludes that such watchdog journalism is not an effective opposition. Li Xiaoping, on the other hand, employs different criteria to reach a more enthusiastic evaluation of a leading television investigative news program, "Focus" (焦點訪談, *Jiaodian fangtan*). For her, an average daily audience of 20-25 percent of potential viewers or 200-250 million people is an indication of impact, and the endorsement of high-level leaders like Zhu Rongji (朱鎔基) and Li Peng (李鵬) is a mark of influence and a license to proceed. She approvingly quotes the Chinese scholar, Xiao Gongqin (蕭功秦), who states that "The range of issues under political control has been gradually reduced, except for those areas related directly or indirectly to national security or public order."[51]

Studies of the content of investigative journalism reach similarly conflicting positions. Stanley Rosen reached a dismal conclusion in his

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[48]Lynch, *After the Propaganda State*, 140-41. See also 139-75.
[49]Zhao, "From Commercialization to Conglomeration" (cited in note 10 above).
[50]Zhao, "Watchdogs on Party Leashes?" 587.
[51]Li, "Focus," 29.

account of *Beijing qingnian bao*'s (北京青年報, Beijing Youth Daily) coverage of the Wahaha (娃哈哈) incident, a story reported in 1996 in which three young girls died of poisoning after drinking a popular beverage produced by a large state-owned enterprise. The firm replied, but via internal secret channels rather than public communications, and succeeded in persuading the Central Propaganda Department to stop publication of the daily. While subsequent investigations showed that *Beijing qingnian bao*'s report was accurate, the paper was nonetheless found guilty of violating procedural rules and its editor, Cui Enqing (崔恩卿), was replaced.[52] Anita Chan's book of translations of exposés of the condition of Chinese workers in maquiladora-type plants suggests, though, that Chinese journalists can make important criticisms. Chan's book is composed of translations from Chinese papers telling appalling stories of abuse, including women workers kept with dogs, workers beaten, workers locked in virtual slavery, workers humiliated and forced to kneel before foreign bosses, and company failure to pay wages.[53] The sum total of these reports is surely a powerful indictment of a major state policy. Nonetheless, it is important that individual reports generally remain within the limits Zhao suggests, e.g., they may accuse local leaders of failing to uphold national policies, but seldom question national policy itself.

Diversity that is not directly political may have subtle political implications, such as reducing the direct influence of the state over the private sphere of social life. Women's magazines—perhaps the most studied genre of popular Chinese media—have an important influence on identities and values. James Farrer's book on youth, gender, and sexuality in Shanghai offers a useful investigation of how women's magazines depict and influence identities and values. Farrer finds that the "indignant social critiques" of the late 1980s were replaced with an ironic tone in the mid-1990s by

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[52]Stanley Rosen, "Seeking Appropriate Behavior under a Socialist Market Economy: An Analysis of Debates and Controversies Reported in the *Beijing Youth Daily*," in Lee, *Power, Money, and Media*, 152-78.

[53]Anita Chan, *China's Workers Under Assault: The Exploitation of Labor in a Globalizing Economy* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2001).

which time "stories do not assume that cades will be honest, that women won't marry for money, and that romantic passion can be contained exclusively within marriage."[54] Farrer carefully argues that the values produced in such magazines are not a simple reflection of social values, but are instead the result of a particular configuration of market and institutional forces that are influenced by and also influence social values. From this perspective, the critical point runs parallel to that made by Xiao Gongqin above. The state has substantially retreated from important sectors of social life, especially private life, and has been replaced by a popular culture where market forces are critically important.

Controversy about New Media Technologies

Commercialization and increasing standards of living have stimulated the introduction of a series of new technologies, including television, recorded music, recorded movies, and the Internet. Television may be the most important of these, having been little more than a curiosity in 1980 but, as noted above, rising to be China's dominant media by 1990. Recorded music—which I will regretfully neglect in this review—was also introduced during the 1980s.[55] Recorded movies, now distributed primarily on DVD, have had an important impact during the 1990s, as will be briefly discussed below.

Most of the controversy regarding new technologies—the majority of

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[54]James Farrer, *Opening Up: Youth Sex Culture and Market Reform in Shanghai* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 134, 116-49. See also Julie F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, "The New Chinese Woman and Lifestyle Magazines in the Late 1990s," in Link, Madsen, and Pickowicz, *Popular China*, 137-61; and Jean Lock Kunz, "From Maoism to Elle: The Impact of Political Ideology on Fashion Trends in China," *International Social Science Journal* 11, no. 3 (September 1996): 317-35. For a first-hand account of women's radio that offers insight into the types of stories that some commercial journalists prefer, see Xinran, *The Good Women of China: Hidden Voices* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002).

[55]See Jerome de Kloet, "Rock in a Hard Place: Commercial Fantasies in China's Music Industry," in Donald, Keane, and Yin, *Media in China*, 93-104; and Lee Tain-Dow and Huang Yingfen, "'We Are Chinese'—Music and Identity in 'Cultural China'," ibid., 105-15.

which is focused on the Internet—concerns whether or not media technologies can determine political outcomes. Perhaps the boldest statement along these lines came from Rupert Murdoch, the global media magnate. Shortly after purchasing an international satellite TV firm from the Hong Kong magnate, Li Ka-shing (李嘉誠), Murdoch declared that totalitarian regimes could not resist the consumer sovereignty embedded in modern communications technologies.[56] Murdoch, as we shall see below, came to regret these words. Similarly, discussion of the Internet has generally retreated from optimistic forecasts of a new era of free information to a guarded appreciation of the state's ability to manage new media.

Before discussing the Internet, I will first touch upon the impact of television. Contrary to Adorno and Horkheimer's much discussed argument that broadcast media facilitate fascism,[57] in China, television worked to move the consumption and interpretation of media from a compulsory public sphere to a more autonomous private sphere. Throughout a good portion of the 1980s, "political study" conducted in groups convened by official authority, often in workplaces, was an important enough means of communication between the center and society to count as an important medium. As content for political study often consisted of reading aloud selected reports from organ papers, political study had an important impact on how other media were understood and interpreted. As James Lull noted, television also began as an activity conducted in formal settings, but as televisions became more common, television-watching grew to be an informal group activity conducted by friends and neighbors in the homes of "early adopters," and eventually became a private activity conducted within the confines of home and family.[58] The change from public participation to private consumption undoubtedly offered the Chinese people far greater control over media content and far greater freedom to devise their

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[56]Rupert Murdoch, "The Consumer is in the Saddle, Driving the Telecommunications Industry," *The Times*, September 2, 1993.

[57]Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cummings (New York: Continuum, 1972).

[58]James Lull, *China Turned On: Television, Reform, and Resistance* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

own strategies for interpreting media.[59] Urban Chinese also now have convenient and affordable access to an excellent selection of recorded movies —mostly from Hong Kong and Taiwan, but also from Hollywood and beyond—which offers media consumers still more individual choice.[60]

The central issue in literature on China's Internet has been the state's ability to manage a medium whose technology was originally understood as inherently resistant to hierarchical control. Geremie R. Barmé and Sang Ye's early report on the Internet in China coined the term, "the Great Firewall of China," which has subsequently been widely adopted in scholarly and popular literature to call attention to the attempts by Chinese officials to regulate and restrict use of the Internet. Barmé and Ye raised other issues that have animated much of the subsequent debate, including the "digital divide," the preference of many users for entertainment over political debate, and the problems of e-commerce in a society where few have credit cards.[61]

Many of these issues are discussed in a recent anthology edited by Zhang Junhua and Martin Woesler, *China's Digital Dream*.[62] Two of the included authors, Nina Hachigian and Shanthi Kalathil, have made important arguments against the "state versus the Internet" perspective.[63] Here and elsewhere, Hachigian points out that the Chinese state does not stand in opposition to the Internet but, for economic and ideological reasons, has instead enthusiastically promoted this new technology. She cites both the rhetoric of high-level leaders like Jiang Zemin and, more importantly, enormous investments in telecommunications infrastructure by state-owned firms.[64] Hachigian and Kalathil are sanguine about the ability of Internet

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[59]Barrett McCormick and Qing Liu, "Globalization and the Chinese Media: Technologies, Content, Commerce, and the Prospects for the Public Sphere," in Lee, *Chinese Media, Global Contexts*, chap. 7.

[60]Barrett McCormick and Qing Liu, "Alternate Medias" (Unpublished paper, 2001).

[61]Geremie R. Barmé and Sang Ye, "The Great Firewall of China," *Wired* 5, no. 6 (June 1997).

[62]See note 13 above.

[63]Jack Linchuan Qiu provided an important step toward these arguments. See his "Virtual Censorship in China: Keeping the Gate Between the Cyberspaces," *International Journal of Communications Law and Policy* 4 (Winter 1999): 1-25.

[64]Nina Hachigian, "Telecom Taxonomy: How are the One-Party States of East Asia Con-

technology to overcome authoritarian restrictions.[65] They cite, among other factors, the evident stability of other highly wired East Asian single-party states (especially Singapore), the application of standard restrictions onto Internet media organizations, the state's willingness to devote considerable resources to the project, and the adoption of countervailing technologies. Rather than seeing the Internet as a threat to the Chinese government, they report that the Chinese government is able to use the Internet to advance its own agenda.

Some authors still maintain that Internet technology will overcome authoritarian restrictions on the flow of information and facilitate democratization. To make this point, David Sheff cites the case of a schoolhouse explosion that cost the lives of 42 children in Jiangxi's Wanzai county (江西省萬載縣) in 2001. Premier Zhu Rongji and the Xinhua News Service initially attributed the disaster to a lone bomber, but this account was so effectively challenged and criticized on the Internet that Zhu issued a rare retraction and apology. Sheff concludes that "paper cannot wrap a fire," and that the Internet will lead to more government accountability.[66]

The ins and outs of the technological strategies of China's Internet regulators and the countervailing strategies of Internet users are subject to rapid change and development, but for the moment, the regulators appear to have the upper hand. For some time they have deployed a national firewall that screens out information sent from specific Internet addresses.

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trolling the Political Impact of the Internet?" in Zhang and Woesler, *China's Digital Dream*, 35-68. Lynch also discusses the growth of China's telecommunications industries in *After the Propaganda State*, 98-110. Kathleen Hartford's "West Lake Wired: Shaping Hangzhou's Information Age," in Lee, *Chinese Media, Global Contexts*, chap. 9, offers a local perspective on official support for information technologies.

[65]Shanthi Kalathil, "The Internet and Civil Society in China and Southeast Asia," in Zhang and Woesler, *China's Digital Dream*, 19-34. In collaboration with Taylor Boas, Kalathil has further developed these themes in a book, *Open Networks, Closed Regimes: The Impact of the Internet on Authoritarian Rule* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003), which unfortunately was not available in time to be considered in this review.

[66]Sheff, *China Dawn*, 279-80. For a more detailed account of the same incident reaching a similar but more qualified conclusion, see note 59 above. For an argument that falls somewhere between Sheff and Hachigian or Kalathil, see note 31 above.

Given the huge size of the global Internet, the ease of copying information from servers whose addresses are blacklisted to other as yet accessible servers, and the ready availability of proxy servers that permit camouflaged access to banned servers, this strategy was labor-intensive and ineffective. Not long before this writing, though, the authorities apparently added an additional layer of supervision in the form of "packet-sniffing" software that examines the contents of all information regardless of its source and blocks transmission of packets containing sensitive combinations of words. The same software has the added "feature" of being able to keep records of individual user's activities.[67]

In fact, even before this software was deployed, there was only minimal evidence that dissidents were able to make effective use of the Internet. Despite the promising title of their short and useful monograph, *You've Got Dissent*, Mulvenon and Chase find no evidence that any dissident group is using the Internet to mount a credible threat to the Chinese government.[68] Instead, they find that government strategies—including distributing false and misleading information via the Internet, sowing discord among dissident groups, and arresting Internet activists—have proven effective. Among dissident groups, the questionable religious group, Falungong (法輪功), has perhaps made the most effective use of the Internet, both through pro-Falungong web pages and by using e-mail for internal group communication. The most effective use of the Internet by traditional dissident groups would appear to be by the e-mail news services *Tunnel* (隧道, *Suidao*) and *VIP Reference* (大參考, *Dacankao*). While these groups have distributed information to large numbers of Internet users, the new packet-sniffing software may well be able to detect and block their missives.

The above does not mean that the Internet has no positive impact.

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[67]For an account that accurately predicted the adoption of such software a year before it occurred and cited Western firms as the source of the software, see Greg Walton, "China's Golden Shield: Corporations and the Development of Surveillance Technology in the People's Republic of China" (Retrieved in September 2001 from International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development at <http://www.ichrdd.ca>).

[68]Chase and Mulvenon, *You've Got Dissent!* 86.

Contrary to fears that most users view the Internet mainly as a source of entertainment, Guo Liang and Bu Wei's important survey of Internet users has found that 57.4 percent of Chinese Internet users turn to the Internet for news, leaving this the most common use of the Internet next to e-mail. Guo and Bu also report that Chinese Internet users spend 9 percent of their online time in a foreign language and 15 percent on overseas Chinese pages, indicating that the Internet is a significant channel for transmitting news across borders.[69]

Some of these users find access to a growing sphere of public discourse, that, at least compared to other Chinese media, is relatively autonomous. Geremie Barmé and Gloria Davies have carefully chronicled and analyzed one of the first major controversies argued in that sphere, the allegations of corruption and nepotism in the Cheung Kong-*Reading* Awards for outstanding works in social sciences and humanities. Barmé and Davies find much to criticize, including the highly polemical and often *ad hominem* style of debate and the selection of issues which, according to these two scholars, are only of interest to a relatively narrow circle of privileged academics. They conclude that many of the problems with previous Chinese intellectual discourse persist when intellectuals adopt Internet technology. They argue that Chinese intellectuals' Internet discourse is not "public" in the sense of being relevant to a broad audience.[70] However, this debate did have at least some relevance to issues such as the desirability of liberal rights, the importance of transparent adjudication, and the costs and benefits of participating in the global economy. That such issues can be discussed on the Internet may mean that Internet technology has some beneficial impact.

In sum, technologies like television and the Internet may well have an

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[69]Guo Liang and Bu Wei, "Internet Use in China—A Comparative Analysis," in Zhang and Woesler, *China's Digital Dream*, 71-94. Guo and Bu also report that there remains a substantial digital divide, with Internet users being typically younger, male, and single, as well as having higher education and income levels.

[70]Geremie R. Barmé and Gloria Davies, "Have We Been Noticed Yet?—Intellectual Contestation and the Chinese Web," in *Chinese Intellectuals between the Market and the State*, ed. Merle Goldman and Gu Xin (forthcoming).

enormous impact on how and what information circulates through Chinese society and may eventually require profound adjustments in the way the state regulates information and legitimates itself, yet the balance of evidence and opinion indicates that no new technology will create an ideal public sphere. Instead, the general finding is that both the state and individual users bring old habits and practices with them when they move to new media, and then struggle to define how that media will be used, perhaps only gradually finding its most strategic uses. Technology matters, but so do institutional and individual interests.

Controversy about Globalization

China's context also has to be carefully considered while assessing the implications of globalization. As various commentators beginning with Thomas Gold have noted,[71] much of China's imported culture comes from Taiwan and especially Hong Kong rather than from the United States and other Western countries. While Hong Kong and Taiwan import large volumes of American culture,[72] Hong Kong in particular remains a vibrant center of cultural production that exports virtually all forms of culture to China. As Joseph Man Chan argues, the situation of receiving cultural imports from a space now locked in China's political periphery is outside normal understandings of "cultural imperialism."[73] This situation—combined with Hong Kong's formerly dynamic economy and the conspicuous influence of Hong Kong on the entire Pearl River Delta—led some to predict that Hong Kong's return to the PRC would result in China becoming "Hong Kong-ized." The PRC's success in asserting control over Hong Kong's politics, the slowing of Hong Kong's economy, and a general loss of con-

[71]Thomas B. Gold, "Go With Your Feelings: Hong Kong and Taiwan Popular Culture in Greater China," *The China Quarterly*, no. 136 (December 1993): 907-25.

[72]See, for example, Michael Curtin, "The Future of Chinese Cinema: Some Lessons from Hong Kong and Taiwan," in Lee, *Chinese Media, Global Contexts*, chap. 12.

[73]Chan, "Television in Greater China," 151-57.

fidence in Hong Kong have undermined these predictions. Nonetheless, in practical terms, many works on cultural globalization involve studying ideas moving across the border from Hong Kong.

Some of the limitations on the flow of ideas into China via Hong Kong have been illustrated by the experience of Rupert Murdoch. Murdoch's News Inc. is surely a global media conglomerate, and yet his subsidiaries most active in the China market—Star TV and Phoenix TV—are headquartered in Hong Kong, and the most successful, Phoenix TV, involves substantial investment from sources inside the PRC. As noted above, following the purchase of Star TV, Murdoch proved overly optimistic about the reach of his technology. Following his remarks to the effect that satellite technology made consumers sovereign, PRC authorities banned and dismantled many satellite dishes. Murdoch's Hong Kong-based operations subsequently had to follow a long hard road to reach profitability. Star TV initially planned to broadcast similar content to many countries; this approach had to be abandoned for diverse content tailored to different tastes and conditions in each target audience. Murdoch made many friendly gestures to PRC leaders. One was to drop the BBC, whose news had displeased Chinese leaders, from Star TV's broadcasts. Yet another was to sell the Hong Kong paper, *South China Morning Post*, to a Malaysian entrepreneur, under whose management several prestigious journalists have been subsequently fired and the paper's coverage of China has generally softened. Murdoch has recently gained direct access to China's potentially lucrative cable TV markets in Guangdong Province (廣東省), but only after establishing a new firm, Phoenix TV, in partnership with well-connected mainland Chinese. Phoenix TV specializes in entertainment. Phoenix TV's news has attracted viewers by reporting news more quickly than CCTV, yet by all accounts Phoenix TV news avoids offending PRC authorities.[74]

The lesson to draw from this may be that the lure of Chinese markets is sufficient to induce transnational media—which may not have that much

[74]See note 56 above.

interest in political change in China in the first place—to compromise with Chinese authorities, who as yet maintain the ability to exclude those whom they wish to exclude. Yahoo's willingness to sign a code of conduct formulated by the Chinese Internet industry and the willingness of other multinational high-tech firms to sell Chinese authorities software for "the Great Firewall" offers further confirmation of this hypothesis.[75]

Even in film, the medium where Chinese-produced content has had the most difficulty competing against imports, there is good evidence that foreign imports actually serve Chinese interests. Stanley Rosen's important article, "The Wolf at the Door," reports that when showings of American movies have been suspended because of political tensions between China and the United States, audiences have stayed away from theaters rather than watch Chinese movies.[76] The terrible conditions in the Chinese cinema industry are far more the result of an inefficient distribution system and (until very recently) a highly centralized and restrictive approval process. Inasmuch as importing American movies is one of the Chinese cinema industry's few reliable sources of revenue, imports are as much of a lifeline as a threat. Wan and Kraus point out that both Chinese movie producers and Hollywood have a common interest in suppressing pervasive piracy.[77]

Evidence that transnational media pose a threat to the existing regime is more subtle. Kevin Latham finds that television viewers in south China who have access to Hong Kong TV are exposed to two different regimes of truth. Hong Kong television reporters, he finds, seek "objectivity" based on the balanced representation of the basic facts in a story while in China, reports are to "give the 'whole picture,' meaning that stories were to have an educative function telling people not just what happened but why, how,

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[75]See note 67 above.

[76]Stanley Rosen, "The Wolf at the Door: Hollywood and the Film Market in China," in *Southern California and the World*, ed. Eric J. Heikkila and Rafael Pizarro (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2002), 49-77.

[77]Wan Jihong and Richard Kraus, "Hollywood and China as Adversaries and Allies," *Pacific Affairs* 75, no. 3 (Winter 2002): 419-34.

what to make of it, and so on."[78] Latham and others agree that this latter standard remains strong in the organ papers, but competing standards of truth can be found elsewhere in China's domestic media. He states that "the contradictions associated with the move from utopianism to hedonism, characteristic of the reform period, constantly highlight the anachronistic nature of the basic assumptions of Chinese Party media production..."[79]

China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) will open China's media markets to increased international content and more foreign investment. The literature to date suggests, however, that this exposure will not have a dramatic or immediate impact on the stability of China's government. Instead, the threat posed by the globalization of Chinese media is complex and subtle. Cultural affinities such as that found within "cultural China" count as well as the economic and political power of metropolitan centers such as the United States. Multinational firms may help Chinese citizens to gain access to information originating from outside China, but also supply capital and technology that help to preserve the status quo, and may also willingly cooperate with Chinese authorities to restrict the flow of "bad" information. The most profound transborder influences may be most effective when they reinforce trends that are already underway and serve the interests of significant groups of Chinese.

Managing the Challenge of Commercial Media

There is controversy in the literature regarding how well the Party is coping with the changes described in the previous sections of this paper. There is a general consensus that the traditional system of controls is breaking down, but there is almost as much agreement that there is both little sign of an imminent collapse of Party control and poor prospects for the emergence of a "free press" in the near term. This common view still leaves con-

[78]Kevin Latham, "Nothing But the Truth: News Media, Power and Hegemony in South China," *The China Quarterly*, no. 163 (September 2000): 633-54.

[79]Ibid., 643.

siderable space for disagreement over how the current situation can be characterized or how stable it may be. This section provides a general overview of this controversy and discusses a series of challenges to the Party's management of the media, including the commercialization of organizational interests, the commercialization of interests of individual journalists, the collapse of ideology, the emergence of competing ethics, and the increasing visibility of repression.

While there exists broad agreement that Chinese media and the methods for managing media are in a state of rapid change, there is debate over how to characterize the current situation and where it may be leading. Donald, Keane, and Yin impart a greater sense of instability than most when they use the word "crisis" in the title of their anthology, which they define as "emblematic of the media industries as they shift into new financial and policy structures and engage with international partners and trading alliances, but also as they continue to work as fundamental props for government policy and state ideology."[80] Daniel Lynch also sees a fundamental transformation of Chinese media and declining central control over the public sphere, but does not quite characterize the situation as a crisis. He defines China's current public sphere as "praetorian," by which he means that political participation will be uninstitutionalized and chaotic, entailing corruption and bribery as well as violence from both above and below.[81] In her recent work, Yuezhi Zhao depicts a public sphere which is not so much chaotic as determined by the institutional interests of the state and the class interests of a rising economic elite. She allows that there is some chance of a break between the two, in which case economic elites might use "a liberal conception of democracy ... to secure hegemony over Chinese society." She derides, however, liberal critics as "the organic intellectuals of the new elites" with little concern for increasing numbers of losers in a severely unequal society. She also seems to find it far more likely that economic elites will choose to be silent partners of a state that both

[80]Donald, Keane, and Yin, *Media in China*, 4-5.
[81]Lynch, *After the Propaganda State*, 1-17.

offers access to otherwise restricted economic opportunities and regulates political participation and the media in order to prevent expression of the interests of competing classes.[82]

I will postpone discussion of where this transformation may be leading in order to first discuss four challenges to stability: the partial transformation of political interests into economic interests, the collapse of ideology and the search for alternatives, the rise of competing ethics of journalism, and the increasing visibility of repression. The overall argument in these pages is generally congenial to the theme of chaos.

First, commercialization has undermined the structure of interests and incentives that have traditionally kept the media more or less subservient to the interests of the political center. The traditional system for managing media—which is still more or less in effect—relies on a system of political organization that supplies powerful incentives for both individuals and institutions to align themselves with the political interests of higher levels. This system of organization has included restrictions on who can own media organizations, requirements for content licensing, restrictions on who is allowed to distribute what sorts of content, and so forth. The nature of these restrictions varies widely from medium to medium in ways that have had a profound impact on the rate of reform in different media. The fragmentation of state and Party organization has always left space for limited difference and divergence. Nonetheless, the system of incentives and sanctions was, and generally is, such that most of the time the majority of journalists discipline themselves in order to avoid any open break with higher levels.

Commercialization has begun to change the structure of incentives by transforming political restrictions into economic assets. The vast majority of media organizations are still owned by government and Party organs, but where this was once only a means of guarantying supervision over the media, it is now also a method of regulating access to lucrative economic opportunities. In book publishing, only officially approved publishers

[82]Zhao, "Media and Elusive Democracy in China" (cited in note 10 above).

have the right to grant the license that is required to publish a book. These licenses are now, however, valuable commodities that can be bought and sold.[83] The license required to publish a periodical is similarly valuable, and organizations that lack the capital or know-how required to publish a profitable periodical may lease their license to commercial interests. Similarly, television stations and film studios may contract production work to independent or semi-independent producers. In each of these cases, sorting through what is and is not legal, what is and is not tolerated, what is apparent and what is occurring behind the scenes, and who actually is running the show can all be very difficult. As in the case of film studios and Hollywood movies discussed above, however, the financial interests of media organizations and the government and Party organizations that own them are often best served by collaborating with anyone that can provide marketable content and effective distribution.

Inasmuch as the government and Party organizations that are charged with regulating media often own media, conflicts of interest frequently occur. Joseph Man Chan's analysis of the *Nanfang City Daily*'s (南方都市報) struggle to distribute their paper in Shenzhen (深圳) illustrates this point.[84] *Nangfang City Daily* was first published in Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong Province, in 1997 by the organization that also publishes Guangdong Province's organ paper After *Nanfang City Daily* proved successful in Guangzhou, its publishers launched a local version of the same paper in Shenzhen, another city in Guangdong Province. The Shenzhen version of *Nanfang City Daily* also proved successful. Its circulation soon surpassed that of two similar metro dailies, *Shenzhen Special Zone Daily* (深圳特區報) and *Shenzhen Commercial Daily* (深圳商報), published by the Shenzhen Party Committee. In May 2001, the Shenzhen Press Distribution Bureau, with the support of the two Shenzhen dailies, instituted a

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[83]See Lynch, *After the Propaganda State*, 83-93, for an account of the commercialization of book publishing.

[84]Joseph Man Chan, "Administrative Boundaries and Media Marketization: A Comparative Analysis of the Newspaper, TV, and Internet Markets in China," in Lee, *Chinese Media, Global Contexts*, chap. 8.

distribution blockade against the *Nanfang City Daily*. According to Chan, the Shenzhen authorities' attempted blockade was quite visible, and was widely understood as being an illegitimate use of political power to protect economic assets rather than having anything to do with ideology.

In sum, the literature is in fairly broad agreement that commercialization transforms institutional constraints on Chinese media in ways that both undermine political restraints and make who and how Chinese media are controlled more visible. China's accession to WTO will most likely accelerate this process, both as Chinese media organizations are consolidated and sharpen their competitive edge in preparation for more foreign participation in China's media markets, and as foreigners increase their level of investment. As will be discussed further below, however, exactly what sort of transformation this may lead to remains unclear.

The literature notes that the Party has devised at least two strategies for coping with this challenge. The first of these, as Yuezhi Zhao mentions, has been an attempt, ongoing since the late 1990s, to re-centralize ownership of media through the establishment of large media conglomerates.[85] Much of the public rhetoric surrounding the creation of conglomerates has focused on the need to prepare for increased international competition following China's accession to the WTO. There can be little doubt, however, that the same reforms are intended to centralize control over the media. Whether or not these reforms will succeed in this end remains an open question. The large conglomerates are not necessarily less commercial than the smaller papers, and the consolidation of ownership has not necessarily changed what consumers prefer to read. Nor has the creation of larger enterprises necessarily resulted in economically effective organizations.

Commercialization has transformed individual as well as institutional interests. Zhongdang Pan finds that many journalists are caught in a "web of subsidies" that has a direct bearing on what gets published or broadcast and often leads to false or distorted reports. Subsidies can range from

[85]Zhao, "From Commercialization to Conglomeration" (cited in note 10 above).

packets of cash offered to journalists in expectation of a favorable report, to newspapers contracting with firms to make space available for content supplied by the firm. In either case the resulting stories would often be published without being clearly identified as paid advertisements.[86] Yuezhi Zhao writes that "unethical practices in journalism are not confined to China, but the degree and scope is perhaps China's unique contribution to world journalism."[87]

The official incentive structure for journalists also places increased emphasis on material incentives. As noted above, commercialization has prompted many media organizations to establish target or quota systems in which journalists' compensation, or even their job security, depends on their steady production of content meeting specified standards. While the usual list of standards includes ideological criteria, journalists are usually also required to meet market criteria which may lead them, as Li Xiaoping writes, to vie for the right to investigate big stories such as corruption scandals.[88] Alternatively, the growth of private firms that supply content and provide distribution means that there is an increasing space for careers in media outside the state sector.

In times past, ideology might have been a central means of maintaining influence over journalists otherwise subject to centripetal incentives; as Zhou He has argued, however, ideology has actually become as much of a challenge as a source of control.[89] It is now widely accepted that very few people in China believe that communism or Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought provide a persuasive explanation of how the world works or a useful guide to official policy. This places journalists and media

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[86]Zhongdang Pan, "Improvising Reform Activities: The Changing Reality of Journalistic Practice in China," in Lee, *Power, Money, and Media*, 68-111. See also Lynch, *After the Propaganda State*, 61-72.

[87]Zhao, *Media, Market, and Democracy*, 83.

[88]Li, "Focus" (cited in note 9 above).

[89]Zhou He, "Working with a Dying Ideology: Dissonance and Its Reduction in Chinese Journalism," *Journalism Studies* 1, no. 4 (November 2000): 599-616; and "How Do the Chinese Media Reduce Organizational Incongruence? Bureaucratic Capitalism in the Name of Communism," in Lee, *Chinese Media, Global Contexts*, chap. 10.

that are required to act as if the ideology remains plausible in a difficult position.

One of the most important strategies for coping with this problem has been to substitute other ideologies such as nationalism and consumerism and to pitch Party propaganda in style resembling commercial messages.[90] These two alternative ideologies have proven successful, both in that Chinese citizens find them plausible and in that Chinese consumers are eager to buy them. Wanning Sun writes about how Chinese media coverage of the Sydney Olympics inspired and reaffirmed patriotic sentiments, quoting her mother as stating that "I can't help feeling emotional when I see our national flags raised and our national anthem sung again and again in a foreign country."[91] Sun concludes that the Party has created a successful genre of "indoctritainment." Stanley Rosen similarly finds Chinese youth receptive to patriotic themes, and taking the 1999 embassy bombing as a case study, finds many similarities in what students believe and what the Chinese media reported. Rosen reports that Chinese youth had little interest in what international media reported about the incident, and when they were exposed to contradictory reports from the international media, they were willing to dismiss them as false propaganda distributed for political purposes. Most alarmingly of all, Rosen reports that some commentators were willing to label calls for freedom of speech a hegemonic plot designed to facilitate further distribution of American propaganda.[92]

The promise of consumption may be similarly legitimating. This theme is prominent in the critical media approach of the Donald, Keane, and Yin volume. While it is relatively common to cite rising standards of living and economic development as a critical source of legitimacy for the Chinese Communist Party, this volume points out how an advertising-based commercial media articulates a culture that strengthens that form of

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[90]For accounts in the shift in the style in which the Party's message is pitched, see Geremie Barmé, "CCP™ & ADCULT PRC," *The China Journal*, no. 41 (January 1999): 1-24.

[91]Wanning Sun, "Semiotic Over-Determination or 'Indoctritainment': Television, Citizenship, and the Olympic Games," in Donald, Keane, and Yin, *Media in China*, 120.

[92]Stanely Rosen, "Chinese Media and Youth: Attitudes Toward Nationalism and Internationalism," in Lee, *Chinese Media, Global Contexts*, chap. 5.

legitimacy. Yuezhi Zhao's article on how China's media justified joining the WTO points out that one of the principal benefits claimed was the creation of a consumer paradise.[93] Just as censorship and media regulation can be justified as a patriotic necessity, political stability and sacrifices on the part of some people can be labeled a necessity for economic growth. It is noteworthy that the most open medium, the Internet, is most accessible to those who are receiving the lion's share of economic benefits.

While these strategies have enjoyed a fair measure of success, there still exist serious problems. As Zhou He notes, nationalism is such a salable commodity that various media have established standards of nationalism that the Party and government have been unable to maintain in their dealings with other governments. The nationalist press has in turn facilitated the rise of exceedingly nationalistic sentiments in some sections of society. He cites Internet BBS commentary in 2001 following the collision of a Chinese fighter and an American reconnaissance aircraft as an example. Many Chinese posted virulent criticism of not just the American government but also of the Chinese government for its ostensibly craven attitude.[94]

There are also vulnerabilities in the Party's promotion of consumption, the most immediate of which may be the difficulty of squaring the promise of improved standards of living with an increasingly inequitable society. Yuezhi Zhao points out important lacunae in Chinese media coverage of the WTO which illustrates these problems. Namely, in order to "sell" the agreement, the terms of China's accession were long withheld, international opposition to and criticism of the WTO were marginalized, and possible costs to China's workers and farmers went almost unreported. Zhao points out that while the WTO might lower the price of California

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[93]Yuezhi Zhao, "'Enter the World': Neo-liberal Globalization, the Dream for a Strong Nation, and Chinese Press Discourses on the WTO," in Lee, *Chinese Media, Global Contexts*, chap. 2.

[94]Zhou He, "How Do the Chinese Media Reduce Organizational Incongruence?". For an earlier account of Internet nationalism, see Christopher Rene Hughes, "Nationalism in Chinese Cyberspace," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 13, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 195-209.

oranges and Texas steaks, these products would still be inaccessible to most Chinese. She writes that "the naked logic of social Darwinist neo-liberalism is wrapped in a nationalistic discourse in the Chinese press. This is a necessarily contradictory discourse..."[95]

Another challenge to the Party's management of the media concerns journalists' professional ethics. As noted above, one of the important strengths of traditional Party media management was that journalists tended to supervise themselves. This was in part a matter of career incentives and political threats, but was also based on cultivation of a paternalistic ethic which conceals censorship in an elitist rhetoric of education. Zhongdang Pan and Ye Lu explain that the traditional Party ethic for journalism holds that journalists have superior knowledge and wisdom that requires them to educate ordinary people.[96] Greater understanding on the part of journalists means that they can deal with "bad" information that would cause chaos if known to ordinary people, and the responsibility journalists demonstrate in not releasing such information in turn qualifies them to have privileged access to more information. This ethos has always been rivaled or colored by another ethos of "serving the masses" by striving for social justice, which might include, for example, exposing corruption.[97] These two strains of thought were generally compatible as the image of journalists as champions of popular justice lent popular legitimacy to their elite status.

Commercialization has undermined both these ethics. Commercialization is a conspicuous reminder that Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought, the ostensible system of thought in which the masses are being educated, is no longer taken seriously. When high-level leaders are seen to be using their authority to protect their commercial interests, as in the case of the *Nanfang City Daily*, journalists can hardly be seen as educators.

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[95]See note 93 above.

[96]See note 78 above; and Zhongdang Pan and Ye Lu, "Localizing Professionalism: Discursive Practices in China's Media Reforms," in Lee, *Chinese Media, Global Contexts*, chap. 11.

[97]For an example of this, see Liu Binyan and Perry Link, eds., *People or Monsters: And Other Stories and Reportage from China after Mao* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983).

Public awareness of corruption and payoffs more directly undermines journalists' prestige.

The search for a new ethic is a complex process that requires not only defining the ethic, but connecting it to professional schools and particular practices, linking it to broader ideological legitimacy, and defending it against competing ethics. It is possible, for example, that a nationalist ideology could supply the foundation for a paternalist ethic that would justify withholding some information from the public, as suggested by commentators who cast calls for freedom of the press as a plot to build American hegemony. On the other hand, the kind of journalism described by Latham above which bases itself on "objectivity" and the public's right to know is a powerful alternative. This ethic has considerable appeal to many Chinese journalists who would connect themselves to the tradition of "serving the masses" by striving for social justice. Both of these ethics might succeed in media markets.

The final challenge to the Party's management of journalism that will be discussed here concerns the growing visibility of repression. Another important strength of the traditional system of media management was that most censorship was hidden from public view. Books, periodicals, web site editors and writers, and ideas and information typically disappeared without public notice. Because audiences did not know what was being hidden, they were not in a position to resist or complain. One of the most important lessons that I would draw from the existence of the now extensive literature on how the Party manages media is that the process of managing the media is increasingly visible. The management of the media is not just increasingly visible to international experts, but also to the Chinese public. I would not want to underestimate the amount of information that the Chinese public still doesn't know that it doesn't know, but public complaints about censorship are increasingly common. For example, in September 2002 when the Chinese authorities blocked access to the popular Internet search engine, "Google"—perhaps because some information that would otherwise be blocked is accessible from Google's caches and because results for searches for "Jiang Zemin" prominently featured information sponsored by Falungong, the story made international headlines in both

Internet and traditional news media. Above all, blocking Google was the subject of widespread and angry complaints on China's Internet, which eventually led to the formulation and circulation of an Internet users' bill of rights.[98]

None of the above necessarily means that the commercialization of media poses an immediate threat to the Party's ability to manipulate media to its own advantage. The analysis does mean, however, that the relationship between the Party, citizens, and information has fundamentally and irreversibly changed. It may well be that the pecuniary interests of media organizations and the journalists who staff them, when coupled with the potential for praetorian intervention, will be sufficient to keep most media more or less tied to the Party's purposes. The above findings also mean, however, that the Party's purposes will be increasingly seen as pecuniary, and that its praetorian practices will be increasingly visible to the public eye.

Conclusion

This review began with a series of questions about the impact of commercialization and subsidiary trends on China's public sphere. On the whole, the literature on Chinese media reaches ambiguous to gloomy conclusions for each of these questions. Commercialization is not necessarily a step toward an autonomous media that will have a more independent role in political debates. Instead, China's commercial media are still largely state-owned and thus far the state has more or less successfully regulated public discourse. Commercialization has led to an increase in tabloid entertainment in China as elsewhere. Diversification of ownership is not

[98]Zittrain and Edelman have recently published an important study of which Internet sites are blocked in China. This is the most reliable study of what gets censored in any Chinese media and marks an important step toward making censorship more visible. See Jonathan Zittrain and Benjamin Edelman, "Empirical Analysis of Internet Filtering in China," at <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/filtering/china/>, accessed by this author on February 17, 2003.

equivalent to pluralism. Censorship and constraints on ownership have created a playing field that is anything but level and in which certain ideas —such as nationalism—have enormous advantages, and others—such as liberalism and the perspectives of workers and farmers—are at a sharp disadvantage. The technologies underlying new media are not so inherently liberating that censorship and control are effectively undermined. The increasing volume of images and ideas crossing China's borders offers more entertainment than political theory, and transnational media firms have compromised with China's leaders.

One interpretation of these trends, forcefully expressed by Yuezhi Zhao, is that the Party, working in collaboration with economic elites, has most likely consolidated its grip over a society in which politically rigged markets result in a highly unequal distribution of wealth.[99] Certain aspects of this image—the present success of media management, the extent to which markets are rigged, and the inequality of results—seem an important part of any serious consideration of contemporary China.

The critical question concerns just how well consolidated this power may be. One possibility is that the current system is developing toward some sort of self-managing system in which the discipline that is required to maintain the system is more or less spontaneously generated by the system itself. Gramsci might have referred to such a situation as a form of "hegemony"—although whose hegemony that would be remains unclear. On the whole, this development seems unlikely. The conclusion that I would draw from the proceeding list of challenges to the Party's management of the media is that there are a number of serious interrelated challenges which will require interlocking solutions. Market incentives need to have some correlation with ideological preferences. Ideological preferences and professional ethics need some degree of correlation, and to be successful, a code of ethics must have some degree of positive relationship to the market. In the absence of an interlocking system of management, much of media management will be "uninstitutionalized" or praetorian.

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[99]Zhao, "Media and Elusive Democracy in China" (cited in note 10 above).

The high rate of corruption cited above, the relatively frequent recourse to coercive intervention, and the increasing public visibility of both offer ample evidence that the current system is not hegemonic.[100]

In closing, I would like to briefly consider how this system looks to individuals. China's current media are more comfortable with viewing their audience as consumers rather than as citizens. The difference between consumers and citizens is considerable. Both make choices, but most of the decisions made by consumers reflect attempts to change or improve their own private lives, while citizens make choices that have explicit and intentional consequences for a broader public. Contemporary Chinese media's consumer orientation can be seen both in that most media is produced as an entertainment commodity that can be sold to a buying public, as well as in the media's pervasive promotion of consumption. Conversely, it can also be seen in the limits imposed on the reasonable public debate that is essential to citizenship.

While there are considerable differences between citizenship and consumption, the legitimation of consumption does entail the legitimation of at least a limited sphere of personal autonomy. Eric Kit-Wai Ma describes public recognition of the separation of media into distinct political and private spheres:

> The Party press has been more and more restricted to offices. On the other hand, entertainment media, which include mass-appeal papers and magazines, are becoming *the media* of the domestic sphere... The Chinese audience now shares the knowledge that the big papers are dull and small papers are hot, the front page is boring whereas the entertainment or weekend sections are lively, and that flagship papers and official TV programs are numbing whereas spin-off publications and entertainment fares are stimulating.[101]

While Rupert Murdoch was at the very least premature in declaring that new technologies make consumers sovereign, consumers do have con-

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[100]For a list of coercive interventions, including the names of journalists imprisoned and arrested, see "Reporters Without Borders," *China Annual Report 2002*, available at <http://www.rsf.fr/article.php3? id_article=1468&Valider=OK>; and "China Internet: A Chronicle of Repression," available at <http://www.rsf.fr/chronicle.php3>, accessed by this author on February 17, 2003.

[101]Ma, "Rethinking Media Studies," 30.

siderably more autonomy than the denizens of a propaganda state. It is possible, as Yuezhi Zhao and others argue, that the creation of this private sphere diverts citizens from public to private concerns. Hannah Arendt, among others, has argued, however, that a secure private sphere is necessary for a meaningful public sphere.[102]

Some forms of citizenship are possible in China's commercial media. Mary Mazur has written about how Chinese can have an impact on the public sphere through informally organized activities such as meetings, questionably legal book publishing ventures, and formally state-owned but actually privately financed and privately managed periodicals. Mazur recognizes that such activities do not fall within the range of traditional Western definitions of "civil society," and yet she finds them a necessary precursor.[103]

There is no necessary line of development from consumption to citizenship. It may well be the case that the Party somehow fits enough of the interlocking pieces together to be able to build a stable system of authoritarian media. There are critical differences between China and Singapore, but the latter certainly demonstrates that a prosperous, high-tech, globally-connected modern authoritarian regime can last for decades. On the other hand, many if not all Chinese citizens now have more resources than they have had at any time since the founding of the People's Republic, including relative prosperity, a relatively autonomous sphere of private life, greater access to global media and culture, and greater access to information in general. It is possible, but by no means inevitable, that the public sphere that Mazur describes will continue to grow.

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[102]Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, with an Introduction by Margaret Canovan, second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 58-73.

[103]Mary G. Mazur, "Public Space for Memory in Contemporary Civil Society: Freedom to Learn from the Past?" *The China Quarterly*, no. 160 (December 1999): 1019-35.