The Challenge of China: Contribution to a Transcultural Political Economy of Communication for the Twenty-First Century

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Assuming as I do that Mao Zedong correctly predicted the zigs and zags of China’s struggles toward socialism, it seems obvious that the fuel is being accumulated which will power a later phase of class struggle taking off from where the Cultural Revolution ended. (Dallas Smythe 1981, 247)

I’m not putting bets on any particular outcome in China, but we must have an open mind in terms of seeing where it is going. (Giovanni Arrighi 2009, 84)

If the political economy of communication as an academic field counts the “blind spot” debate, initiated by Dallas Smythe, as one of the defining moments in its development, political economy of communication as a praxis witnessed a historical encounter of an entirely different nature and magnitude, also initiated by Dallas Smythe, in an article entitled “After Bicycles, What?,” which was not published during his lifetime but nevertheless “attained a legendary status” among his peers (Guback 1994, 227). While the “blind spot” debate pitted North American political economists against their British counterparts within western Marxism, this other encounter engaged Smythe with the ideas and political practices of the Chinese Communist Party (CPP) within the international communist movement.

Smythe went to China to study ideology and technology between December 1971 and January 1972 on the eve of China’s reinsertion into the global capitalist economy, a process that started with the formal breakthrough in diplomatic relations with the US marked by Richard Nixon’s visit to China in February 1972 and culminated with post-Mao China’s dramatic change in its developmental strategy. Smythe’s interviews with officials and academics in various fields led him to conclude that while “proletarian politics” were being put “in command of all cultural life,” “our common cultural heritage of capitalist thinking” continued to inhibit Chinese academics from seeing the political nature of techniques and technology (Smythe 1994, 238). Having a “gut feeling” that this could be a problem in the Chinese pursuit of socialism and realizing that this was more than a question of scholarly concern, Smythe submitted his report to the Chinese authorities as a piece of friendly criticism from a concerned “family” member within the international socialist movement (Guback 1994, 229). Although the Chinese authorities never responded directly, the indirect answer to his question “After Bicycles What?” has been a thunderous “Of Course, Cars!” along with all the capitalist social relations that the private automobile embodies. Today, political economists of communication are facing “the challenge of China” produced by this titanic transformation. This chapter explores the theoretical challenges that China’s ascending role within the global political economy poses for a political economy of communication and culture in the twenty-first century. Building on an earlier attempt to contribute to a transcultural political economy of communication that aims to transcend the Euro-American biases of the field (Chakravartty and Zhao 2008), I bring the Chinese case to bear upon some of political economy’s basic conceptual categories in relation to
communication: the nature of the state; the relationships between class, nation, and empire; the problem of history and culture; and finally, by way of conclusion, agencies and alternatives.

The West, the Rest, and the Centrality of the Chinese State

“Like a giant oil tank, the world is turning. New growth poles of the world economy have been emerging in the south and east. Globalization once belonged to the west and now the tables are turning. We have entered the era of the ‘rise of the rest’,” writes sociologist Jan Neverveen Pieterse (2009, 55). But what makes China’s rise stand out? Its demographic weight, continental geographic scale, as well as the dizzying variety of ethnic communities and identities, do not provide an adequate answer – after all, the Indian subcontinent, the other major emerging power center, shares all these features. However, there is one crucial difference: “the modern state of India ... does not carry China’s long heritage of political unity or recent experience as a Leninist state” (Cheek 2006, 13).

Despite the mainstream western and Chinese dichotomous portrayal of an economically devastated Mao era versus the economically miraculous reform era, the Mao period laid the essential political, industrial, as well as social foundations for China’s spectacular growth in the reform era (Shirk 1993, Meisner 1996). Walden Bello (1999), writing from the Philippines, has gone back further arguing that China’s post-Mao economic dynamism “can’t be separated from an event that most of us in the South missed out on,” that is, “a social revolution in the late forties and early fifties that eliminated the worst inequalities in the distribution of land and income, and prepared the country for economic take-off ... in the late 1970s” (Bello, 1999).

Bello’s observation is especially relevant in the critical area of media and communication, where the Chinese state’s Leninist and Maoist legacies remain particularly strong (Zhao forthcoming). As I have argued (Zhao 2008a), the Chinese state’s aggressive promotion of information and communication technologies, along with commodification and state control of both ideology and the “commanding heights” of the media and communication industry, have been key dimensions of the “China rising” story, making the Chinese trajectory of development different from both former communist countries on the one hand, and other countries in the global south on the other. In fact, Ann Marie Brady (2008), in a rearticulated Cold War framework, has characterized the post-1989 era Chinese state’s incorporation of market mechanisms and western techniques of public relations and mass persuasion in its propaganda work as an Orwellian case of “marketing dictatorship.”

The Chinese state’s special position within the current global order, including its veto power in the United Nations Security Council, also place it in “a league of its own” among emerging powers in the global south, with a unique ability to fashion flexible responses to American hegemony. As J. N. Pieterse (2008, 712) has argued, different states have adopted three broad strategies of responses to American hegemony: (1) continued support for reasons such as the appeal of the US market, the role of the dollar, and even “lingering hope in the possibility of American self-correction”; (2) soft balancing, ranging from tactic noncooperation to establishing alternative institutions; and (3) hard balancing, a strategy that “only a few countries can afford” either because they have already been branded as enemies of the US and thus have nothing to lose or “because their bargaining power allows maneuvering room.” The Chinese state has resorted to all three in different spheres. Its position within the postwar capitalist interstate system was not easily assumed. It was a prize the modern Chinese nation-state first earned under a nationalist government in a protracted war against Japanese imperialism
in Asia. The CCP-led state then fought for it and earned it not only for emerging victorious in the civil war with the Nationalist government, but also for its early commitment to Third World internationalism – as Mao said famously, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was carried into the UN by the brotherhood of Africa’s numerous postcolonial nation-states, at a time when it was struggling for national autonomy vis-à-vis western capitalism on the one hand and Soviet “social imperialism” on the other. Thus, if the PRC owes a historical debt to the aspirations of China’s lower social classes, especially the Chinese peasantry, for its domestic political and ideological legitimacy, it also owes a historical debt to the hopes of oppressed peoples in the global south as articulated in a utopian movement, the “Third World” project inaugurated at the Afro-Asia meeting in Bandung in 1955, for its prominent place in the capitalist interstate system (Prashad, 2007).

Because China’s national history is deeply affected by both its struggle against imperialism and its Communist revolution, “Chinese leaders intend to insert themselves into the global economy as fully respected and integrated members of the transnationalised capitalist class, not as indebted junior partners” (Harris 2005, 9). This raises the question of whether the Chinese leadership can officially shed their communist colors and constitute themselves as members of the transnational capitalist class without losing their political and ideological legitimacy to rule in China. For the political economy of communication, this foregrounds questions regarding the “relative autonomy” of the political and ideological realms vis-à-vis the economic realm. Unfortunately, neither western social theory in general nor the political economy of communication offers the necessary tools for analyzing the Chinese state. Within western social theory, earlier attempts by Marxist political economists to develop a state theory were prematurely buried by the globalization paradigm celebrating the death of the state on the one hand, and by post-Marxist, poststructuralist, and postmodernist theories displacing the academic focus from “the state and class struggle to the micro-physics of power and the problems of identity formation” on the other (Jessop 1991, 91), resulting in “a remarkable impoverishment of state theory” (Panitch 2002, 93). The theoretical blind spot surrounding the postcolonial nation-state has also been noted, not only in the field of development communication in general, but also within the critical political economy paradigm. Citing Nordenstreng’s (2001, 155) acknowledgement that “the state as a concept remains shamefully underanalyzed” among early theorists of the cultural imperialism paradigm, Alhassan (2004, 61) argued that even some of the defining texts on cultural imperialism “were blind on conceptual clarifications on the nation-state, democracy, citizenship, and sovereignty.” Sparks (2007, 193, 203–4) has criticized theorists of cultural imperialism for failing to understand the nature of the central conflict of the pre-1991 world between the US and the USSR as “a struggle between different forms of empire,” and for remaining silent about the distribution of power inside societies and “defining statist autarchic solutions as an alternative, rather than a complement, to US capitalism.”

To be sure, not all the formulations of the cultural imperialism thesis problematically reify the Third World states and their national cultures and pit them mechanically and ahistorically against western capitalist states and transnational capitalist culture. The original critique of cultural imperialism, with its focus on how the “dominating stratum” of postcolonial societies “is attracted, pressured, forced and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominating center” of the modern world system (H. Schiller 1976, 9 emphasis in original), “verged upon – though in truth it never fully became – a theory of transnational class struggle” (D. Schiller 1996, 101). This
struggle, as Dan Schiller (1996, 101) elaborated, resonated with Franz Fanon’s insistence that it is absolutely necessary to oppose vigorously and definitely the birth of a national bourgeoisie and a privileged caste within these societies. It is precisely within this context that one might appreciate Dallas Smythe’s fascination with the rhetoric of “proletariat politics” being in command in the PRC and his attempt to grasp not only the nature of “class struggle” between the “capitalist roaders” and “socialist roaders” within the Chinese state, but also to analyze the ideological orientations and knowledge regimes of the officials and academics who were in the leading position to shape China’s developmental path. Addressing the challenge that China presents for a contemporary global political economy of communication, then, first and foremost entails an analysis of the nature of the Chinese state in the era of information capitalism. As discussed above, this is a state that began in a social revolution and in Third World internationalism, and has, more recently, in the view of Joshua Cooper Ramo (2004), amassed “asymmetric power” in the global arena. If it is the power of this state that has enabled China to become a pole of growth for global capitalism during the era of neoliberal accumulation, it is the future direction of this state that has rendered “the rise of China” so unsettling for the evolving global capitalist order. The bankruptcy of neoliberalism and the Chinese state’s ability to resist wholesale neoliberalization – or, put the other way, China’s neoliberal elite’s inability to pursue wholesale neoliberalization in the past 30 years due to the Chinese state’s communist legacies – has propelled it to the center of the global political economy. However, precisely because its political legitimacy is still based on its socialist pretensions, and because class struggle over its direction is by no means settled despite the ascending power of the bureaucratic, capitalist, and managerial strata, there is the danger that the reforms are reversible, with “the masses” threatening to “seek a restoration of their own unique form of class power” (Harvey 2005, 151), compelling the leadership to rearticulate the state’s hegemony in favor of the low social classes to “live up to its revolutionary mandate against foreign capitalists, private interests, and local authorities” (Harvey 2005: 150). As I have demonstrated elsewhere (Zhao 2008a), elite and popular communication politics in China since the early 2000s need to be understood as part of this unfolding struggle over the terms of the CCP’s hegemony, and the future direction of China’s ongoing transformation.

There is a profound uneasiness and fear on the part of the dominant US elite about the nature and future direction of the Chinese state. Elizabeth Economy and Adam Segal (2009), two analysts at the Council on Foreign Relations, have stated bluntly that the US and China have “mismatched interests, values, and capabilities” and that the US should incorporate “the rest of the world” in its hub-and-spoke China containment strategy. There is a sense of déjà vu here. As Westad has noted: “To elites in the United States, the rise of the Soviet Union as a world power also meant the rise of an alternative form of modernity that America had been combating since 1917” (2007, 25). Although the US won the Cold War with the Soviet Union, there is widespread fear that the rise of China under CCP rule may actually fulfill the Soviet Union’s historical promise of providing “an alternative modernity; a way poor and downtrodden peoples could challenge their conditions without replicating the American model” (Westad 2007, 17).

Class, Nation, and Empire: Chinese and Global Dimensions

As the above analysis makes clear, the class character of the Chinese state and its role in the shifting regimes of capitalist accumulation must be taken as an issue of critical importance in any discussion of “the challenge of China.” So must the relations between state and “nation.” Because much of the debate on cultural imperialism ends up centering on the problem of
inequality between nations, the concept of the “nation” has seldom been adequately conceptualized. Recent developments in the field, specifically what Mosco (2009) described as political economy’s globalization and the development of feminist and labor “standpoints” of analysis, continue to gloss over questions of interstate struggles, nations, and nationalisms. Furthermore, as Desai (2008, 398) has identified, there is an unproductive scholarly division of labor between a study of nations and nationalisms focused primarily on culture and a political economy of national and international development that foregrounds class. Facing the “challenge of China” – a poor country that has managed to rise up in the global capitalist order while dramatically increasing domestic class inequalities, and a nation-state with staggering ethnic, gender, urban–rural, and regional divides, as well as a Chinese diaspora that not only has no parallel in its population size and economic power in the world but also perhaps in its economic and cultural linkages with China – necessarily requires a critical examination of the complicated intersections of class, nation, and other marks of status difference both within and beyond Chinese borders.

As Lin Chun (2006) has argued, in China, socialism, nationalism, and developmentalism were closely intertwined historically. The Chinese communists were more nationalists than communists. Because of the Chinese nation’s “class” position in an imperialist international system, “the Chinese revolution … was first national and then social, and could not be otherwise” and Chinese communists “held a firm conviction that if social interest conflicted with national interest, the social must yield to the national” (Lin 2006, 40). Nevertheless, to the extent that the PRC was and is still defined constitutionally as a state led by the working class and based on the class alliance of workers and peasants, Chinese nationalism has a strong socialist and international legacy. This is literally embodied in the PRC national flag, which foregrounds the national population’s class, rather than ethnocultural, or “nationality” constitution, with four stars representing the workers, peasants, petit bourgeoisie, and national bourgeoisie classes surrounding a larger star representing the CCP.

An international nationalism that differs from European nationalism underpins the PRC’s historical self-identification with and participation in the “Third World” project. As Prashad argues, “if European nationalism took as a given that a people (who are perhaps a “race”) need to be organized by a state so that their nation can come into its own,” postcolonial nationalists developed an alternative theory of the nation, which “had to be constructed out of two elements: the history of their struggles against colonialism, and their program for the creation of justice” (2007, 12).

The modern Chinese concept of the “nation” was also strongly conditioned by imperial China’s long history of political unity and ethnocultural integration. As Wang Hui (2004; 2008) has demonstrated, the process of fashioning a modern Chinese nation-state out of imperial China with its long history of integration among different national populations is fundamentally different from the process of nation-state formation in Europe. Earlier Chinese bourgeois nationalists from Zhang Taiyan to Sun Yat-sen initially aimed to build a monocultural Han Chinese state but quickly realized that this would lead to the disintegration of China. Consequently, the modern Chinese state in its first incarnation, established in 1912, was a multiethnic nation. Similarly, the Communists, influenced by Lenin’s European notion of national self-determination, attempted to establish a communist state after the image of the European nation-state. However, they soon discovered through their revolutionary struggles that a Chinese copy of the European nation-state was not tenable. In particular, during the Long
March, which brought the mostly Han Chinese revolutionaries into close contact with ethnic minorities in the remote regions of Southwest China, the communists discovered the reality of ethnic integration and realized that although there were ethnic tensions, ethnic conflict was not the “primary contradiction” in the ethnic minority regions. This appreciation for the long history of ethnic integration and the prioritization of class solidarity over ethnocultural identity in the articulation of the CCP’s revolutionary hegemony, made the Chinese communist state’s solution to the “national question” fundamentally different from those of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. While ethnonationalism was an important cause for the disintegration of these other two multinational communist states, China remains unified under a CCP-led state that is ever vigilant not only against western attempts at “xihua” China – that is, imposing western liberal-democratic institutions on China, but also “fenhua” China – that is, disintegrating it by supporting Taiwanese independence or any forms of ethnonationalist independent movement.

The reform period starting in 1978 marked a dramatic rearticulation of class and nation in the political economy of Chinese development, and along with it, a radical reorientation of the class nature of Chinese nationalism and the development of a depoliticized neoliberal cultural politics of class and nation. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) and commercialized media – with TV at its core, but soon followed by computers and cell phones – have played instrumental roles in these processes (Zhao and Schiller 2001; Hong 2008). If Mao had led the communist revolution in the first half of the twentieth century by mobilizing China’s lower social classes and championing the cause of anti-imperialism, the CCP under Deng Xiaoping and his successor Jiang Zemin installed China’s “digital revolution” from above by relying on the country’s technocratic elites and rearticulating China’s political economy with transnational capitalism, leading to the de facto formation of a hegemonic power bloc consisting of Chinese state officials, a rising domestic urban middle class, as well as transnational capitalists, foreign state managers and policy makers (Zhao 2003, Schiller 2007). As China became the poster child of the World Bank-promoted strategy of “ICT for development,” Chinese society became fragmented, polarized, and deeply divided along class, region, gender, ethnicity, region, and other social and cultural divides. By 1997, the World Bank had reported that China’s Gini coefficient index, which measures inequality on a scale of 0.001 to 1 (where 1 reflects absolute equality), had increased from a score of .28 in 1981 to 0.458 (Anagnost 2008: 498), making China, which still claims to be a socialist country, more inequitable than the United States (.408) and one of the most inequitable societies in the world – ranking 90th among 131 countries in a UN assessment in 2005 (Manthorpe 2006). Rather than speaking of “China,” it has become more meaningful to think about China in terms of “one country, four worlds”: the ultramodern and high-income Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen constitute the first world, the ethnic minority and border areas and extremely low income rural areas the fourth world (Hu et al. 2001,167). ICT’s role in constituting China’s uneven development was matched by the media’s role in rearticulating the neoliberal cultural politics of class and nation.

First, a fortified and modernized media control regime effectively depoliticized development and prohibited open debates about the class orientation of China’s “reform and openness” process, debates on the commodification of media, and reflections on the capitalist social relations embedded in commercialized media services. This created the key enabling political condition for cheap labor as China’s so-called “comparative advantage” by disenabling the circulation of labor struggles and suppressing the formation of radical working class consciousness (Zhao and Duffy 2007). For better or worse, the most striking fact is this: instead of being able to constitute themselves as an urban working class, members of this massive wage-
earning workforce – 225 million by the end of 2008 in the official account, with 140 million as migrant workers (Du 2009) – referred to as “peasant workers” (nongmin gong), are not able to reproduce themselves as a “full proletarian” materially and culturally in the cities, with gender, place of origin, as well as a sense of having a piece of land and a rural home to return, playing significant roles in their identities (Ngai 2005, Hong 2008). The 2008-2009 economic crisis, for example, has propelled tens of millions of migrant workers back to the countryside. As the other side of the coin of class (dis)formation, as many party members got rich first by becoming capitalists themselves and as the party incorporated the newly constituted capitalists, professional and comprador elites into its ranks, it continued to frustrate autonomous capitalist class formation by restricting liberal and neoliberal intellectuals from enjoying full press freedom in the mass media, and by prohibiting private capital from entering the core areas of the media and communication system (Zhao 2008a; 2008b).

Second, while still opportunistically mobilizing anti-imperialist rhetoric in its ongoing bargaining with the US for a better deal within the global capitalist order, the party leadership and the mainstream media foreground a pragmatic and cultural form of Chinese nationalism, using it as an instrument for rallying popular support for the state-led project of “the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” As China attempted to reposition itself “from a Third-World anti-imperialist nation into one of imperialism’s ‘strategic partners’” (Wang 2006), essentialized Chinese cultural values and symbols, even vernacular beliefs and practices such as the fetish with the “lucky” number of 8, receive the highest level state sanction. The 8.08 p.m. grand opening of the August 8, 2008 Beijing Olympics with the high-tech cultural spectacle directed by Zhang Yimou is the ultimate embodiment of this version of Chinese cultural nationalism in the digitalized neoliberal era.

The concomitant spatial and cultural reconfiguration of Chinese national politics is also profound. On the one hand, the PRC state appeal to a pan-Chinese nationalism, or “modern Chinese transnationalism,” both to support its unfinished business of reclaiming sovereignty over all Chinese territories under imperialist and capitalist rule (Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan) and its coastal-based and exported oriented development strategy, taps into the vast financial and human capital of Chinese nationals living in these territories as well as the “ungrounded empires” of overseas Chinese diaspora (Ong and Nonini 1996, Ong 1999). As Wanning Sun (2002) has demonstrated, reform-era Chinese media, especially Chinese television, has been deeply involved in the cultural politics of migration and the Chinese transnational imagination. On the other hand, this strategy of asymmetric capitalist integration led to a neglect of the social and cultural needs of the ethnic minorities within PRC’s hinterlands. As the “special economic zones” established in the coastal provinces in the early 1980s to attract foreign, and especially diaspora Chinese capital to jump-start China’s economic development assumed a central place in reform-era China’s cultural imagination, the ethnic minority “autonomous regions” lost their relative importance. Regional inequalities grew. Class tension, ethnic divides, as well as the ideological void and identity crisis created by the discrediting of the Maoist-era class ideology and its particular articulation of the Chinese socialist nation, have intersected in complicated ways to create heightened social and cultural conflicts. As Yao (2009) has demonstrated, it is precisely within this context that one witnesses the rise of Tibetan ethnonationalism and a profound change in the identity politics of Tibetans, a development that has also been enabled by globalization and modern information technologies and new cultural venues such as online Tibetan literary forums. As Yao goes on to argue, this is a major cultural failure of the reform-era Chinese state and its lopsided economic development process, and one that must not be
obscured by the Chinese state’s attribution of the creation of the “Tibetan problem” to the Dalai Lama and the interference of western countries. The more dramatic and devastating eruption of ethnic conflicts in Xinjiang in July 2009 further underscored the severity of the problem.

Third, as the media abandoned Mao’s discourse of class and class struggle, it embraced the discourse of “social strata” and dedicated themselves to the formation of “the middle class,” making its growth “a national project that signifies China’s membership in the developed world” (Anagnost 2008, 499). Within this discourse, the middle class – whose size and exact constitution remains fuzzy, ranging between 5 to 15 percent of the population – becomes a prized political and cultural trope, a force for social stability and perhaps even the agents of Chinese democracy. Under this neoliberal mode of citizenship, “citizen-subjects were no longer defined as equal members of a collective political body but by the degree of their individual progress towards middle class status” (Anagnost 2008, 499). Thus one witnessed one of the greatest ironies in the Chinese cultural politics: the discourse of “class struggle” was taken to its essentialist extreme when Chinese society was relatively egalitarian during the Cultural Revolution, and was totally suppressed during a process of rapid class polarization during the reform era.

As the other side of the media’s role in its contribution to, and anticipation of, “middle class” formation, workers and peasants, the prized class tropes of the Maoist era and constitutionally still the leading classes of the PRC socialist state, re-emerged as the “vulnerable social groups” in official discourse. Rather than a structural factor and a class-charged political issue, inequality is depoliticized and articulated as “cultural difference in a hierarchy of national belonging” (Anagnost 2008, 497). Rather than the revolutionary and productive backbone of the nation, peasants have become the burden of the nation’s march toward its ascendancy in the global capitalist order. At best, they are the ones who need to improve their own individual “qualities,” and if they try hard, they can perhaps even become a member of the middle class; at worst, they are doomed to be sacrificed as the “price” for China’s “great national destiny” (Zhao 2008a, 318). In perhaps the most ironic, and even cynical, turn in the developmental logic of global capitalism, Chinese peasants, whose basic needs for health care and education have hardly been met and whose unaccounted labor has subsidized the reproductive needs of China’s migrant workers (for example, by taking care of the elderly and raising children in the countryside), have since February 2009 been subsidized by the Chinese state and mobilized by the media to overcome global capitalism’s crisis of overproduction by purchasing the televisions, refrigerators, washing machines, and other electronic goods that American consumers had no more credit to buy. Through a program called “home electronics go to the countryside,” which saw an average monthly growth rate of 74 percent in the amount of subsidies between February and May 2009, with the May 2009 total worth of subsidies standing at 280 million yuan (X. Li 2009), Chinese peasants, once the engine of a Chinese Communist revolution, are now to serve as the engine for global capitalism’s massive industrial machine in China, even potentially saving it by turning themselves into “consumers of last resort” – a role, until recently, that had been assumed by American consumers.

The Chinese state thus faces the profound challenges of balancing economic growth and social and ecological justice, conflicting class interests and cultural identities. As Lin Chun (2006, 223) put it, the transformation of Chinese socialism “is yet to strike a balance between market dynamics and private incentives on the one hand, and social cohesion and justice on the other.” Recognizing the unsustainable nature of the developmental path in the 1990s, the Hu
Jintao leadership, which came to power in 2002, has begun to address these tensions under the slogans of practicing “the scientific concept of development” and building a “harmonious socialist society.” Even more interestingly, in an attempt to counter both the west’s liberal democratic discourse and Eurocentric notion of nationalism, and a transnationalized Tibetan ethnonationalist movement, the Chinese state, while continuing to suppress the language of class, has been compelled to reclaim class-based solidarity with the Tibetan nation. In a highly symbolic move in January 2009, the Tibetan Autonomous Region National People’s Congress established March 28 as Tibet’s annual “Serf Liberation Day.” In the official media discourse, this is to commemorate the Chinese People’s Liberation Army’s quelling of a March 10, 1959 armed rebellion led by “the Dalai Lama and his supporters in the upper ruling class ... with assistance from some western powers,” and the subsequent completion of a “democratic reform” leading to “the emancipation of millions of Tibetan serfs and slaves” from the Dalai Lama’s “feudal serfdom” and “theocracy” (Xinhua News Agency 2009).

Following Lin (2006), I argue that it remains worthwhile to explore the continuing relevance of the Chinese communist revolution’s legitimation of “people’s sovereignty” and the theory and practices of “people’s democracy.” As Lin (2006, 136) has pointed out, “whenever the People’s Republic failed the people, it turned out not to be because it defied the Western models of government and their colonial extension, but because it departed from its own visionary inspiration and promise of democracy.” From this perspective, the point that as long as its national government is not chosen through free, fair, and competitive elections, the PRC cannot be a democracy is beside the point. Instead, “It would be more appropriate to not ignore any genuinely democratic components of Chinese socialism and historicize them in such a way that the country is seen as yet to accomplish its own unfinished democratic project” (Lin 2006, 197). Although much attention has been placed on the rising “middle class” as potential agents of Chinese democracy, as Dan Schiller (2008) has reminded us, the making of a gigantic Chinese working class during the reform era and its domestic and global political and cultural implications must command the urgent attention of communication scholars. As I have already alluded to, the nature of this process, partial proletarianization as opposed to full proletarianization, as well as the gender and regional mediation of the Chinese working class, are quite different from the archetypical making of the English working class. Schiller’s comparative world-historical framework brings into sharp focus the magnitude of the kind of intellectual challenge that we are discussing:

In England, propelling the originating movement into capitalism over the centuries between around 1500 and 1800, a few million persons became – made themselves into – what was long taken to be the first wage-earning working class. The world historical significance of this development for politics and culture and social policy registered, and not merely in England, both throughout early modern Europe and into contemporary times. What may we expect from the formation, during a compressed interval of just three decades, of a working class numbering perhaps 200 million wage-earners? (Schiller 2008, 413)

Communication scholars are only now beginning to engage with the multifaceted dimensions of this process (Zhao and Duffy 2007, Zhao, 2008a; Hong 2008, Qiu 2009, 2010; Sun 2009). The Chinese state, by following an information technology-based and export-oriented development strategy, has accumulated national wealth on the one hand and intensified a multitude of domestic social conflicts on the other. Minqi Li (2008) has gone so far as to argue that China’s economic boom was based on the political defeat of the urban working class and the
creation of a massive surplus labor force in the form of rural migrant workers. At the same time, cheap consumer goods, low inflation rates, and the Chinese state’s indirect financing of Washington’s “war on terror” (by its debt-financing of the US state) allowed the US government to ease the domestic class tensions normally associated with increased income inequality and the massive upward redistribution of wealth. If China’s low social classes were suppressed by the Chinese state while bayoneted with a nationalistic discourse of China’s triumphant rise in the world, one wonders whether the American working class, whose bargaining power with capital has been undermined by transnational capital’s mobilization of China’s large reserve army of cheap, healthy, and relatively well-educated labor, has been materially pacified by Wal-Mart and latte consumerisms, while their sense of American political and cultural superiority was reaffirmed by American media stories of Chinese media and Internet censorship, human rights abuses, poor and dangerously made Chinese products, and discourses of “cultural genocide” in Tibet. If the “war on terror” has undermined civil liberties and curtailed the communicative freedoms of the American public – from American journalism’s practices of “embedded reporting” to the American state’s growing surveillance power over telecommunications and the Internet (Schiller 2007), will the current global financial crisis and a possible readjustment of China’s developmental strategy in favor of China’s domestic consumption and the welfare of China’s lower social classes contribute to intensified class conflicts within the US?

As recent intensified social struggles and environmental conflicts in China and the Hu Jintao leadership’s new ideological and policy initiatives have already demonstrated, the “rise of China” cannot sustain itself politically in the long run without the rise of China’s lower social classes. As I have demonstrated, by 2004–5, even the Chinese state’s fortified regime of media censorship could no longer contain the voices of China’s lower social classes and those of their organic intellectuals in the struggle for social justice, environmental sustainability, and a more equitable developmental path (Zhao 2007, 2008a, Zhao and Duffy 2007). It is within this context that Minqi Li (2008, 92) has argued that the creation of a large working class and its rising bargaining power and organizational capacity in China will not only “turn the global balance of power again to the favor of the global working class,” but put so much pressure on the capitalist profit rate and accumulation that it will bring about the eventual “demise” of the capitalist world economy as we know it. If the earth’s biocapacities cannot accommodate the “rise of China” or the “rise of the rest” as aspiring to current western levels of consumer capitalism, then Smythe’s radical insistence in “After Bicycles” on the necessity of transforming capitalist production and consumer relations, and its regime of technological innovation, assumes more urgency today not only for the Chinese, but also for an ecologically sustainable future for humanity as a whole.

This, in turn, raises urgent questions for the political economy of communication: what are the challenges and opportunities for democratic communication at a time when commercialized media systems have become victims of the global economic crisis with the decline of the advertising revenues as their lifeblood? Given that the US corporate media have not only failed to provide any meaningful “check” on the consecutive rise of various economic bubbles, and have more or less blindly endorsed the “war on terror,” how far will they go in supporting a “coming conflict” with China, thus once again mobilizing US nationalism to displace domestic class conflict? What kind of media structure, practices, and cultural sensibilities will be necessary for the US to manage its decline in “a non-catastrophic way” (Arrighi 2009, 83)? Will the US media be able to transcend anticommunist and anti-Chinese racist ideologies in representing “China rising” during a period of profound uncertainty in the
global order? Can the western media transcend imperialist and orientalist legacies in its coverage of Tibet or other ethnonational independent movements?

Furthermore, if one prong of the Chinese state’s strategies in overcoming the crisis of overproduction is to boost domestic consumption by increasing the welfare of China’s low social classes, and the other is to export its surplus capital and productive capacities and infrastructure building know-how to less developed countries in the global south, especially Africa, how will such a development contribute to reconfigure class, race, and national politics in Africa? As Franks and Ribet (2009) note, interesting work is already being done in the area of China–Africa media relations. Is Chinese capital creating “a Chinese legend” in African development, and even nurturing “love without borders” there – as the People’s Daily claims (Yang and Xie 2009), or is it engendering a new form of “neocolonialism” – as the western media claim, or is the situation more complicated? After Africa being rendered the “lost continent” during the era of Euro-American-led neoliberal globalization, will China bring industry to the continent and become “a motor of development which will help transform much of Africa for the better,” a process that Edward Friedman (2009, 19) argues is already happening? What kind of media and telecommunications infrastructure development projects are being pursued by Chinese government and industry there, and does the ideological legacy of “Third World internationalism,” however compromised, play a role in both the practices and discourses of current Chinese economic and cultural interactions with Africa, and with the Arabic and Latin American countries? A global political economy of communication that reproduces the “hub-and-spoke” power relationship between the US and the rest of the world is clearly no longer adequate, if it ever was, as the new phase of economic and cultural globalization engenders more east–south and south–south financial, technological, and cultural flows.

Finally, in the context of a seismological transformation in the global political economy, and recognizing how growing inequalities have unleashed greater political instability in the global south, an argument has been made that, “it is in the interests of states in the global South to cooperate with each other to change the rules of the game,” thus potentially engendering a “new Bandung,” and one in which the former “Third World” states have not only the political and moral authority, but also the economic clout to challenge the west (Palat 2008, 721, Arrighi 2007). In this context, the June 16, 2009 inaugural summit meeting among the leaders of the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) marks a significant development. If the call for a New World Information and Communication Order played such a central role in the previous attempt to build a more just world order, what role will this sector play in either blocking or engendering a possible “new Bandung,” or more likely, proliferation of many “mini-Bandungs” along various lines of geopolitical affinity, in the current era of “knowledge economy” and informational capitalism? Will the fact that media and communication industries in the global south are themselves integrated into the transnational circuits of capitalist production and consumption make them complicit in perpetuating the neoliberal capitalist order? Will the “struggle to democratize public communication” in the North Atlantic heartland of global capitalism (Hackett and Carroll 2006) make a difference? What are the potential linkages and points of affinity among media democratization movements in the west, in the global south, and across the globe? How will political economists position themselves in these ongoing struggles? What lies beyond the past’s misplaced hope in the Third World states and the current disenchantment with “transnational civil society”?2
History, Culture, and Chinese “Soft Power”: Between a New “Renaissance” and a Second “Cultural Revolution”?

As Mosco (2009) has argued, one of the central characteristics of political economy is that it prioritizes social change and historical transformation. However, Mosco also recognizes that political economic thought is “mostly building on a metanarrative that sees the discipline rooted firmly within characteristic patterns of Western white male intellectual activity” (2009, 37). Marxist political economy takes as its historical “time zeroes” the rise of capitalism in the west and the beginning of colonization. However, at least two intellectual currents have challenged the adequacy of this temporality and provided useful insights for political economists of communication facing the “challenge of China” today.

The first of these currents has been initiated by world system theorists, in works such as Andre Frank’s *Reorient* (1998) and Giovanni Arrighi’s *Adam Smith in Beijing* (2007). By analyzing the world economy before the rise of capitalism and turning the east and west and center–periphery relationship upside down and, in Arrighi’s case, by detailing the political economy of state and market formation in precolonized China and describing the noncapitalist market economy in East Asia, these theorists have contributed to dereifying capitalism as a “master category” in political economic analysis. In particular, they have made it possible to avoid the conflation between globalization and the spread of capitalism, which has been radical political economists’ response to the “globalization paradigm.” As Amartya Sen (2006) has argued, globalization is not new, and is a much bigger and immensely greater process than western imperialism. Recognizing this makes it possible to transcend “civilizational confinement” (Sen 2006) and to imagine postcapitalist globalization and a new form of internationalism, or “critical cosmopolitanism,” as a more desirable alternative to both capitalist “mobile consumerism” and religious fundamentalism (Murdock 2006) in a post-Cold War era that seems to have effectively put an end to the international communist movement.

By distinguishing between the development of a market economy and capitalist development proper, Arrighi has made it possible to open up the debate on the direction of China’s ongoing transformation. According to Arrighi (2007), the capitalist nature of market-based development is not determined by the presence of capitalists but by the subordination of state power to capitalist class interest and the militarization of state power in the pursuit of foreign territories and markets – the latter is what defined the European developmental path as capitalist, and the market-based development in the Ming and early Qing eras as noncapitalist. To be sure, China’s current integration with the global capitalist economy has made its contemporary market economy qualitatively different from the market economies of the Ming and Qing eras. But this alone does not rule out the possibility that the territorial logic of power – be it the Chinese state or more likely, a multipolarity of transitional states including China – may manage to subordinate “the capitalist logic of power” – thus ending what Harvey (2003) has characterized as the US-centered “imperialism of the capitalist sort.” Although Arrighi claims that “developments in the ideological realm are unreliable indicators of reality” (2007, 17), the fact that the Chinese state continues to prevent private capitalist domination of the ideological and cultural realms and to mobilize the rhetoric of socialism to legitimate itself remain significant factors in considering the future direction of China’s ongoing transformation. As I have argued (Zhao 2008a), this discourse of socialism has provided a language for members of China’s subordinate social classes and their organic intellectuals to mount their struggles against Chinese versions of “accumulation by dispossession.” The “advantage” of this language, as
opposed to an anticommunist ideology, for managing the current global economic crisis is also considerable. As Harvey (2009) has noted, in the US, “even the vaguest hint of state direction let alone nationalization creates a political furor.” In contrast, although “there may be some vested interests of wealthier party members and an emergent capitalist class to be overcome,” there is “absolutely no ideological barrier to redistributing economic largeness to the neediest sectors of society … The charge that this would amount to ‘socialism’ or even worse to ‘communism’ would simply be greeted with amusement in China.” Although Colin Sparks (2009, 111) is probably correct in suggesting that the rationale for the Hu Jintao leadership’s redistributive policies is to “save capitalism from the capitalists rather than to challenge the system itself,” this is more a matter of interpretative framework than an issue of substantive concern. As I have argued (Zhao 2008a, 343), it is “not only the party’s official socialist slogans per se, but also their reappropriation by various Chinese social forces and the unfolding societal processes of subordinating both state and market to the social needs of the working people, are what the struggle for socialism in China is about.” For the rural girls who were denied school education because of tuition fees, the government’s abolishing of school tuition fees is a real gain.

Alongside world system theorists, postcolonial scholars have challenged the temporality of critical political economy from a cultural perspective. As Mahmood Mamdani (2007) has argued, political decolonization won’t be complete without an intellectual paradigm shift, or an “intellectual decolonization” that thinks of the present in terms of a past that goes to the colonial period and before:

“One unfortunate tendency of radical political economy was that it tended to reduce the usable past to the colonial period. We should recognize that the various forms of nativism around the post-colonial world – from racialized Black nationalism to ethnicized nationalisms to religious Muslim and Hindu nationalism, what we tend to call “fundamentalisms” these days – have been the first to raise this question. They are the ones who have accused self-declared modernist intellectuals of being nothing but a pale reflection of their colonial masters. They have emphasized the necessity to link up with the historicity of their respective societies. The only problem is that they rule out the colonial period as an artificial imposition, as a departure from an authentic history … As a result, they underestimate – or sometimes fail to understand fully – the present by ignoring how the institutional and intellectual legacy of colonialism tends to be reproduced in the present.” (Mamdani 2007, 95–6)

While acknowledging the importance of the nativist call for a fuller grasp of historicity, Mamdani also underscores how this project is compromised by its search for authenticity. Consequently, “The point is not just to sidestep the nativist critique but to sublate it, in the manner in which Engels understood sublating Hegel in his critique of Ludwig Feuerbach; to take into consideration that which is relevant, effective, and forceful in the critique but at the same time to break away from its pre-occupation with origins and authenticity” (2007, 96).

Mamdani’s argument provides a relevant framework for interpreting the Chinese state’s effort to selectively make use of China’s nativist cultural traditions without being culturally fundamentalist. On the one hand, as the Marxist heir to the European Enlightenment and the May 4 Chinese modernist tradition, the CCP-led Chinese state has relentlessly promoted a modern market economy and developed modern science and technology. On the other hand, the reform era has witnessed a state- and societal-wide reassertion of Chinese cultural difference from western capitalist modernity, culminating in a cultural politics that lays claim to the transformational power of Chinese culture in sublating western capitalist modernity. To be sure,
there are reactionary tendencies in this cultural revivalism. Some versions are highly compatible with the political economy of a globalized capitalism, “which for its own survival depends at once on a valorization of difference, and the convergence of difference into homogeneity through techniques of representation that carefully assign only to those practices that accord with the logic of ongoing capitalist expansion” (Dirlik 2002, 21). No longer content with merely critiquing American cultural imperialism, the Chinese state under the Hu Jintao leadership has embraced Joseph Nye’s concept of “soft power” and launched a multifaceted effort to project China abroad through its media and cultural institutions (Sun, 2010). The concept, initially discussed in Chinese media and academic circles, was a hot topic at the National People’s Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) meetings in March 2007. On July 24, 2007, the National Committee of the CPPCC held a seminar to call for advice and contributions on building “soft power” as a means of forging national solidarity and “gaining an upper hand in the international arena” (Xinhua News Agency 2007). By October 15, 2007, Hu Jintao’s report to the 17th National Congress of the CCP had made strengthening China’s “soft power” an official party policy (Hu 2007). Instead of exporting revolutionary ideology (as in the Mao era), the Chinese state is building Confucian Institutes all over the world, while various branches of the Chinese media industries are trying to expand into overseas markets. The Chinese film industry, for example, after having experienced a major transitional crisis at the time Titanic hit China in 1998, has witnessed a market-driven rejuvenation since the early 2000s, buttressed by a systematic state-led effort in overseas market expansion that was institutionalized in 2004, when the China Film Overseas Promotion Corporation was established as a centralized national platform for the promotion of Chinese films abroad.

Within the Chinese news media and the broader cultural realm, reflecting a newly gained cultural confidence, a growing discourse lays claim to the transformational power of Chinese culture in transcending the problems of western capitalist modernity. A signed front page commentary on the May 8, 2009 issue of the overseas edition of the People’s Daily, by Ye Xiaowen, director of the central government’s Bureau for Religious Affairs, is symptomatic of this discourse. Entitled “Greeting the ‘Renaissance’ of the New Era” and invoking western intellectual and popular cultural sources ranging from Arnold Toynbee to the Hollywood movie Matrix, the article offered a dialectical view of the European Renaissance, claiming that its initial liberation of humanity from the darkness of the Medieval age has now degenerated into the “virus” in Matrix. It then calls for a “Renaissance of the New Era” which will redeem humanity by drawing on the Chinese state’s “double-harmony model” – a harmonious Chinese society and a harmonious world – and its newly articulated “human-centric, all-rounded, coordinated and sustainable scientific developmental outlook” which embodies the “profound wisdom of Chinese culture” (Ye 2009). Whether we consider this as a necessary expression of cultural self-confidence, a strategic discursive retreat from a discredited socialist discourse to win over national and global cultural leaderships) or as a cover for and mystification of Chinese capitalism, this is a new cultural politics that critical political economists must confront in grasping the “challenge of China.”

On the other hand, China’s official discourse has not entirely buried the revolutionary tradition. The same People’s Daily column that published the May 8, 2009 call for a new “Renaissance” also published a May 30, 2009 call by Wu Jianmin, a prominent foreign policy expert, for China to seize the ethical-political high ground by anchoring Chinese discourses on global affairs in the spirit of the international communist movement, especially its concern for the “emancipation of humanity as a whole,” so that the “rise of China will not only benefit the
Chinese people, but also humanity as a whole” (Wu 2009). Even Maoist radical discourses have experienced a revival in China’s cyberspace as a dialectical response to the social contradictions of China’s capitalistic development.

During his research in China between 1971 and 1972, Smythe tried to explain to his hosts how the western-style TV system is embedded in the authoritarian social relations of consumer capitalism. As an alternative, he suggested that the Chinese design a more democratic “two-way television” system, which he imagined as an “an electronic tatzupao system,” an updated version of the “big character posters” that had served as such an important means of communication for the kind of “mass democracy” that Mao had envisioned during the Cultural Revolution. As the opening quote for this chapter suggested, Smythe, to the horror of China’s post-Mao bureaucratic and intellectual elites who suffered from the Cultural Revolution, even discussed the possibility of a “second great Proletariat Cultural Revolution” to achieve a fundamental transformation of China’s reform-era economic policy. Although a more balanced evaluation of the Cultural Revolution remains taboo in Chinese official discourse, and the once constitutionally entrenched right of the Chinese people to post “big character posters” as a means of political communication was soon revoked after Deng came to power in 1979, the legacies of China’s experiment with radical democracy have survived in an increasingly dynamic and diverse Chinese communication system. In the aftermath of Hu Jintao’s June 2008 visit to the People’s Daily’s web forum “Strengthen the Nation,” and his claim that his leadership heeds online voices, neo-Maoist netizens were quick to frame his visit as a redemption of Mao-style “mass democracy” in the digital age. In this view, at a time when China’s established print and broadcast media institutions are dominated by the voices of the “iron triangle” of bureaucratic, business, and intellectual elites, the Internet has opened up spaces for bottom-up popular communication. In particular, online forums and blogs have arguably brought back the “four great freedoms” of the Cultural Revolution era (speak out freely, air views freely, hold great debates, and write big character posters), engendering what one netizen described as “a cultural revolution in new form” (Wujiaxiangxiaerqiusuo 2008). Another netizen (Su 2008) sees this as a genuinely bottom-up and autonomous initiative that is being carried out “in a more profound and broader way” than before, with the following objectives: to “explore China’s developmental path,” to “carry out ideological struggles,” to “criticize revisionism,” to “expose the nature of imperialism,” and to “discuss the problem of continuous revolution.” Although it is being carried out under the watchful eyes of Internet censors, perhaps Dallas Smythe should feel redeemed in some way.

**After Socialist Defeatism, What? Or, Begin from the Beginning?**

What’s next? Certainly the prospect of China becoming the next hegemon in a capitalist world economy does not appeal to anybody, except perhaps in the private dreams of some of China’s transnational capitalist elites and Chinese chauvinists. Nor did Marx provide a clear road map toward the unification of the global working class. But as Zhao Jun, a Guangdong film distributor I encountered in my field research, remarked, the idea of communism won’t be obsolete as long as there are injustices in society. This point, made by a “middle-class” Chinese who is not a CCP member, underscores the deeply ingrained impact of the communist idea in China.

Just as communism is both an idea and a movement that reacts to antagonisms in the real world, the political economy of communication is both an academic discipline and an emancipatory praxis. As Slavoj Zizek recently pointed out, there are four antagonisms in
capitalism that potentially prevent it from its indefinite reproduction: “the looming threat of ecological catastrophe; the inappropriateness of private property for so-called intellectual property; the social-ethical implications of new techno-scientific developments, especially in biogenetics, and last, but not least, new forms of social apartheid – new walls and slums.” In this context, “The new emancipatory politics will no longer be the act of a particular social agent, but an explosive combination of different agents. What unites us is that, in contrast to the classic image of proletarians who have ‘nothing to lose but their chains’, we are in danger of losing everything.” However, Zizek (2009: 53–4) goes on to insist that while the first three antagonisms concern the “commons” of the culture and internal and external nature of humanity, it is the fourth antagonism, “the reference to the excluded, that justifies the term communism.”

In China, the CCP-led fight for the inclusion of the Chinese nation in the modern world system on equal terms has generated the very problem that this chapter has attempted to address – the rise of China. This has generated fears, provoked leftist cynicism and even defeatism, although a growing, though small, minority in western scholarly circles has also expressed hope. Arrighi (2007, 389), for one, registered the hope that a reorientation of the Chinese developmental path around “reviving and consolidating China’s traditions of self-centered market-based development, accumulation without dispossession, mobilization of human rather than non-human resources, and government through mass participation in shaping policies,” offers the chance “that China will be in a position to contribute to the emergence of a commonwealth of civilizations truly respectful of cultural differences.” On the other hand, if this reorientation fails, Arrighi continued, “China may well turn into a new epicentre of social and political chaos that will facilitate Northern attempts to re-establish a crumbling global dominance or … help humanity burn up in the horrors (or glories) of the escalating violence that has accompanied the liquidation of the Cold War world order” (2007, 389).

As Arrighi also emphasizes (2009, 79), “Chinese peasants and workers have a millennial tradition of unrest that has no parallel anywhere in the world.” It was this tradition and the unbearable conditions of Chinese peripheral capitalism that had led to the rise of the CCP and formation of the PRC in the first place. And it is this tradition and the worsening conditions of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” in the reform era that has engendered resistances by all kind of social agents in myriad arenas: tax riots; labor strikes; interethnic clashes; environmental, anticorruption, and gender protests; legal challenges; prodemocracy demonstrations; local electoral disputes; religious rebellions; and even mass suicides (Perry and Selden, 2003). As I have argued, these hydra-headed and interpenetrated struggles have taken many communicative forms – from journalistic struggles for autonomy to workers using blogs to fight against privatization, from farmers circulating a camcorder video to foreign journalists to fight against land seizure to a rural grandmother using a bullhorn to appeal for accountability in a village electoral process (Zhao 1998, 2003, 2007, 2008a, Zhao and Duffy 2007). As Zizek (2009, 55) reminds us, the name for the intrusion of the excluded into sociopolitical space is “democracy.” Within China, this started with a long series of revolutions resulting in the establishment of “people’s sovereignty” as the foundation of the PRC, and continues in the ongoing struggles over this unfinished democratic project.

As I recounted at the beginning of this chapter, the road to the scholarly consideration of China’s political, economic, cultural, and historical specificities within the political economy of communication started with Dallas Smythe. Today, the “challenge of China” has become more far-reaching. The trajectory of the Chinese state’s self-proclaimed pursuit for “socialism with
Chinese characteristics” and its ongoing reorientation of its developmental path have more profound implications for the evolving global order. Concurrently, the intellectual labor force working on China from a communication perspective has expanded rapidly and their modes of participation have also diversified. Rather than simply reading official documents and interviewing elite intellectuals and government officials through interpreters, as Smythe did admirably more than 40 years ago, political economists studying China today have more resources and opportunities at their disposal. The work has just started. It is an interesting time indeed.

Notes

1 Parts of this section draw upon relevant sections in Zhao (2009a) and Zhao (2010).

2 Much of the academic discussion surrounding the World Summit on the Information Society, which foregrounds a mixed assessment of the role of transnational civil society in challenging a transnational corporatist agenda, for example, betrays a blind spot on the role of the postcolonial state. For a relevant discussion, see Bhuiyan (2010).

3 Colin Sparks’s work best exemplifies this tendency when he wrote: “The master category that explains them all [changes in the “past quarter century or so”] is not globalization but capitalism, in its most recent and expansive phase” (2007, 188).

4 For a more detailed description of my encounter with Zhao Jun and his likeminded peers in the production of an independent documentary about China’s revolutionary heroes, see Zhao (2009b).

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