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Chinese media, contentious society

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Just as China's ongoing political economic and socio-cultural transformation continues to astonish and confuse the world, analysing media institutions and communication processes involving a population comprising one-fifth of humanity remains a daunting challenge. Against the backdrop of a Cold War tainted picture of a totalizing communist propaganda system at the onset of China's reform and opening-up process in the late 1970s, optimistic projections about the liberalizing and potentially democratizing impact of commercialization, globalization and technological explosion rivalled, and soon gave way to, more complex assessments of the multifaceted and contradictory dynamics of state control and market mediations in the Chinese media, including the structural biases of a commercialized media system in accentuating old and new forms of exclusion and marginalization in Chinese social communication (e.g. Zhao, 1998; Xu, 2000; Bai, 2005). Recently, however, this more socially contextualized line of analysis has been carried to a rather dystopian extreme in some cases, giving rise to cynical accounts of the complete fusion of political power and market rationality and the skilful mixing of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) revolutionary rhetoric and traditional mass propaganda methods with the Western techniques of public relations and mass persuasion in Chinese media, leading to the rebirth, in a rearticulated anti-communist framework, of the Chinese 'propaganda state' (Brady, 2008; see also Lee, He and Huang, 2006). The ever-expanding academic literature on control and resistance around China's rapidly expanding internet, coupled with ongoing Western media reports of Chinese state censorship and the complicity of Western internet corporations, further reinforces this top-down and institutionalist take on Chinese communication.

Whilst analysts have gone a long way in dispersing illusions about the imminent emergence of a liberal democratic polity in the aftermath of market reforms in China, it is essential to emphasize the agency of China's different social forces, the complicated dynamics of congruence, compromise and conflict between official and popular voices, as well as the specific ways in which the state and the market are

embedded in Chinese society. The Chinese population's organic relationship with the CCP's revolutionary heritage, the question of collective memories as well as the resilience and continuing appeal of socialist norms in contemporary China also remain relevant. Beyond the oscillations between celebratory and pessimistic accounts of media and internet in empowering a Chinese civil society and China's rising urban 'middle class' as potential agents of democratization, analysts such as Sun (2009) and Qiu (2009), meanwhile, have demonstrated that the thick and complex realities of media and information technology-mediated 'middle-class' and 'working-class' urban societies in China defy any one-dimensional perspective on state repression, market emancipation and technological empowerment. As the 'social question' comes to the fore in the aftermath of thirty years of economic reform and global integration, the imperative of engaging with the categories of 'society' and 'class' and of re-embedding the analysis of access and control in Chinese communication in the social domain have never been so compelling (Zhao, 2007a,b, 2008, 2009a).

Taking the title of this book literally, this chapter provides an overview of the relationship between China's evolving mass-media institutions and communication processes and a rapidly transforming, increasingly dynamic, contentious and even conflictual society. The first section briefly outlines my historical and theoretical points of entry by locating Chinese media and communication in the transformation of Chinese politics, economy and society. The second section discusses how the evolving political economy of the Chinese media system is reshaping Chinese society and reconfiguring social power relations, contributing specifically to processes of social stratification and class (dis)formation. The third section, in turn, discusses how a multitude of subordinated social forces and marginalized political voices have fought out their struggles over the future direction of China's evolving political economy through the media and internet. This leads to a final section looking more generally at formal and informal mechanisms of societal contestation over media power and the terms of media discourses. I use the generic term 'media' to refer to both old and new media, with the latter encompassing the rapidly converging platforms of internet and wireless communication.

Locating media in Chinese politics, economy and society

As Michael Burawoy has argued, the dynamism of 'society' is 'a key to the durability and transcendence of advanced capitalism, just as its fragility proved to be the downfall of Soviet communism' (2003, p. 194). Although the post-revolutionary Chinese (PRC) state, like its Soviet and East European communist counterparts, completely subordinated and absorbed society during the state socialist era, it remains the case that a popular social revolution underpinned the historical formation of this state. This state, in turn, owes its ability to erase the state–society demarcation largely to a revolution-era forged and morally bound 'societal consensus' or 'social contract' to 'lead and serve the people' (Lin, 2006, p. 70). After having subordinated the market and dismantled exploitative class relations by transforming China's pre-1949 peripheral capitalist market economy into a planned state socialist economy, Mao's

Cultural Revolution (1966–76) – an event that has no parallel either in the former Soviet bloc or in post-Second World War capitalist authoritarian regimes in Asia and Latin America – aimed to activate societal forces to curb the degeneration of socialism into oppressive Soviet-style bureaucratic statism and to prevent 'capitalist restoration'. Cultural Revolution-era popular communication forms, from the big character posters to Red Guard tabloids, served as powerful means of decentralized social communication in Mao's envisaged participatory 'mass democracy'. Thus, 'while most authoritarian states seek to insulate themselves from society by repressing it into quiescence, the Maoist state chose instead to rule by activating society' (Blecher, 1997, p. 220, cited in Lin, 2006, p. 137).

Although reform-era remobilization of the population for economic development and in line with consumerist desires has not led to the emergence of Western-style civil society and the clear demarcation between state, market and society in the liberal capitalist democratic imagination, an important consequence of the post-Mao state's economic reforms has been the revitalization of Chinese society, a process that combines the reintroduction of the market and the strategic withdrawal of the state in selected realms of Chinese economy and society from above – for some time the doctrine of 'small government, large society' was a popular reform slogan in the media – with popular societal self-empowerment from below. The concurrent explosion of the internet as a new space of social communication and a new site of social networking, coupled with the wireless revolution, has further activated China's lower social classes and facilitated the rapid expansion of the Chinese social field. To be sure, independent political parties and trade unions are still vigorously suppressed. State corporatism remains the dominant framework for the Chinese state–society relationship. Chinese farmers – the largest societal force by numbers – are still prevented from organizing themselves nationally within the official mass organization structure. Politically sensitive social organizations such as independent legal aid groups continue to assume a precarious institutional existence. Nevertheless, new forms of formal and informal social organization and associational life, ranging from business associations to migrant workers' self-empowerment groups, from homeowners associations to environmental protection non-governmental organizations (NGOs), are flourishing, leading to China's 'associational revolution' (Wang and He, 2004). In the view of Guobin Yang, the interactions between this 'associational revolution' and the internet-based 'information revolution' have assumed 'special significance in China's political context' (2009, p. 254), as an unprecedented level of online activism by Chinese citizens championing a wide range of redistributive and identity claims engenders an 'unofficial democracy' in China.

Inspired by the work of Michael Burawoy, who in turn drew from the works of Antonio Gramsci and Karl Polanyi to develop what he calls 'the liberative notion of society' to revitalize Marxism in the post-communist era, Chinese sociologist Shen Yuan (2007) has defined 'the production of society' and the related transformation of class relations, including the formation of the world's largest working class in China, as the basic problematic in understanding China's ongoing market transition. As Burawoy (2003, p. 195) delineates, contrary to the notion of 'society' as an

'autonomous, all-embracing homeostatic self-equilibrating system' in Parsonsian sociology on the one hand, and the base and superstructure model of Soviet Marxism which leaves little conceptual space for society on the other, the concept of 'society' as developed in the Marxist visions of Gramsci and Polanyi connotes a historically specific institutional space between economy and state developed in the context of a capitalist political economy. For Gramsci, who describes a transition within capitalism from political dictatorship to political hegemony, society is 'civil society', which is always understood in its contradictory connection to the state: it collaborates with the state to contain class struggle and absorb political challenges to capitalism, while its autonomy from the state can also promote class struggle. For Polanyi, who focuses on the economy and describes a transition from market despotism to market regulation, society is what Burawoy calls 'active society', which is understood in its contradictory tension with the market. On the one hand, the expansion of the market and the commodification of labour, land and money tend to destroy society; on the other hand, society (re)acts to defend itself and subordinate the market. Underscoring the broad lines of division such as class and race that traverse the whole of civil society on the one hand, and the micro-powers of patriarchy concealed in institutions such as the workplace and family on the other hand, Burawoy, following both Gramsci and Polanyi, believes that a thriving 'society' is associated with mobilized subaltern classes, and that 'socialism is the subordination of market and state to the self-regulating society' (2003, p. 198).

Although the liberal framework of 'civil society versus the state' has underpinned much of Chinese media studies, Burawoy's concept of 'society', with its focus on the dual state–society and market–society relationships and its emphasis on class and other forms of social divisions , seems to be a particularly intriguing and relevant theoretical construct for understanding the media's role in the mutually constitutive relationships among state, market and society in reform-era China. Under reform and opening-up, the Chinese state, which had previously absorbed society and suppressed the market through a revolutionary hegemony, transforms itself by withdrawing from its revolutionary-era cemented 'social contract' with Chinese society on the one hand and unleashing market forces and other sources of private power and interests on the other. Furthermore, it has set in motion – either directly sanctioned or indirectly failed to constrain – a whole range of neoliberal and predatory practices involving 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey, 2003), from the privatization of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and the seizure of farm lands to the commodification of a wide range of media and cultural forms and the destruction of the environmental commons. In turn, members of Chinese society, who encountered the market either by attraction or by compulsion, are being activated and (re) constituting themselves as social classes or other social subjects by drawing upon institutional and symbolic resources from Chinese society of the pre-Communist and pre-reform eras. During this process, the Chinese state has also been compelled to redefine the terms of its hegemony and to contain re-emergent class and other forms of social conflict, as it responds to the demands of an activated society for protection against the dehumanizing impacts of all forms of localized market despotism, from

slave labourers in the workplace (e.g. the infamous Shanxi kilns that used kidnapped child labourers) to poisoned baby formulas in the marketplace and pornography in cyberspace. Viewed in this context, reform-era Chinese media, which assume a triple role as the Chinese state's 'ideological apparatuses', as units of capital accumulation in the marketplace as well as the public opinion organs of activated Chinese society, are truly at the epicentre of China's world historical social transformation – a process that has no other parallels in both its nature and its magnitude.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to fully develop a society-centred perspective on Chinese media by critically assessing Burawoy's sociological Marxism and relating it to China's unique post-Mao social formation. However, it will be fruitful to not only account for the social-historical legacies of China's communist media institutions, practices and discursive formations, but also to understand Chinese communication processes during the post-Mao (especially the post-1989) era, as a process whereby the institutional space of Chinese society is being engendered and contested in contradictory relationships with state and market and in conjunction with the transformation of Chinese class relations. Rather than being antithetical to political economy analysis, which has been dismissed by Schudson (2005) as a meaningful approach to the sociology of news production, an engagement with the social dimension is highly consistent with the critical political economic tradition, which is holistic, integrative and socially embedded (Mosco, 2009). Among other things, this tradition focuses on the relations between the unequal distribution of control over systems of communications and wider patterns of inequality in the distribution of wealth and power in society, particularly 'between the mass media and the central axis of stratification – the class structure' (Golding and Murdoch, 1978, p. 353). Furthermore, it foregrounds the questions of legitimation and social conflicts by analysing 'the sources of social dissent and political struggle', and with the dialectical relations between challenge and incorporation (1978, p. 353). The rest of this chapter offers snapshots of such an analysis.

Media, social stratification and class (dis)formation: from promoting class struggle to suppressing the class discourse

Although class is not the only division in society, the Marxist-inspired history of PRC state formation has meant that the class, rather than, for example, the ethnocultural make-up of the Chinese population, was conceived to be the defining character of the Chinese polity. This is literally embodied in the five-star national flag, with four stars representing the workers, peasants, urban petit-bourgeoisie and national bourgeoisie classes surrounding a larger star representing the CCP. Mass media in China, in turn, were defined as 'instruments of class struggle' during the Mao era. However, the Chinese experience with class politics has not only been profoundly contradictory, but also violent and delusionary. As Lin (2006, p. 83) wrote, '[i]n theory, the socialist state is the vehicle for society to achieve equality, classlessness, and eventually self-management without bureaucracy. In reality, the PRC state first institutionalized the urban–rural divide and later allowed the old

forms of class inequalities to be restored in the marketplace'. In the most dramatic episode, the Cultural Revolution, which was informed by Mao's highly subjectivist concept of class (as opposed to an objective concept of class defined in terms of relations of production), aimed, at least in theory, to cultivate the new subjectivities of the popular classes to realize the central task of the Chinese revolution, that is, 'the dismantling of class relations formed through a history of violence and unequal property relations' (Wang, 2006, p. 37). In reality, however, the supposedly progressive politics of 'class struggle' quickly degenerated into an essentialized discourse of class identity, becoming 'the most oppressive kind of power logic, the basis for the merciless character of subsequent faction fights' (2006, p. 37). Spontaneous political and discursive debates aiming at transforming repressive social relations and fighting against the rise of techno-bureaucratic power within the post-revolutionary state were turned into depoliticized symbolic, and even physical, violence of the most brutal type.

The reform era inaugurated itself by declaring an end to 'class struggle' and by foregrounding the media's role in promoting economic development and engendering citizenship in a 'socialist market economy'. Ironically, the suppression of the concept of 'class' as part of the discredited Cultural Revolution discourse paved the way for its regained relevance as a critical analytical category, as China transformed itself from one of the most egalitarian societies to one of the most economically polarized on earth, with the Gini-coefficient index rising from 0.22 in 1978 to 0.496 in 2007, and a mere 0.4 per cent of households owning around 70 per cent of the wealth of the nation in 2006 (Guo, Y., 2009, p. 1). As I have argued eslewhere (Zhao, 2008, pp. 75–6), class power in China is best understood as being constituted politically, economically and culturally through a plurality of productive and administrative relations, lived experiences, social histories and dynamic subjectivities that have arisen or been transformed in relation to the ongoing political economic and social restructuring. The prominent role of corruption and the currency of terms such as 'the capitalization of power', 'official-entrepreneurs' and 'knowledge capitalists' testify to the multifaceted nature of class formation in reform-era China. Moreover, as the Chinese economy shifts from a production-driven to a consumption-driven model, bureaucratically privileged access to prime consumer goods such as housing has played a formative role in the pattern of class reconstitution in urban China (Tomba, 2004). At the same time, because China's market economy is still largely bifurcated along the rural–urban divide, the division between the rural and urban populations remains acute. This division is further compounded by income gaps within the rural economy, profound ethnic and regional cleavages, and gender inequality. Finally, because 'reform' is linked to 'openness', that is, reintegrating the Chinese economy with the global market system, the processes of class (dis)formation entail an important transnational dimension.

The media system assumes a double role in these processes: it affects class structure not only as an increasingly central vector of production and economic exchange – most importantly in its growing role as a significant sector of economic production and in its role as an advertising vehicle for the entire economy – but

also as the means of social organization and sites of identity formation. From the emergence of private media capitalists and the 'enbourgeoisement' of media managers and celebrities to the 'proletariatization' of a young and increasingly female army of highly segmented, precarious and flexible front-line journalistic workers (Wang, 2009), from the diffusion of consumerist values and cultivation of bohemian or 'petit-bourgeois' cultural identities to the marginalization of working-class identities, processes of media commercialization and information commodification are the pivotal sites whereby Chinese society constitutes and reconstitutes its class and other social relations of power both objectively and subjectively. Along with the progressive commodification of labour in the media and information industries and the concomitant process of class (dis)formation within these sectors (Hong, 2008; Wang, 2009), the role of media in the subjective process of class (dis)formation in Chinese society at large can be grasped in the following broad strokes.

First, under Deng Xiaoping's 'no debate' curse – that is, there should be no debate about whether reform policies are endangering capitalistic or socialist social relations – imposed in the immediate post-1989 period to legitimate the state's unleashing of the market, the state's media and ideological control regime marginalized leftist critiques of the political and social consequences of the economic reforms and restricted news reports of grassroots protests against the negative consequences of the economic reforms. This created the key enabling symbolic conditions for the production of cheap labour as China's 'comparative advantage' in the neoliberal global market system by disenabling the circulation of labour and peasant struggles and by suppressing the formation of radical working-class or peasant-class consciousness in response to the processes of labour and land commodification and the privatization of SOEs. State censorship, along with the structural bias of a commercialized media system, in particular, has curtailed horizontal communication among China's subaltern social classes, from media reporting on workers' and peasants' protests, to workers' newsletters, leftist websites and online discussion forums that provide information on working-class struggles (Zhao and Duffy, 2007).

Second, and as the other side of the coin of class (dis)formation, many CCP members got rich first by becoming capitalists themselves. Moreover, by 2002, the CCP had officially incorporated the newly constituted capitalists, managerial and comprador strata into its ranks by repositioning itself from a self-proclaimed working-class vanguard to a party of 'the Chinese people and the Chinese nation'. However, because of the CCP's revolutionary heritage and because Deng Xiaoping once claimed that 'if a bourgeoisie has emerged, we must have gone astray' (1993, pp. 110–11), the CCP continued to deny the existence of a capitalist class and frustrate autonomous capitalist class formation by restricting liberal and neoliberal intellectuals from enjoying their full press freedom in the mass media, and by restricting private capital – domestic and foreign alike – from entering the core areas of the media system (Zhao, 2008). Ongoing liberal cries against media censorship, often centring upon high-profile cases involving the sacking of leading liberal journalists and writers at official media outlets, are part of the struggle for media control between a ruling bureaucratic elite that continues to refuse to formally share power

with an emergent capitalist stratum, and intellectuals who are eager to articulate the class consciousness of this emergent social force in an attempt to secure capitalist class rule through liberal-oriented political reforms.

Third, as the media abandoned the discourse of 'class' and 'class struggle' – a statistical survey of the *People's Daily*'s usage of the term 'class' revealed that whereas a six-page *People's Daily* in 1976 contained 3,755 articles with this term, a sixteen-page *People's Daily* in 2007 contained only eighty-eight articles with this term (Guo, Z., 2009, p. 9), they 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, p. 499). Within this discourse, the 'middle class' – whose size and exact constitution remain fuzzy, ranging between 5 and 20 per cent of the population depending on the criteria – becomes a prized political and cultural trope, a force for social stability and perhaps even the agent of democratization. As commercial propaganda, advertising – the reform-era equivalent of Cultural Revolution political propaganda – offers the most influential discourse on the 'middle class':

> The moment one opens the newspaper, turns on the TV, or walks into a street, one comes face to face with the lifestyle of the 'middle class': big mansions, private cars, fashion, jewellery, famous watches, banquets, golf courses, pubs, and every new trend and every form of fashion, entertainment and luxury are marked as 'middle class' without any analysis of class characteristics. (Li, 2005, p. 63, cited in Guo, Y., 2009, p. 7)

This consumption and lifestyle-centred media image of the 'middle class' serves the important ideological function of disguising inequality in the realms of production and distribution. Thus, as Yingjie Guo put it, the consensus among China's academic and media elite that 'the emergence of a large and strong middle class can only be a good thing, emblematic of China's maturing economy and society' is coupled with a fundamental dilemma: 'the relation to other social groupings or classes which cannot be named deprived the class concept of its power to frame social relationships, particularly exploitative relationships' (2009, p. 1). The other side of the media's role in its contribution to, and anticipation of, 'middle-class' formation as well as its role in legitimating class inequalities, then, is the discursive marginalization and objectification of workers and peasants, the prized class tropes of the Mao era, and constitutionally still the power base of the PRC state (Zhao, 2002, 2003a, 2008; Anagnost, 2008; Sun and Zhao, 2009).

Finally, the media's role in class (dis)formation assumes important transnational and subnational dimensions and intersects in complicated ways with race, gender, nation and ethnicity in a deeply fractured and increasingly globalized market society both within and beyond the PRC's borders. On the one hand, Hollywood blockbusters (including a growing number of 'created-in-China' ones), Chinese editions of foreign business, consumer and lifestyle magazines, transnational satellite channels, as well as Hong Kong-based pan-Chinese media outlets such as Phoenix TV – accessible through niche markets and exclusive neighbourhoods – are engendering the Chinese segment of a potential 'transnational capitalist class' (Sklair, 2001).

Concurrently, and along with the growth of various ethno-nationalist movements, reform-era mainstream Chinese media also cultivate a modern Chinese transnationalism both to support the state's sovereignty claims over Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan, and to taps into the vast financial and human capital of Chinese nationals living in these territories and beyond to boost the state's coastal-based and export-oriented development strategy. As Sun (2002) has demonstrated, reform-era Chinese media, especially Chinese television, have been deeply involved in the cultural politics of migration and Chinese transnational imagination. On the other hand, the same strategy of asymmetric integration with global capitalism led to the social and cultural displacement of the ethnic minorities within China's hinterlands. As the 'special economic zones' established in the coastal provinces in the early 1980s to attract diaspora Chinese capital assumed a central place in reform-era China's geographical and cultural imagination, the ethnic minority areas lost their relative importance. Despite, and perhaps precisely because of, the Chinese state's Western development strategy since the late 1990s, ethnic inequalities in the marketplace and in the workplace have intensified. Class tension, ethnic cleavages, increased transborder information and cultural flows, as well as the ideological void and identity crisis created by the discrediting of the Mao-era socialist state ideology have intersected in complicated ways to create heightened social and cultural conflicts in China's ethnic minority areas (Zhao, 2009b, forthcoming).

Media, class conflicts and social contestation

Despite reform-era mainstream Chinese media's persistent effort in containing class and other forms of social conflicts, China's social transformation remains boiling with – and constituted by – political economic contradictions, social conflicts, and ideological and cultural tensions. Oppositions against capitalistic developments and the installation of capitalistic social relations continue to surface at every turn of the reform process. The Chinese media have not been immune to such oppositions. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, intensive ideological and policy struggles at the elite levels resulted in not only the showdown in 1989, but also the 'first debate on reform' between 1982 and 1984, the 'second debate on reform' between 1989 and 1992, which ended with Deng's imposition of the no debate curse and China's 'long decade' of relentless market-driven development throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. As Perry and Selden observed in 2003, the reform process had engendered multifaceted conflicts and myriad arenas of resistance at every stage, from tax riots, labour strikes and interethnic clashes to environmental, anti-corruption and gender protests, legal challenges, pro-democracy demonstrations, local electoral disputes, religious rebellions and even mass suicides. Moreover, 'the emerging patterns of conflict and resistance' have 'stimulated and shaped significant dimensions of the reform programme itself' (2003, pp. 1–2).

The extraordinary situation in China is that a state that was forged in a communist revolution and still claims to build socialism has been pursuing 'a paradigm of development that was the product of capitalism', thus turning socialism into a

cover for policies of development inspired by capitalism (Dirlik, 2005, pp. 157, 9). Such a unique historical condition has meant that the objective processes of capitalistic 'accumulation by dispossession' and the consequences of rapid class polarization and cultural dislocation have been subjectively experienced by a population that has been educated in the socialist ideology of equality, social justice and the rightness, if not the liberal legal right, to rebel. As Lin Chun (2006, p. 10) has argued, 'upholding national dignity, providing economic security, delivering public goods, and overcoming corruption', were among the normative expectations of the Chinese society placed on the Chinese state. Even after thirty years of market reform, the profoundly educational experience of revolutionary socialism has ensured that '[t]he norm by which money and market values could not dictate the lifeworld was resilient' (Lin, 2006, p. 14). Moreover, while the Chinese population is perhaps indeed 'propaganda-weary and deeply suspicious of (or at least apathetic towards) Party ideology' (Lee *et al*., 2006, p. 583), this does not prevent China's subaltern classes from appropriating the official ideology and turning it into a weapon in their own struggles. Restive Chinese workers, for example, make justice and insurgent identity claims by drawing upon official discourses and symbolic resources ranging from Mao-era socialist ideology glorifying workers as the masters of the country to the reform-era state media discourses on citizenship and the rule of law (Lee, 2007).

As an unusually candid survey conducted by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences revealed, China's urban population experience an acute sense of social conflict along class and other major political economic cleavages. The survey revealed that 79.1 per cent feel various degrees of conflicts between capital and labour, 78.1 per cent feel conflicts between officials and the ordinary people, and 75.8 per cent feel conflicts between the rich and the poor (Li, Zhang, Zhao and Liang, 2005, pp. 136–8). Moreover, not only does there exist 'apparent mutual hostility between the rich and the poor', but 'a significant proportion of those who self-identify as being at the top of the social structure are unwilling to shoulder the responsibility of helping the poor' (Li *et al*., 2005, pp. 171, 174–5). This heightened level of sensitivity towards social division and injustice on the part of the lower classes, as well as the arrogance of the rich and the powerful, is precisely what explained why a traffic incident involving a BMW driver and a peasant in Harbin turned into the explosive 'BMW incident' in the Chinese media and cyberspace in 2003. The same reasons also explain why an ostensibly 'purely pedestrian' encounter between a self-proclaimed ranking government official and a lowly porter in Sichuan Province turned into the 'Wanzhou uprising' (28 October, 2004) in which tens of thousands of ordinary people stormed the city square and set fire to the city hall (Zhao, 2008, p. 10).

The Chinese state's relentless efforts to contain social conflicts, and members of the lower social classes' persistent efforts to articulate their own interests and make justice, equity and other normative claims on the nominal socialist state through the channels of social communication are two sides of the same conflicted historical process. Justice-seeking petitioners travelled from all corners of the country to the

Beijing headquarters of Chinese Central Television (CCTV) to urge it to investigate their grievances. Dispossessed farmers smuggled out a videotape of a violent land seizure by a local developer to a foreign media outlet. Super-exploited workers trying to get unpaid wages staged suicide spectacles – typically trying to jump off a bridge in a busy street intersection – in attempts to attract media and public attention. Desperate parents of kidnapped children got their help cries posted on the internet. China's different social forces, organized or not, have never been so activated, articulate, persistent and contentious, offline or online. Moreover, as the processes of social stratification, class polarization and cultural displacement accelerated, the frequency and velocity, as well as the breadth and scope, of the various 'hydra-headed' conflicts and acts of resistance have intensified since the early 2000s. This has galvanized the media's role as sites of discursive contestation – making the Chinese media and communication system, one of the most controlled in the world, also one of the most dynamic and controversial.

Elite and popular debates about the future direction of the reform process have intensified since 2004, as the number of officially recorded 'mass incidents' – a euphemism for riots and uprisings by a wide range of disenfranchised and dispossessed social groups – reached 74,000 during 2004 and 87,000 in 2005, up from 58,000 in 2003 and 10,000 in 1994. By then, a broader ideological and policy debate about the future of China's reform, the 'third debate on reform', had taken shape in China's established media and the internet, which took off as a prominent space for social communication and grassroots expression in the first few years of the new century. Sparked by Lang Xianping, a media-savvy US-trained and Hong Kong-based economist, and propelled by socially conscientious journalists, left-leaning domestic economists whose voices have long been suppressed by the dominant market economic discourse, and above all, active Chinese netizens with a deep concern for social justice and equality, this debate, which initially focused on the narrower topic of unaccountable SOE privatization, soon evolved into a broad debate on the overall direction of China's economic reform and the stakes of China's different social classes in this process. Although this debate was largely disconnected with actual ongoing working-class struggles against privatization and the terms of the discourse excluded a radical socialist path to China's reform,[1] it threatened to dispel Deng's long-imposed 'no debate' curse and break the ideological hegemony of neoliberal economics in the Chinese media. This debate, along with many other media and internet-generated controversies and online mobilizations for various redistributive and identity-based claims, coincided with the Hu Jintao leadership's attempts to critically assess neoliberalism as a global ideology, to refurbish the CCP's hegemony over Chinese society around the concepts of building 'a harmonious socialist society' and practising 'the scientific concept of development' (i.e. development along a more socially and environmentally sustainable path), as well as to stabilize the social field through various redistributive and welfare-oriented policy initiatives (Zhao, 2008, Chapter 6).

The leadership's new ideological and policy initiatives, along with the media's relentless promotion of national pride and cross-class love and compassion in the

aftermath of the devastating Wenchuan earthquake and during the Beijing Olympics in 2008, however, have been far from able to repair the fissures of a deeply fractured post-reform Chinese market society. The ongoing global economic recession has generated further societal pressures – employment of university graduates, for example, has emerged as a major destabilizing problem. By late summer 2009, as the PRC prepared to celebrate its sixtieth anniversary on 1 October, class and ethnic tensions had reached a new height. In early July 2009 in Xinjiang, where youth unemployment among the ethnic Uighur population was much higher than that of the Han population, ethnic violence resulted in the killing of nearly 200 individuals in Urumqi. On 24 July 2009 at the Tonghua Iron and Steel Group (Tonggan) in the northeast Jilin province, an outraged and massive workforce rioted for more than ten hours in opposition to the privatization of their factory and the potential loss of their jobs. Most dramatically, workers shocked the nation by beating to death Chen Guojun, a forty-year-old private corporate executive who had come to announce the privatization and the potential layoffs. Chen, a vice president of the privately owned Jianlong Heavy Machinery Group which was to assume majority control of the state steel mill and whose record of ruthless treatment of workers at the factory when Jianlong had a minority stake in Tonggan, had come to symbolize the most exploitative dimensions of private capital power in the minds of the workers. Chen reportedly told the enraged workers: 'If you do not kill me today, I promise you will not even get a bowl of vegetable soup to drink' (Fu and Wang, 2009). Class struggle has indeed become a life and death matter in this case.

The Chinese media, which generally suppress the reporting of 'mass events', found it no longer possible to remain silent. Apart from its political economic significance, the bloody spectacle of uprising state enterprise workers beating a capitalist manager to death, for example, is probably as newsworthy as the proverbial man-bite-dog story. As I have analysed elsewhere (Zhao, 2008, Chapters 5–6), while Chinese journalists and netizens were able to successfully mobilize themselves around the individual-based liberal rights discourse (in media events that often pit individuals against the state), they were unable, and perhaps unwilling, to mobilize themselves around the class-based economic and legal justice claims of the Chinese working class. Not surprisingly, mainstream media framing of the Tonggan event is hardly cast in class struggle terms. Nor does it challenge the very process of SOE privatization itself. Nevertheless, just the mere reporting of the event, which ended with a working-class victory – the Jilin provincial government ordered Jianlong to abandon its buy-out plan, is significant for Chinese workers. Although it is truly a tragedy of many dimensions that China's working class finally got a voice in the national media only when their struggles against privatization took a sensationalist turn by claiming the life of a privatizing capitalist agent, the struggles at Tonggan inspired workers at Linzhou Steel (Lingan) in Henan province in central China, where workers escalated their own struggles and scored a victory as well (Hu, 2009). For its part, the CCP Central Propaganda Department quickly ordered the national media to refrain from reporting further on the Tonggan case (interview, Beijing, 18 August 2009). Nevertheless, mainstream media, including CCTV, at least for a moment,

started to discuss the importance of giving workers a voice and respecting their rights and interests in the process of privatization.

Contesting media power in a highly mediated and globalizing Chinese society

As a rapidly transforming Chinese media system struggles to sustain its regimes of accumulation and legitimation, members of an activated Chinese society are not only trying to have their voices heard in the media, but also actively challenging media institutions and contesting the terms of media discourses. The militant, well-organized and transnationalized media activism of the outlawed quasi-religious Falun Gong movement, including its storming of media organizations to demand 'correct' representations of the group, its high-tech campaign to disrupt Chinese state satellite broadcast transmissions and its success in hacking into cable television systems, has been well documented (Zhao, 2003b; Yu, 2009). In fact, it was the group's persistent challenges against their media representations and their insistence upon having their truths told by the official media that brought the group's confrontational politics to the fore in 1999 in the first place, leading to the Chinese state's eventual banning of the group. The tug of war between official media and Falun Gong media over their mutually exclusive claims to tell the truth only underscores the 'power of identity' (Castells, 1997) and the salient nature of non-class-based cultural politics of recognition in a globalized network society, but also challenges any normative assumptions that idealize 'alternative media' and 'civil society'.

Although other forms of Chinese media activism are less confrontational against the established order, the causes, from advocating women and children's rights and promoting environmental protection to exposing the media's commercial and capitalist biases, are no less significant. The most long-established Chinese media-monitoring NGO is the Women Media Monitoring Network affiliated with the Capital Women Journalists Association. Inspired by the 1995 Fourth World Women's Conference in Beijing, which incorporated fair and non-stereotypical representation of women as one of its action plans, a group of women journalists and feminist media scholars established the network on March 1996. Among other activities, the group run a regular media criticism column on *China Women's Journal* – the organ of the official All China Women's Federation – exposing gender stereotypes and advocating feminist sensibilities in media representation. It also organizes salons and seminars on gender and media-related issues, conducts and publicizes research on media reporting of violence against women, as well as promoting gender-sensitive professional norms and practices in media reporting. Environmental NGOs, meanwhile, have grown increasingly sophisticated in their abilities to gain media access and influence media frames (Zeng, 2009).

Although more general ideological critique of the media is politically highly sensitive, struggles over the media's ideological orientation have always been important dimensions of Chinese symbolic politics. On the one hand, liberal media critics, who are often established voices as media columnists or even journalists themselves,

decry state censorship. Because international media outlets are always receptive of such stories, the domestic and international liberal anti-censorship alliance has served as a permanent thorn to the Chinese leadership, which is increasingly conscious of its international popularity and eager to cultivate a favourable media image. Left-leaning media critics, who have little access to international media, on the other hand, tend to focus on exposing the right-wing and pro-business bias of domestic media outlets. Here, the unequal rival to the moral and discursive power of domestic and international liberal media is the left-leaning Utopia website, which, since its establishment in 2003, has among other things become a clearinghouse for left-leaning media critics who strongly believe that China's print and broadcast media have betrayed their official mission to 'speak for the people'. In this view, many media outlets in China have become dominated by neoliberal ideologues and the mouthpieces of a pro-capital ideological perspective. Newspapers affiliated with the *Nanfang Daily* Group, CCTV, and the liberal journal *Yanhuang chunqiu* [Chinese century], have been specific targets in many of the websites' media criticisms. CCTV's well-known news commentator Bai Yansong, for example, has even 'earned' himself a feature column with a collection of nearly twenty articles on the website, all devoted to exposing his perceived elitist and pro-capitalist bias, from his promotion of selfishness to his cynical coverage of the government's welfare programme for farmers. There is no empirical research funded by outside money, just the intellectual judgement and moral persuasion of a group of unorganized and yet passionate individuals as vigilant media watchers and active citizens – or more precisely, active citizens who still take the founding promises of the PRC and the founding promises of the CCP-controlled media system seriously. For example, infuriated by the remarks of a history teacher who claimed on a prominent CCTV programme that while the poor were to be depended upon for gaining state power, the rich are to be depended upon for sustaining state power, one online media critic charged the CCTV with having become 'the golden horn of the rich'. The writer went on to say that as marketization subjugates CCTV to the power of money, the station is abusing the trust of the people, failing to effectively promote the central leadership's pro-people policies, and on its way to 'realize the objective of rule by capital'. Juxtaposing the 'people' with 'capital' and assuming a unity of the people with the state, the author declared that CCTV should be 'the people's television, the state's television ... not the instrument of capital' (myw941116, 2009).

While Utopia's media criticisms are not likely to have a direct impact on CCTV performance, or, for that matter, on that of other media outlets, popular citizen critique of the media does take more dramatic and widespread forms, leading to changes in media practices and, occasionally, even media regulation. Again, CCTV, because of its powerful monopolistic position in the Chinese television system, has been an obvious target. From its exploitative labour practices to the extravagance of its controversial new headquarters (the spectacular burning-down of one of its buildings in early 2009 only fuels further popular outrage against the senses and sensibilities of CCTV as a state-protected lucrative commercial monopoly), popular criticism of the commercial excesses of the state network has been constant and pervasive. Like

other branches of the Chinese state, CCTV, despite its bureaucratic inertia, cannot sustain its legitimacy and credibility without at least partially responding to societal pressures. One well-known example shows how popular outrage compelled CCTV to curb its excessive commercialism. The case concerns CCTV's handling of the hostage-taking crisis in a Beslan middle school in the southern Russian republic of North Ossetia on 1 September 2004, a human tragedy that led to nearly 400 deaths and many more wounded. While reporting an update on this event on a programme called *Today's Focus* on 6 September 2004, CCTV4 flashed text on the screen asking viewers to take part in a game quiz by text-messaging their guess to the number of hostages that had been killed in the school siege, with the opportunity to win prizes. At the start of 2004, CCTV had teamed up with two state telecommunication service providers, China Mobile and China Unicom in a synergistic joint-venture to boost its own ratings while simultaneously promoting mobile services for the two state telecommunication firms. However, CCTV's insensitive exploitation of a human tragedy to drive profits outraged the Chinese public, leading to an outcry of popular condemnation both online and offline. Many Chinese citizens contacted CCTV and government authorities to express their disgust, and demanded the punishment of the individuals responsible. This led to the dismissal of two producers and an editor, as well as the Chinese broadcasting authority's ban of SMS games and quizzes during news broadcasts (Tai, 2006, p. xix). Here, we saw a clear case of an activated society mobilizing itself in a Polanyian fashion to protect established social values and media norms against the destructive logic of a media market.

Challenging media framing has become a new frontier of societal contestation over media power. Because the reporting of social protests, or 'mass events', reflects badly on local officials' ability to maintain social stability, which is the paramount concern of the central leadership and the most important criterion in the top leadership's evaluation of the performance of local officials, local officials tried all means to suppress such reports. However, mere suppression undermined the credibility of not only local governments, but also media organizations. The circulation of news through personalized communication channels in China's highly networked society, meanwhile, often has the unintended impact of dramatizing the conflicting angles of such events, causing further damage to official legitimacy. Consequently, controlled reporting – that is, the limited circulation of official news on these events, channelled through the newly instituted government news spokesperson mechanism and the official news release system such that all media outlets are only allowed to provide a standard government sanctioned report of a given event – has become more common in the past couple of years.

A standard official framing of 'mass events' quickly developed. In this formulaic storyline, such events occurred because of the 'agitation' of evil force in society or a 'small number of unlawful individuals' and because of the crowd mentality of an 'uninformed mass' oblivious to the 'true situation'. This official framing has become so discredited among the active Chinese media audience, especially internet users, that it is the subject of popular mockery. For example, no sooner had a violent protest in Hupei province broken out in early 2009 than netizens began to post blogs

on Twitter by providing a parody of the not yet produced official news release. To the netizens' amusement, the official account faithfully lived up to the Twitter version. Paraphrasing a traditional popular saying about how reciting 300 Tang dynasty poems will make a poet, a new popular saying goes: after having read 300 official news stories, even a layperson knows how to fabricate news (Cankao xiaoxi, 2009).

This widespread societal contestation of a negative news frame has eventually caught the official media's own attention. On 28 July 2009, prompted by yet another typical official account of a 'mass event' – the above-described Tonggan case – the Xinhua News Agency issued a signed editorial challenging the official framing (Huang, 2009). The article pointed out that to attribute such events to the actions of 'an uninformed mass' not only covers up the actual violation of the interests of the 'mass' in the reform process and local officials' failure in protecting these interests, but also covers up long entrenched and deeply felt social discontents. Furthermore, such a frame not only implies that the 'mass' does not have the ability to judge right or wrong, but also dodges the responsibility of local officials for revealing the truth to the public and defusing a potential conflict well before the situation gets out of control. Although Xinhua seems to have timed this article to coincide with the central leadership's new policy directive of promoting accountability in local governments, that such a piece is published at all is testimony to the dynamic nature of Chinese political communication. The agendas and the framing of Chinese media reporting are slowly changing as a result of contestation from below and incorporative moves from above.

A concluding note

As the PRC celebrates its sixtieth anniversary on 1 October 2009, it is fitting to reflect upon the processes of state, market and social power relationship (trans)formation in the PRC and the evolving role of media in these processes. The modern Chinese media system had its roots in the turbulent process of a twofold struggle in China as a peripheral society in the global capitalist order: a struggle for an independent nation state within the modern world system, and a struggle for hegemony within Chinese society. After having won the Chinese Communist revolution by mobilizing the low social classes to forge a successful hegemony over Chinese society, the CCP under Mao launched the Cultural Revolution in an attempt to re-activate Chinese society through the 'class struggle' discourse to both prevent the bureaucratization of state power itself and to curtail the reinstallation of capitalist social relations. However, a post-Cultural Revolution hegemonic crisis and the imperative of development in a capitalist world economy soon compelled the Chinese state to reintroduce the market and reinstall capitalistic social relations in Chinese society. During these processes, the media's officially prescribed role transformed from agitating for revolution in a class-divided pre-revolutionary society to wage 'class struggle' in a relatively egalitarian post-revolutionary society and then to promoting 'social harmony' in a (once again) class-divided and conflict-laden post-reform society. The CCP-led PRC state has a formidable task in sustaining its hegemony by containing class conflicts and alleviating inequalities in China's deeply fractured and increasingly globalized

market society. China's low social classes, after having first won themselves in constitutional status as the 'leading classes' of the state through a revolution and then having been subjected to the compulsions of the market through the reforms to become 'vulnerable social groups', also have a formidable task in subordinating both the state and the market to their own needs. The struggle for social control of media and communication constitutes an increasingly central dimension of the larger struggle for a more equitable and just post-reform Chinese society.

Notes

1 Articulated in marginal leftist websites, such a vision includes democratizing the state, reimaging and remaking the economy in non-statist and non-capitalist forms, as well as promoting workers' ownership and democratic management.

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