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China’s Journalism: the emancipatory potential of social theory

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ABSTRACT This article explores the liberating and empowering potential of social theories for China’s authoritarian–bureaucratic journalistic practices. By relating them to empirical studies, it analyzes the sociology of knowledge—cognitive interests, social positions and politico-economic contexts—of (a) liberal-pluralism, (b) the reformist Chinese “Old Left” of the 1980s and (c) the radical-critical Chinese “New Left” of the 1990s. These social theories converge on the central importance of democratizing China’s party-state, but diverge on the role of the market in this process. While liberals empower the market to foster “negative freedom” for journalism, radicals attack the anti-democratic tendencies of media commercialization. Among the Chinese intelligentsia, the “New Left” is sharply critical of both liberal-pluralism and the “Old Left”. New democratic discourses must explain the relationships between China’s journalism and the state–market nexus in the context of globalization, thereby balancing universalistic principles with national narratives.

KEY WORDS: Chinese Journalism, Demobilized Liberalization, Liberal-Pluralism, Marxism, Media Democracy, New Left, Old Left, State and Market, Social Theories

The clash of doctrines is not a disaster, it is an opportunity (A. N. Whitehead)

At the start of a new millennium, after 20 years of vigorous market reform in authoritarian China, how much do we know about the complex and conflicting relationships between social power and the media, especially with reference to the liberating and empowering potential of social theories? What are the implications of the state–market interaction for constructing new democratic discourses about media freedom and equality in the age of globalization? What roles do journalists and the people play in the emancipatory process? What is the sociology of knowledge—cognitive interests and social positions—on which proponents of various social theories are based? The time is ripe for a serious assessment of the growing literature exploring the media and journalistic practices in the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

An important contribution to this literature comes from PRC intellectuals intent on intervening in the momentous social and media changes surrounding their world. Their chief mode of scholarship consists of theoretical essays within a mixed and often truncated compass of Marxist interpretations. Overseas scholars offer a further contribution—including those of PRC origin—through a conflicting gamut of theoretical and ideological prisms ranging from liberal-pluralism to various western Marxist or post-Marxian strands of thought. A dialogue between members of these “invisible colleges” (Crane, 1972) could be fostered to en-
The insider’s “acquaintance with” views with the outsider’s “knowledge about” views (Merton, 1971). Identifying the contentious and contradictory implications of their positions is a first step towards achieving an interpretation between the insider’s and the outsider’s views and a critical synthesis of various social theories.

This article explores the linkages between three social theories and various empirical studies of journalistic practices in China. These social theories articulate a distinctive emancipatory significance for the state–market nexus with consequences for journalistic freedom and equality in China. Liberal-pluralism, the first of the three social theories but a general framework against which all of its alternatives must be measured, sees the market as a positive counterbalance to state control of news media. The other two social theories can be broadly termed as the Chinese “old left” of the 1980s aligned with the ill-fated political reform, and the Chinese “new left” of the 1990s situated within current western critical discourses which offer radical critiques of media commercialization. The three social theories have internal connections, but their rise and fall—as well as running battles—are also closely related to the larger sociopolitical contexts inside and outside China.

The interplay of social theories and empirical studies is of paramount importance. While empirical media studies have to do with detailed and concretely delineated problems—with findings that validate or reject existing knowledge—social theories are concerned with the interpretation of the totality of social being. Dahrendorf (1968, p. vii) observes that social theories guide the formulation of sociological (and thus media) theories, guard against their reification, and form the basis for making judgements of their value in wider contexts. Zhang (1998a, p. 1) argues that the evasive nature of Chinese society derives “not so much from the limitations of our knowledge but from the rigidity and self-righteousness of our point of view and from our ideological assumptions and epistemological frameworks”. Comparing the clashing doctrines yields valuable insights in ways that elude any single doctrine.

**Liberal-Pluralist Perspectives**

In modern China, a succession of monumental but failing pro-democracy movements—from the May Fourth (1919) to the June Fourth (1989)—have persistently appealed to liberal-pluralist values, with calls for press freedom being prominent. Despite—and because of—official antagonism towards it, liberal-pluralism enables us to understand what I would call the “demonbilized liberalization” characteristic of post-Mao journalism compared with Mao’s earlier “mobilized totalitarianism”. The relevance of the liberal perspective is, of course, much broader.¹

The liberal-pluralist perspective, by affirming the sovereignty of the people and individual autonomy, has traditionally been allied with democratic struggles against a variety of feudal, despotic and autocratic powers. Its classical version emphasizes “negative freedom” (Berlin, 1969): the right of individuals and groups to free expression of diverse opinions without any excessive or repressive exercise of state power. It calls for impersonal institutions and policies to protect and foster this freedom; the media are part and parcel of institutional checks and balances on state power. The market is regarded as an indispensable mechanism to prevent the state from devouring society in its name. Berger (1986, pp. 79–81) surmises that the capitalist market is a prerequisite for democracy...
for it provides a “social zone relatively independent of state control”. Similarly, Rueschemeyer et al. (1992) maintains that capitalist development is associated with democracy because it transforms class structures. Berger (1986), however, warns that capitalist development and liberalization are only necessary but not sufficient conditions for democracy. While no democracies are illiberal or devoid of capitalist development, many capitalist economies and liberal regimes are non-democratic or anti-democratic. In summary, Chinese journalism cannot be expected to make substantial advances in press freedom without the backing of a viable market economy, but the existence of a market economy does not guarantee press freedom.

Three dominant characteristics of “demobilized liberalization” have been pervasive in China’s media and journalistic practices. First, although undemocratic, the system has become authoritarian rather than totalitarian. China still maintains tighter reins on news media than in former Communist Poland, where the state media had to contend with Solidarity’s oppositional media and the church media (Sparks, 2000), or during the glasnost era of the Soviet Union (Pei, 1994). However, many key mechanisms of “command journalism” (Lee, 1990) and “cultural despotism” (Su, 1994) have been eroded with the unleashing of the power of the market. Market forces are inherently pragmatic and incompatible with Maoist utopian visions. Post-Mao leaders do not seek to intrude into every domain of social and private life, but the regime has ruthlessly quelled dissent and opposition by the regular use of state repressive apparatuses rather than through Maoist mass campaigns from below. The media have frequently been caught up in factional leadership warfare (Goldman, 1994; Wang, 1997) and summoned to attack state enemies (dissidents, rival mass or religious organizations and foreign leaders). The relative separation of politics from the economy has none the less subjected the state’s news management to certain processes of secularization, formalization and regularization (Dittmer, 1994; Polumbaum, 1994). News media are no longer expected to reshape the all-encompassing, exclusionary and absolutist socialist consciousness in Maoist mass campaigns (Lee, 2000b). Journalistic professionalism grew with the reform movement during the politically active 1980s (Polumbaum, 1990), only to be dimmed by raging commercialization in the 1990s.

The second feature of “demobilized liberalization” consists of various attempts at media experimentation and news improvisation (Pan, 2000) catering to wider and more diverse constituencies in the expanded marketplace and consequently diluting state ideology (Lee, 2000a). The overall macroeconomic policy has required news media to shift away from class struggle to a focus on the pragmatic goals of economic modernization. Economic reform demands more and better information for improving managerial, financial and technological infrastructures (Hamrin, 1994). In the 1990s the state’s crucial decision to sever media subsidies has further impacted on the dynamics of media microeconomics, pushing them to scramble for—for some, to profiteer from—advertising revenues in the stormy commercial sea. The process of “uneven liberalization” has created new winners and losers. The central and regional Party organs have significantly lost ground to mass-appeal evening newspapers, weekend editions and tabloids in major coastal cities. The shifting economic base has significantly reshaped the media’s operating environment, the professional
reward structure, and intra-organizational power distribution (Chen and Lee, 1998).

The key tension has become one of serving two masters: the Party or the market. The media have learned to improvise a variety of seemingly paradoxical editorial or marketing strategies—including news genres, formats and techniques—geared primarily toward cultivating market and business opportunities without violating official limits (Pan, 2000). Ideological diversion and depoliticized entertainment, which have increasingly comprised the media staple, may seem mundane and wasteful to the intellectual elite, but are preferred by the masses over strident Communist propaganda. Politically safe but socially useful news genres are being commodified for mass consumption and media profit. Controls over newspapers and television are harsher than for magazines, radio and books. Detailed state control is imposed on television news, but not on television entertainment (Pan and Chan, 2000). The structure of television news production and supply is much more decentralized (Huang, 1994). Many newspaper editors confess that while their front pages endorse the planned economy, the middle pages support a mixed economy and the remainder advocates the market economy. He (2000) portrays these schizophrenic market-orientated media as a “capitalist body” that “wears a socialist face”.

The third and related feature of “demobilized liberalization” is the transformation of the media from being strict Party mouthpieces into what He (2000) terms the “Party Publicity Inc.”, whose job it is to promote Party images and legitimacy rather than to brainwash people. It is feared (Yu, 1994; Zhao, 1998, p. 147) that marketization has strengthened the authoritarian Party media, given their ability to repackage the official ideology and sell it with a profit. Conversely (He, 2000; Lee, 2000b; Pan, 2000; Pan and Chan, 2000) interpret the situation as an already weakened authoritarian party-state trying desperately and instrumentally to trade financial privileges for media loyalty. Competition, even in a distorted market, has lessened the ideological rigidity of official journalism while broadening the space for non-political discourses. Surveys have portrayed a changing picture of professional culture among journalists to reflect a mix of news and market functions (Lee, 2000b). Besides, there are encouraging examples of journalistic innovations purporting to “serve the people” (Zhao, 1998; Pan and Chan 2000; Rosen, 2000).

Many western media writers (Thompson, 1990; Jansen, 1991; Keane, 1991; Fiss, 1996) argue that market forces, driven by corporate industrialism and conglomerate ownership, have widened the unequal access to media resources and limited the range of free expression. The rise of the market—with advertising displacing circulation as a main source of revenue—has led to contraction of the radical and working-class press in Britain and in the United States (Curran, 1978; Bagdikian, 1992). Inspired by Rawls’s theory of justice (1971) and Berlin’s concept of “positive freedom” (1969), many writers view the state as a prime agency of retributive justice and social fairness, a protector of the socially disadvantaged group (Touraine, 1997), and a promoter of “regulated pluralism” in the media sphere (Thompson, 1990). Fiss (1996), a media legal scholar on the liberal left, considers the state as a “corrective” to supplement the market, not to supplant or perfect it. The state should act as the much-needed power “to counter the skew of public debate attributable to the market and thus preserve the essential conditions of
democracy" (Fiss, 1996, p. 40). So conceived, liberal-democratic journalism represents a conscientious and moderate reconciliation between freedom and equality, between individual right and public right, between the state and the market—and above all, between the limitation of state power and the use of the state to guarantee citizenship.

Liberty and equality are “equally indispensable to democracy’s existence” (Touraine, 1997, p. 50); but for China, the Cultural Revolution symbolized extreme equality without freedom—or equality of confinement. Equality must be predicated upon, not oppositional to, freedom. Zhao (1998) laments that marketization may threaten the survival of specialized publications for peasants, women, the aged and other economically disadvantaged groups in China. This legitimate concern should not forget that China’s interlocking media structure penetrating downward into various administrative levels, Party cells, and social, functional or occupational groups is an embellished Leninist form of mass ideological control. Contrary to its past condemnations of western media concentration, China has taken steps toward organizing huge press conglomerates around lucrative and monopolistic Party organs to facilitate state control and to unload its financial burden (Chen and Lee, 1998). It contends that the cultivation of negative freedom—freedom from state interference—is more pertinent to China’s journalism than the state’s employment of positive freedom to equalize the diffusion of illiberal messages across social sectors.

In sum, so far as China’s journalism is concerned, the state is both “enabling and disabling” relative to the market. “Socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics” is undoubtedly state capitalism with authoritarian characteristics. Taking the lead in developing a market economy, the bureaucratic state finds itself having not only to retreat from certain non-political terrain—hence, contributing to the growth of “negative freedom” for journalism—but also to negotiate, incorporate and take advantage of market forces. The market has, in turn, enabled the state to continue wielding ideological domination through a patron–client relationship with the media; but China’s journalism is by no means oppositional to the regime. The media have failed to build a civic consensus on core values such as individual rights, checks and balances and the primary role of public opinion. In the absence of a coherent framework, media reform may be shortsighted, opportunistic and vulnerable to the sway of shifting Party winds (Pan, 2000). Worse yet is the corrupting influence of money in China’s journalistic practices (Zhao, 1998), a natural product of collaboration between an authoritarian power and an undisciplined market.

Chinese Reformist Marxist Perspectives

Since 1949 liberal-pluralist ideas have been severely denounced in the PRC, with “bourgeois” journalism education being shut down between the late 1950s and late 1970s. There was little appreciation of the enduring opposition of such ideas to Communist-authoritarian forms of centralizing media power. The only viable hope of theoretical renewal would come from an assorted group of reformist journalists and scholars who worked within the official orbit of Marxism but sought to give it less rigid interpretations. This group can be broadly identified as the “Old Left”, distinguished from the “New Left” of the 1990s. Most of the “old left” group had been elite members of the party-state propaganda and ideological
apparatuses, but were emboldened to break ranks with party orthodoxy in the post-Mao era. As part of the larger liberalizing cultural formation of the 1980s, however, they failed to develop unified positions. Their theoretical resources were quite uneven, scattered and variegated.

Two general points are noteworthy. First, based on ideological conviction and political necessity, the Old Left invariably staked their claims on the selective texts of Marx and Engels (against Prussian censors), Lenin (against the Tsarists) and Mao (against the Guomindang) as an antidote to “the venomous influences of Stalinism and late Maoism” (Su, 1992, p. 57). Ignorant of journalistic practice in the outside world, their writings were too abstract and overly philosophized to specify any modus operandi for reaching the identified goals. Chen (1993) did not relate his erudite exposition of Marx’s theory of communication to China’s context, but readers could unmistakably draw their own conclusions. As some writers strayed from the official turf to embrace certain theses from European Marxists, they fell foul of ideological commissars in the Party.

Secondly, displaying strong statist tendencies, the Old Left looked to post-Mao “enlightened” leaders—Deng Xiaoping and two of his proteges: Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, the successive Party general secretaries whom Deng would oust in time—to right the wrongs from 1979 to 1989. Taking the fundamental virtues of socialism for granted, they used news media as the major vehicle for advocating change within the system, without seeking a change of the system (Ruan, 1990). Their legitimacy hinged precariously on the patronage of the “enlightened leaders”, in virtual isolation from popular movements. They snubbed dissidents such as Wei Jing-sheng when he denounced Communist dictatorship and Deng (Su, 1996, p. 33). Liu Binyan (1992), China’s leading investigative reporter, professed to hold a “second kind of loyalty”, harnessing his pen to strengthening Party legitimacy by exposing bureaucratic corruption. However, unrelenting intra-party power struggles resulted in their bitter ousting from the Party because of ideological transgressions during the short-lived Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign (1983), the Anti-Bourgeois Liberalization Campaign (1987) and the brutal Tiananmen crackdown (1989).3 Tighter ideological control since 1989, combined with the dazzling ascendency of consumer culture amid China’s forceful articulation of its political economy into the process of globalization since 1992, have consigned these writers into exile, dissent and irrelevance to both intellectual and everyday discourses. As a group, their contribution to the corpus of Marxist press theories was meager but their liberating potential in China could be bold, if also unstable.

During the heyday of the reform ferment, writers (Sun, 1988; Ruan, 1992; Su, 1992) revived Mao’s early fugitive writings, all angrily demanding press freedom and civil liberties from the ruling Guomindang. Among the texts now censored from his five-volume Selected Works, Mao offered democracy—and press freedom—as cures for China’s chronic instability. Mao, moreover, defined freedom in terms of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “four freedoms” and democracy in terms of Lincoln’s “the government of the people, by the people, and for the people”. Among the uncensored texts, Mao envisaged that post-revolutionary China should first practice “new democracy”—a concept imbued with strong liberal underpinnings—for many decades to rid itself of semi-feudalism and semi-colonialism. He rejected the idea of leapfrogging from feudalism—thus bypassing capi-
talism—into the higher stage of socialism. Since Mao the ruler did exactly the opposite of what Mao the theorist had preached, Su (1992) urged that it was time to redeem “new democracy”. As Mao’s writings were frequently tailored to his contradictory tactical needs, reformist writers had to exploit his more “liberal” side to contrast Party vulgarity. Sun (1988) argues that Communist news media should tackle “contradictions within the people” through mild ideological rectification rather than launch violent class struggles against “contradictions with the enemy”. This represents a conscious strategy to present “alternative”, if not “oppositional”, readings of Mao to the “dominant” official interpretations within a presumably approved yet not always safe parameter.

Outside observers can hardly appreciate how strenuous was the battle just to legitimize journalism as a conveyer of information rather than a means of class struggle. According to the Leninist dictate, the media must obey the “party principle” that is synonymous with the “people principle.” Hu Jiwei (1989) argued otherwise that the “people principle” should take precedence over the “party principle”. Recounting his own past credentials as a top party journalist-ideologist, Hu said that whenever the Party erred, the press followed suit and he was praised. In the late 1970s, however, the People’s Daily firmly supported Deng against Maoist remnants who controlled the Party apparatuses; in this case, Hu maintained, because the paper stood on the side of the people it did not repeat the Party’s blunder. The press should take the people’s interests to heart instead of blindly following orders from the Party. When attacked, Hu added that the “party principle” is derived from, but higher than, the “people principle”—to the further anger of the ideological chiefs (Wang, 1997, p. 172). Hu repositioned himself on the basis of journalistic practice rather than theoretical reflection; the “people” was freely invoked but characteristically undefined. His deputy, Wang Ruoshui—an orthodox Marxist philosopher and once devout Maoist, now heading the paper’s theoretical work department—began to discover the work of “young Marx” through the Frankfurt School in the early 1980s. Invoking the concept of “alienation”, he argued critically that Stalinist and Maoist adventurism had turned China’s public servants into people’s oppressors. As a remedy he called for injecting radical humanism into China’s “socialist democracy”, stressing that Marx himself blamed the failure of the Paris Commune on the lack of direct elections and press freedom (Wang, 1986, 1997). Asserting that Marxist alienation was possible only in capitalism but not in socialism, the ideological commissar sacked Wang and Hu in 1983.

Su Shaozhi (1992), a noted political economist, adopted certain premises from dissident Marxists in Central/Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union by stressing the historical continuities rather than the divergences of socialism with capitalism. He argued that “socialism with a human face” should inherit and transcend—instead of breaking away from—the capitalist womb in which it was born. He insisted that socialism was the legitimate heir to bourgeois culture and democracy. The working classes should share due credit with the emergent bourgeois classes for supporting and articulating the values of liberty, equality and fraternity in the first place; socialist countries should, moreover, uphold those values to in the defence and support of working people in their continuing struggle against the bourgeoisie in today’s world. Socialism, therefore, must adopt general elections, a parliamentary sys-
tem, constitutional checks and balances and press freedom; it should supersede capitalism by placing the means of production, including the media, in public ownership (Su, 1992, p. 168). Despite its lack of specificity, Su’s position was potentially subversive of state dogma.

Adopting this broad line of argument, Sun Xupei (1988) tried to develop, in a monograph-length essay, what is arguably the most eloquent theoretical work on journalism in China: a theory of socialist press freedom. He began by endorsing bourgeois press freedom as embodying a “universal form”, under which the civilian (minbian) media and journalists were given the right to report and criticize government affairs freely. Monopoly of material conditions by the larger capitalists and the capitalist class has rendered such freedom meaningless to the working people. He then critiqued the Soviet model: while Lenin only opposed the anti-Soviet and anti-revolutionary press, Stalin nationalized every means of expression as a tool of Party propaganda, denying the people their right to free expression. Sun (1988, p. 50) quoted Engels approvingly as saying that the press party should be the party’s “flagship”, not “mouthpiece”, and that the Communist Party could profit from constructive criticisms by a special kind of party press not under the direct control of the Party’s executive committee or its assembly of delegates. Finally, he proposed what seemed a remarkably painless union between socialist control of the economic base and capitalist forms of the superstructure (p. 63). Under this model, journalists should be entrusted to report, to express views, and to criticize freely, on behalf of the people (undefined) and within the bounds of Communist power. Proposing a grand media structure, moreover, Sun (1988, p. 92) declared that various social, political and functional groups should be allowed to publish their non-Party newspapers; such papers, among other functions, may “come to the government’s aid on international and diplomatic topics”. Sun observed that the Party press must be accountable to the constitution and the Party, but the non-Party papers should obey only the constitution.

The Old Left’s discourses seem to be predicated on the assumption (if not oxymoron) of a benevolent Leninist party, not to mention a democratic Communist regime, willing to subject itself to constitutional limitation and to tolerate legitimate dissent and challenge. Their implicit criticisms of Party rigidity were framed in ways which supported the fundamental sanctity of the system. Some, for example, associated democracy with benevolent dictatorship, suspicious of Western democracy. As a whole, the Old Left gave no serious thought to how the press could best manage, if not solve, the Party—people contradictions. What prevailed was a mixture of halfway rejection and vague endorsement of the vanguard party. Only Sun (1988) came close to providing a concrete exemplar of a free Socialist press when praising the now defunct (and thus suspect) Yugoslav model under Tito. While canonizing the struggles by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao against their censors, reformist writers failed to acknowledge that press freedom has been institutionally and legally guaranteed in stable liberal democracies. Their writings seemed to suggest that selected elements of the capitalist and socialist media systems might be harmonized at a higher level of theoretical abstraction as an imagined, transcendent form of human progress. They gave no hint of the inherent dialectical struggle required for abolishing the weaknesses and embodying the strengths of both systems. This stage theory of Marxism implies a betrayal of the status quo.
from “true Marxism”.–Instead of being democratically minded, members of the technocratic circle around Zhao Ziyang were proud protagonists of “neo-authoritarianism”. Drawing on dubious East Asian examples, they suggested that since economic growth was fused with tight-fisted control, China should centralize its political power while decentralizing its economic power. Chen Yizi (1990, p. 188), Zhao’s narcissistic aide, was blatantly anti-democratic in declaring that less than 10 per cent of the population—the “most knowledgeable, most farsighted, and ablest” elites—were entitled to take power. He assigned his presumptuous elites the role of educating and representing the 90 per cent of population which was too poor and too uneducated to be politically competent. Chen and his fellow authoritarians ruled out democracy as a viable political arrangement for their economically backward country. Others argued that authoritarianism was a necessary prelude to democracy, admiring Jiang Jingguo as someone who used his immense dictatorial power to usher in democratic transition in Taiwan (see Ruan, 1992, pp. 232–8). The fragile alliance between Zhao’s circle and the reformist publications of the late 1980s appeared to have been tactically based. The tragic downfall of the reformists has further marginalized Marxist idealism, as consumer culture in which money is the new and only religion reigns supreme in the 1990s. No credible media scholarship has emerged from within China in the 1990s, in sharp contrast to the growing interest abroad which attempts to theorize the practice of journalism struggling between the “party line” and the “bottom line”. As in post-Communist Europe, the ideological vacuum created by the decline of official Marxism in China is being filled by the revival of a coarse nationalism, which the state gingerly exploits to redirect and diffuse popular discontent. Typifying this anti-liberal backlash, Li et al. (1998–9) issue a notoriously self-righteous treatise on US media’s alleged China-bashing—a best seller feeding on nationalist and nativistic hysteria, dangerously undemocratic and exclusive while oblivious to internal dimensions of colonialism, not to be compared with Said’s (1978, 1993) or other careful post-colonial studies (for example, Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1997). Retreat from theoretical reform against the tidal waves of crass commercialization and vulgar nationalism in the 1990s offers no cause for celebration. Into this complex context enters the “New Left” critique.

Radical-Critical Perspectives

In the 1990s a small Chinese “New Left” emerged which has been sharply critical of both liberal-pluralism and the “Old Left” of the 1980s. It has offered a radical critique of various brutal and distorted consequences of the state-led market reforms that became manifest in the late 1990s. This New Left has the potential to initiate a crucial debate on a significant issue which liberal-pluralists and the “Old Left” have failed to address. Its radical emancipatory potential is, however, not commensurate with its actual influence. To begin with, a brief comparison between the “New Left” and the “Old Left” is in order.

First, the two groupings belong to different generations. Many members of the “Old Left” were revolutionary idealists who joined the Communist Party in their youth, had struggled against the Nationalists, but were battered by ruthless Communist power struggles. They were Confucian intellectuals in Communist guises, drawn to post-Mao leaders’ statist reform projects and eventually purged out of the Party. The New Left, born after 1949, with some of
them having been Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, spent their formative and college years under the secularizing era of Deng’s economic reform. They did not experience Communist State terror in the same way as their predecessors. Nor do they feel obliged to accept official dogma as a starting point for their discourse. Their contact with liberal-pluralism has transformed them from its initial admirers into its harshest critics; they fashion their visions in the light of western radical-critical scholarship and the Maoist utopia.

Secondly, the social positions of the two groups are different. Members of the “Old Left” were ideological allies of reform bureaucracy, sharing the same economic, social and philosophical privileges. For this, members of the “New Left” (Gan, 1998; Zhang, 1998b) attack them for being elitist, aristocratic and conservative—advocating liberalization without commitment to democracy. Within China, a major intellectual and organizational base for the “New Left” is the Dushu (Studies) Monthly. But many of its members are western-educated, living overseas in the Chinese Diaspora and attached to various western academic institutions, where their perspectives garner more attention than among public constituencies at home. If the “Old Left” looks out from the inside, the “New Left” tends to look in from the outside.

Thirdly, their central theses, social contexts and theoretical resources are different. The “Old Left” drew selectively on the original work of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao to advance arguments for political and media reform at a time when many Maoist ideologues were still vehemently opposed to the incipient market elements. The “old left” discourse was politically oriented, having little to say about market dynamics except to echo Deng’s rhetoric of “economic reform” in the hope that a market economy would take root and dilute the existing political authoritarianism. Despite their alleged elitist and aristocratic dispositions, they tried to deliver a liberating message of modernity, of which press freedom is a central part. It was in that context that prominent “old left” writers (Sun, 1987; Su, 1992) emphasized the continuities between socialism and capitalism. In the 1990s this message was instead delivered by the marketplace, creating a Chinese domestic market and everyday culture thought to be “more level and homogeneous (sic) than that of Mao’s China” (Zhang, 1998b, p. 111). As the old left’s political narrative ended with the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989, the New Left’s cultural narrative begins with the post-1992 China where commercialization has been in full swing and generated substantial Marxist alienation. Meanwhile, the 1990s saw the marginalization of Chinese intellectuals as the state conspired with the people in figuring out how to stay in power and how to get rich. The “new left” has drawn theoretically from a range of western radical-critical thought—Marxism, post-Marxism, post-colonialism, and post-structuralism—to reconstruct a radical critique of China’s commercialized party journalism under the domination of cultural capital in a globalized economy.

Members of the “New Left” neither frame the primary problem of China’s journalism in state-versus-the-people terms, nor see the repressive state as China’s first enemy. Rather, they attack the rising global capitalist domination with its attendant consumer culture. Market fetishism is the enemy of grassroots-based democratic journalistic practices. Reminiscent of Herbert Marcuse’s famous critique of the “one-dimensional man”, they regard nurturing and marketizing a mass consumer media culture in China as another form of
dictatorship. In closely following western radical discourses, however, they seem to have built rather ill conceived and exaggerated narratives of capital domination in China, thus committing the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness” (Ren, 2000, p. 200). As a result, they have sometimes placed themselves perilously close to aligning with statism and a coarse nationalism. They have also adopted the bankrupt Maoist legacy that has continued to hold the fancy of western radical scholarship. Zhang (1998b, p. 135); for example, calls for “the socialist commitment to the people as a whole, as well as the will to create a new kind of democracy, freedom, and equality that supersedes the bourgeois model”. He attempts to construct a discourse based on “a renewed utopian expectation” that “may create new possibilities for political participation and democracy within the residual socialist framework” (p. 130, emphasis added). In summary, the “new left” envisages a “socialist democracy” far more radical than “social democracy”. While sharing with the “old left” in believing the Marxist rhetoric of superceding capitalist democracy, it is more critical of liberal democracy than the “old left”.

Arguably the most significant radical work on Chinese media so far has been published by Zhao (1998; see also her contribution to this special issue). She maintains that China’s journalism should not only struggle to achieve “narrow” liberal democracy but also strive to preserve “the progressive gains of socialist revolution”. She calls for “a democratic state… to check both unaccountable political power and the structural biases of market forces” (p. 191). She is at once critical of and sympathetic to Maoist legacies. Her position is more radical than that of liberal pluralists and yet somewhat less radical than that of others like Zhang (1998b) in the “New Left” circle.

Three central premises of the radical-critical perspective vis-à-vis its theoretical siblings stand out. First, in managing democracy’s essential tension, liberals tend to value freedom over equality whereas radicals tend to favor equality over freedom (Wallerstein, 1999, pp. 87–103). The liberal left (Fiss 1996; Giddens, 1998) supports “responsible capitalism” as a friend of democracy and calls for using the state as a “corrective” for the market. The radical left, however, is fundamentally critical of the contradictions between capitalism and democracy. Zhao (1998) disavows capitalism (market forces, commercialization) as a precondition for press freedom and democracy (p. 10) or any “necessary relationship” between them (p. 188). While ambivalently acknowledging some “progressive effects” of the market, she is clearly more sympathetic to what Keane (1991) calls “market censorship”. China’s journalism amplifies “the worst aspects of party journalism and commercialism” (p. 152).

Secondly, the New Left’s uncompromising opposition to the undemocratic media implications of capital accumulation and circulation in China is an insight of crucial significance, but it may be of dubious merit to universalize the kind of romantic and totalizing images, developed at the margin of western democracies for struggles against their own dominant ideological center. Zhao (1998) echoes western critics in claiming that the market has led to the “decline of democracy” and the crisis of the public sphere. This is so in China, where there is no democracy. Moreover, China’s public sphere is “not a mediating space between state and society” in Habermas’s sense, but the result of “the penetration of society into a certain space in the state” (Wang, 1998, p. 33). Zhao further adopts the Gramscian definition of hegemony from the cultural studies tradition (Hall,
1977) to question the liberal claims of ideological de-emphasis by China’s news media. She wants to take the concept of hegemony from the intentional to the unintentional, from the explicit to the implicit, thus situating the news media as sites of active struggle against ideological domination in ordinary and everyday life consciousness (p. 5). The use of a broadened concept of hegemony is fine, again in so far as it does not blur the precious boundaries between the liberal, authoritarian, and totalitarian media (Arendt, 1968; Su, 1994). Chinese propaganda seems often too crude for a nuanced hegemonic analysis. The Maoist tendency to exalt and totalize anything and everything into political and ideological significance of the first order (wuxiang shanggang) during the Cultural Revolution is more than a worrying thought.

Thirdly, writing about post-Communist Eastern Europe, Sparks (2000) argues that media studies should shift their focus from the empowering virtues of the state versus the market to the ideal of popular democracy, in which media professionals and the public—not just the old political elite or new capitalists—have a strong voice in the policy and operation of news media. Zhao (1998) endorses this vision for China. While recognizing the liberal claim that professionalism has created a journalistic space (Polumbaum, 1990), she favours more channels for popular participation. The ordained “progressive gains of the socialist revolution” smack of many Maoist mass-line legacies. Mao’s radical-romanticism, despite its internal contradictions, is symbolically enchanting but practically disenchanting. If radical Maoism (of which period?) continues to enchant some radical intellectuals, the Chinese people, feeling betrayed or indifferent, have thoroughly discarded it. The masses have undergone a process of what Max Weber (1958) calls “disenchantment of the world”, thus unmasking Mao’s magic thought and practice. How can Maoist tenets be reshaped to serve today’s democratic causes in the name of the people who have discredited them? It is the devil in the detail, not the angel of ideals offered by the radical agenda which is likely to disappoint us. Radical thought is better equipped for critique than for reconstructing a program.

Concluding Remarks

I have reviewed the liberating potential of liberal-pluralist, Chinese reformist Marxist and radical-critical perspectives for China’s journalism. They converge on the pivotal importance of democratizing the authoritarian–bureaucratic party-state, but diverge widely on the role of the capitalist market in this process. The opening-up of European Communist states was not due to the good will of the elite, but to the division developed between them resulting from political and economic pressures (Sparks, 2000). Liberals stress “negative freedom” and are wary concerning the authoritarian state’s exercise of “positive freedom” (Berlin, 1969). China’s news media are, from the perspective of “negative freedom”, still in a very bad shape but far superior to their past. Liberals credit the market, even operating in a distorted environment, with having latentely created a space to insulate news media from the omnipresent state power. Some postmodernists even reify the commercialized market as having generated a democratizing mass consumer media culture in China, only to be dismissed by the intellectual elites of various ideological stripes. In contrast, radical critics charge that China’s state capitalism has created illiberal and anti-democratic backlashes against journalism. Market censorship is equally as
dangerous as state censorship, if not more so. The pernicious charms of mass consumerism, via the media, may prioritize individual desires over any collective quest for equality and fairness. This consumer culture is a joint product of the state and its ideological apparatuses. Ma (2000) conceives of it as “constructing a hybrid of overt conflicts but structural coexistence” between the state and the media. It has a Foucauldian bent that promotes regulatory discourses that are “restraining and enabling, disciplinary and satisfying”.

I have argued (Lee, 1999) that radical-Marxist materialism offers an “economic political economy”, a powerful top–down approach for analyzing the “alienation” of the news media in western democracies. The primary enemy is the capitalist market, not the liberal-democratic state. As long as the news media enjoy relative autonomy and institutional separation from the state, radical writers can concentrate their critiques of the status quo—resource inequity, cultural distortion through capital concentration and commodification, and the “incomplete emancipation”—from the high plateaus of various radical humanist formulations, invariably committed to some forms of socialism. Only on this basis can Curran (1991) legitimately propose a far-reaching “democratic media system” that incorporates the civic sector, the professional sector, the social market sector and the private enterprise sector. This awesome vision is all but a luxury for most news media living under authoritarian control, in China or elsewhere. Liberal “political political economy” may indeed retain its critical edge by offering a bottom–up approach for the oppressed media and media professionals to struggle against the low and rough ground of naked state repression in most Third World and Communist countries. This perspective sees the market more as a mechanism for promoting individual freedom and autonomy, rather than a condition for an ideal society. Liberalization may not necessarily trigger media democratization, but democratization is historically and empirically inconceivable without the development of a strong market. In some democratically transitional states, both radical and liberal perspectives seem to co-exist uneasily side by side since the media have to contend with a reconfigured relationship between the weakened but still dominant state and an emerging capitalism (Lee, 2000c).

To recapitulate, as the first challenge, it is essential to preserve the liberal emphasis on journalistic freedom and the radical emphasis on media equality. Equality without freedom is authoritarian and repressive, but freedom without equality is exclusive and ultimately undemocratic. Wallerstein (1999, p. 99) calls this balancing synthesis “egaliberty”. We must also confront a second struggle between idealism and pragmatism. Acquiescence to liberal practicality risks reifying the status quo and impoverishing imagination, but radical idealism without a strategy is merely a “cultural critique without politics”: a paper war. A third struggle concerns the relationship between “master narratives” developed in the heartland countries and “specific narratives” arising from regional, national and local contexts.

The end of the cold war has made the globalizing processes ever more pressing. The collapse of European communism has given birth to considerable liberalization, making it possible for news media to report and reflect open conflicts and debates between factions of the elite. However, capitalist development has not bred a democratic “civil society”, leaving the media open to manipulation by the emerging alliances between the old political elite and new local and international capitalists (Sparks, 2000). This
same pressure is closing in on China as it joins the neo-liberal World Trade Organization (WTO) to participate as a full member in the globalization of capitalism, a process that will thrust an authoritarian state into sharper conflict (and partial accommodation) with the dynamics of world economy. As part of the conditions for admission, China has conceded to the demand of opening up its potentially vast telecommunications industries and the Internet market to foreign ownership, especially by transnational corporations. The full implications of this policy shift are yet to unravel. It remains uncertain whether we will witness more (both trivial and non-trivial) information being infused into China from outside via a mix of old and new technologies? It is also pertinent to consider whether this will this render internal censorship more difficult, while widening news gaps according to the age, socioeconomic and geographical strata.

In the end, we must develop new discourses to meet this formidable intellectual and policy challenge. The new discourses must account for the role of China’s journalism in the growing interpenetrating web of the local, the national and the global to maintain a dynamic equilibrium between universal principles (human rights, freedom of expression) and national narratives (sovereignty). Mao once upheld the simultaneous aims of anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism, even though he became a fiercely anti-imperialist and ultra-feudalist ruler. We must reject many of today’s nationalistic discourses and some of the new left discourses in China that are anti-imperialistic but not anti-feudalistic. These two goals are not mutually exclusive. For democracy to survive, Touraine’s (1997) advises that it must protect the power of the nation-state as it limits that power, for only the state has sufficient means to counterbalance the global corporate wielders of money and information. Any new democratic discourses must begin with this problematic. Liberating China’s journalism from the yoke of both state control and global capitalist control should be seen as an integral part of the larger international media and cultural formation.

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Notes

1 Third World liberation movements have articulated their resistance in light of natural rights theories derived from western enlightenment (Jansen, 1991, p. 137). Liberal rhetoric has empowered oppressed journalists everywhere to struggle for greater press freedom in the names of professionalism, “watchdog”, and the public’s right to know (Hachten and Giffard, 1984; Yoon, 1989; Lee, 1993; Paletz et al., 1995). Thompson (1990, p. 251) acknowledged its “radical and critical potential”, even for a country such as Britain where public broadcasting and the public sphere faced state assaults.

2 In the end, several hard questions must be addressed seriously: who should foot the bill to benefit whom, for what purpose, under what kind of a regime? Also, to that end, will the high-tech media (cable and satellite television boasting over-abundant channel capacity) and the low-tech media (the less capital-intensive radio, weeklies or magazines) be more cost-effective than the traditional daily newspaper and terrestrial television?

3 Victims of the purges include Liu Binyan, Su Shaozhi, Wang Ruoshui, Ruan Ming, Chen Yizi and many others. Liu, Su, Ruan and Chen have been in exile in the United States. Sun Xupei lost his directorship of the Institute of Journalism under the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

Downing (1996) has also remarked that many dominant western assumptions in media studies lose their relevance beyond the “heartland nations” of the United States and Britain.


US radical instrumentalists (Herman and Chomsky, 1987; Schiller, 1992) tend to consider the state as a structural collaborator of the corporate interests. The British left (Curran, 1991; Golding and Murdock, 1991) tends to regard the state as an agency of distributive justice to moderate corporate influences.

It seems premature to complain about “incomplete emancipation” when the process of emancipation has barely begun. It is hard to talk about the “decline of democracy” in an authoritarian country. Despite a plethora of writings suggesting that the market-orientated Anglo-American media have reduced active political citizens to passive consumers, where was democratic citizenship in China to begin with?

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