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China

A tug-of-war over the media

- IV Online magazine - 2009 - IV413 - June 2009 -

Publication date: Monday 8 June 2009

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Twenty years ago this month on Tienanmen square, the Chinese army put a violent end to a peaceful movement for democracy. The reigning image of China in the world is a country that has not only become much richer since then, but also freer. A fascinating book about the Chinese media makes short shrift of that notion.

Left-wing Canadian-Chinese professor Yuezhi Zhao has written several books about the media in the age of neoliberal globalization. Her works are devoted to showing how the apparently diverse global media is in fact kept in line by capital with the help of all sorts of subtle mechanisms. She had little need of her ability to peer beneath the surface in order to expose media dictatorship in her native country, however; there's not much subtlety about the way the Chinese state controls its media.

While competition and debate do exist in the Chinese media today, there's no such thing as independent media. Newspapers, magazines and broadcasting are virtually the only remaining sector in which private property in the means of production are not permitted in China. According to the official rules, every publication must be the organ of a Communist Party committee.

This does not amount to an effective barrier to multinational or domestic capital. There are Chinese editions today of fashion magazines like Elle and sports magazines like Golf. In 2003 top CP leaders attended a lecture at their party school by no less a media magnate than Rupert Murdoch. And by now the Chinese media is almost totally dependent for its revenues on advertising, mostly by the private sector. Formally, however, a party committee is always in charge of every media outlet - which means that providing a CP front for private investors is an easy way for local party organizations to fill their treasuries.

Yet formal party ownership of the media is not considered a sufficient guarantee of its political submissiveness. All media firms also fall under the strict central supervision of the CP propaganda department. Every day, before an editor puts together a paper or news broadcast, a stack of directives has to be read. No coverage today of yesterday's protests in x province, the editor is instructed. Use only the central press bureau's copy for your coverage of the prime minister's visit to country y. You may publish an interview with this expert about that development, but don't give your own in-depth analysis - or the other way around. And the editor had better pay close attention, because Beijing reserves the right to sack any editor whenever it chooses.

Dissent

Within such an apparently airtight system, one might imagine that there is no space at all for dissident opinions or debate. But space for dissent does exist. In fact the system even allows for storms of protest that shake the structures of authority every couple of years, and even shake loose concessions. China is simply too big a country to make it feasible to stifle every dissident opinion before publication - as the regime fully understands. Its goal is no longer to censor every article, but rather to channel debates in a way that marginalizes the most dangerous currents of opinion.

The internet in particular has become the privileged terrain of dissidents, despite the state's internationally notorious system of firewalls and filters. Zhao explains that net users are not a good cross-sample of the Chinese population, since only the most prosperous two or three hundred million of the 1.3 billion Chinese have internet access. But

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these millions of net users include students and even workers who can and do pass on their semi-licit reading to millions of others.

Zhao recounts at length the story of three recent protests that spread across the whole country: the protest against the murder of former student Sun Zhigang in 2003 in a detention centre in Guangzhou; the 'Lang Xianping storm' of protest in 2004 against the plundering of state property by managers; and the protest against the death sentence imposed in 2005 on worker Wang Binyu after he had stabbed four people to death in a rage after he had failed to get his back wages paid. Each of these waves of protest was begun by a courageous blogger or journalist, allowed temporarily and partially by a shocked government to be picked up by the broader media, and eventually suppressed, though sometimes after concessions.

Concessions are sometimes useful in helping President Hu Jintao with his effort to craft a more social image than his predecessors Jiang Zemin and Deng Xiaoping. But no dissent is allowed to put capitalism itself in question, or even criticize the system of apartheid that keeps the great majority of the rural population prisoner in their villages or only allows them to live as second-class citizens in the cities.

To the extent that foreign sources covers repression of the Chinese media, they give a distorted picture of who the victims usually are. Western publications sometimes complain that liberal democratic intellectuals, like the signers of last year's Charter 08, suffer from the regime's attacks. And in fact China's rulers do sometimes decide that they need to draw the line when intellectuals call for a multiparty system or the privatization of everything that is still in state hands. Zhao shows, however, that this kind of liberal is generally treated with kid gloves compared with the treatment meted out to workers who protest against factory closings, farmers who protest against confiscation of their land, or the small left-wing circles that charge that there is no longer anything communist about the CP.

It is unfortunate that a book this valuable is written so inaccessibly. That it repeatedly cites people like Raymond Williams and Jürgen Habermas is fair enough. But there was no need to write the whole volume in 'critical communications' jargon, or make virtually every sentence in these hundreds of pages stretch for two or three lines of print or more. However, this reader in any event found it well worth the effort of plowing through to the end.

Yuezhi Zhao, Communication in China: Political Economy, Power and Conflict. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008. 373 pp.