

Communication and Global Power Shifts: A View on China

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Introduction

I wish to make three points in this presentation:

1. The great communication divide at the moment: strikingly different Western and Chinese media coverage of the ongoing the CCP 18th Congress
2. The great omission: What's missing in the Western critique of Chinese censorship?
3. The great challenge: Imagining an alternative global vision

I. The Great Media Divide: Who (Hu) is from Which Planet?

- China's real and imagined "rise" has provoked profound anxiety, fear, and hope in the world
- Despite the long declared "end" of the Cold War, the fear has much to do with China's perceived "abnormality:" That a communist party-led state is presiding over the "rise of China"

- This is profoundly unsettling for the basic assumptions of “modernization theory/transition theory” and more broadly, the Anglo-American ideological and cultural myth that capitalism and liberal democracy goes together
- Nowhere is the Anglo-American media frustration more explicit than its coverage of the much anticipated CCP 18th Congress

What Did Hu Say in his 18th Congress Report?

Among other things, he said:

- “We have held high the great banner of socialism with Chinese characteristics and neither taken the old and rigid closed-door policy nor taken the deviant path of changing the banner.”
- “We will never copy a Western political system”

Here is how The Guardian (Nov. 8) reported it:

Headline: “China's congress reveals 'an elite from another planet’”

Lead sentence: “Despite problems of party corruption and rapid economic growth, the leadership handover looks unlikely to bring political change.”

Expert quote: Kerry Brown: "When you think of the extraordinary events going on, and put it beside Obama's victory speech, you realise we are dealing with an elite from another planet."

Here is how the New York Times (Nov. 10) reported it:

Headline: “Amid Calls to Open China’s Politics, Party Digs In”

Quotes: there are no lack of domestic Chinese liberal voices – native informants who have internalized the dominant Western view and are willing to give what the Western media want:

- Li: “I still think China’s politics remain **prehistoric**... I often joke that the Chinese civilization is the last **prehistoric** civilization left in the world.”
- Yang: “In order to build a **real** market economy, we have to have **real** political reform... in the next years, we should have a **constitutional democracy plus a market economy.**”

Here is how The International Herald Tribune (Nov. 10-11) reported it:

Headline: “Poking Fun at China’s closed-door congress”

Content: how “ordinary Chinese citizens are turning to humor to express themselves ” on the Internet – with many Internet jokes.

So is BBC World... the leading story this morning was Chinese media censorship, and I just got a request from Al Jazeera English for an interview on Chinese media censorship today.

In Contrast, here is how the Xinhua Net (Nov. 9) framed the report:

Headline: “Hu's vision for development highlights the modern path”

Lead: the Party will stride ahead, in full confidence, on the path of ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’:

Content: “The report's emphasis on self-confidence - in the path the CPC has chosen, the theories it has propounded, and in the system it has created - **is not out of nowhere.** From the first-generation CPC leaders' search for nation-building strategies to the inauguration and enrichment of the idea of ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ by the second- and third-generation leaderships, the CPC's sense of direction has reached a new level under the leadership of Hu and his colleagues.”

2. The Great Paradox: Can the Western Media Have it both Ways (Have the Cake of Critiquing Chinese Censorship and Eat it Too?)

The Chinese censorship regime or “media control campaign” (as Keegan Elmer put it in the FIIR’s briefing paper) as a key aspect of the communication dimension of “China’s rise”

- Silencing domestic dissents via preventive/reactive media control measures
- neutralizing external critiques via the most recent “soft power” drive: since 1989, the liberal human rights discourse has been a powerful political ideology mobilized by the Western media to critique the negative political and social consequences of China’s capitalist integrationist/market-authoritarian developmental path.

- To the extent that China's 30 years of pro-capitalistic developmental path has not only been fundamentally flawed but also proven unsustainable, negative critiques are inevitable and justified.
- At the same time, the Western media have also been caught in their own ideological prison in so far as China's 30 years of reform challenges the myth that capitalism and democracy goes hand in hand.

- As long as China fails to shape itself in the image of the West, and to the extent that it acts as an agent of inter-capitalist rivalry, the Western media will continue to describe the Chinese state as “the goon state” (Economist, April 16, 2011) and its leaders from another planet!
- Thus, a Chinese soft-power drive that aims at “image-making” and winning favorable Western media coverage is probably not only indeed a “mission impossible”, but also highly problematic

- However, there is a profound blind-spot in the Western media's highly moralizing crusade against Chinese censorship: It was precisely this censorship regime that does the dirty work of sustaining China's capitalistic development/saving global capitalism: in addition to Lu Xiaobo and his fellow pro-Western liberals, the other victims/silenced voices have been the leftist (neo-maoist or not) critics of "capitalist restoration"! (this has been most visible in the recent Bo Xilai scandal)

- But as Chinese netizens and intellectuals gained more access to the Western media and began to develop their own critical positions, it has become increasingly difficult for the Western media to have the cake of their Cold-War inspired and patronizing coverage of China and eat it too:

Example 1: Anti-CNN.com (now April Media), established in 2008 in protesting against Western media coverage of China. Founder: then 23-Year old Rao Jing – the young, urban, affluent, highly educated, confident, and (male!) image of a “rising China”



May 4th, 1919, the Birthdate of Modern Chinese nationalism in response to Western imperialism; May 4th, 2008, Chinese again defended China's territorial integrity in response to Western supported Tibetan ethno-nationalism



There have also been lively popular and intellectual calls for renewing Chinese socialism in a more democratic form:

- e.g. (1): 2010 popular book *China Rise: Our Future, Destiny and Spiritual Independence* (中国站起来) : From “connecting with the global track” (i.e. capitalist re-integration) to “change track”, or even compelled the West to “change its track”, i.e. to “embark on a sustainable developmental path that radically transform the Western dominated “high energy, high consumption and highly exploitative” model of development.
- e.g. (2): 2011 book *A Just Path for Humanity* (人间正道) -- an abashed celebration of the Maoist revolutionary past, a balanced and yet critical assessment 30 years of dependent development, and a call for surpassing capitalist “market society” and the building of a “people’s society”

- However, these voices are typically dismissed by domestic liberal intellectuals who have privileged access to the Western media, as well as the mainstream international scholarly community, as “pro-state” and “nationalistic”, or even worse, wanting to “return to the Cultural Revolution”! Nothing is more effective in closing any debate about non-capitalist alternative than this!

3. The Great Challenge: Imagining and shaping an alternative vision of “the Rise of China and the “Rise of the Rest”

- This alternative vision is actually inscribed on the Gate of Heavenly Peace as the internationalist commitment of the PRC at its founding: “Long Live the Great Solidarity of the Peoples of the World!” (in today’s terminology, “the peoples of the world” can be seen as “the 99%” in the Occupying Wall Street Movement).

- That the Chinese state continues to prevent private capitalist domination of the ideological and cultural realms and that it continues to mobilise the rhetoric of socialism to legitimate itself remain significant factors in considering the future direction of China's ongoing transformation – or “what kind of superpower China will be:”
- This discourse of socialism has provided a language for members of China's subordinate social classes and their organic intellectuals to mount their struggles against Chinese versions of “accumulation by dispossession”.

- The “advantage” of this language, as opposed to an anti-communist ideology, in the current era of economic crisis, is clear. As David Harvey (2009) put it: in the US, “even the vaguest hint of state direction let alone nationalization creates a political furor.” In contrast, although “there may be some vested interests of wealthier party members and an emergent capitalist class to be overcome,” there is “absolutely no ideological barrier to redistributing economic largeness to the neediest sectors of society ... The charge that this would be amount to ‘socialism’ or even worse to ‘communism’ would simply be greeted with amusement in China.”

- At stake is not just a problem of Chinese “soft power”, but a potential conflict between competing global political economies and cultural imaginaries during this period of “Global Power Shifts”: A Confucius capitalist China that tries to integrate with a socially and ecologically unsustainable planetary capitalist order vs a China that still seriously commits to the idea of socialism and leads a sustainable developmental path (with all the official rhetoric about “scientific” or “human centred development”)

- There is no lack of scholarly imaginations in the West as well and there is even hopeful convergence/shared effort of Western and Chinese progressive voices:
- For example, G. Arrighi (author of *Adam Smith in Beijing*: 2007, 389) registered the hope that a reorientation of the Chinese developmental path around “reviving and consolidating China’s traditions of self-centered market-based development, accumulation *without* dispossession, mobilization of human rather than non-human resources, and government through mass participation in shaping policies,” offers the chance “that China will be in a position to contribute to the emergence of a commonwealth of civilizations truly respectful of cultural differences.”

- On the other hand, if this reorientation fails, Arrighi continued, “China may well turn into a new epicentre of social and political chaos that will facilitate Northern attempts to re-establish a crumbling global dominance or... help humanity burn up in the horrors (or glories) of the escalating violence that has accompanied the liquidation of the Cold War world order” (2007, 389).

- So, what's next? Certainly the prospect of China becoming the next hegemon in a capitalist world economy does not appeal to anybody, except perhaps in the private dreams of some of China's transnational capitalist elites.
- Thus, after socialist defeatism and "left melancholy," what? What about "begin from the beginning"?

- As I have argued elsewhere (Zhao, *Communication in China*, 2008: 343), if socialism means anything at all in China today, it is “not only the party’s official socialist slogans per se, but also their re-appropriation by various Chinese social forces and the unfolding societal processes of subordinating both state and market to the social needs of the working people, are what the struggle for socialism in China is about.”

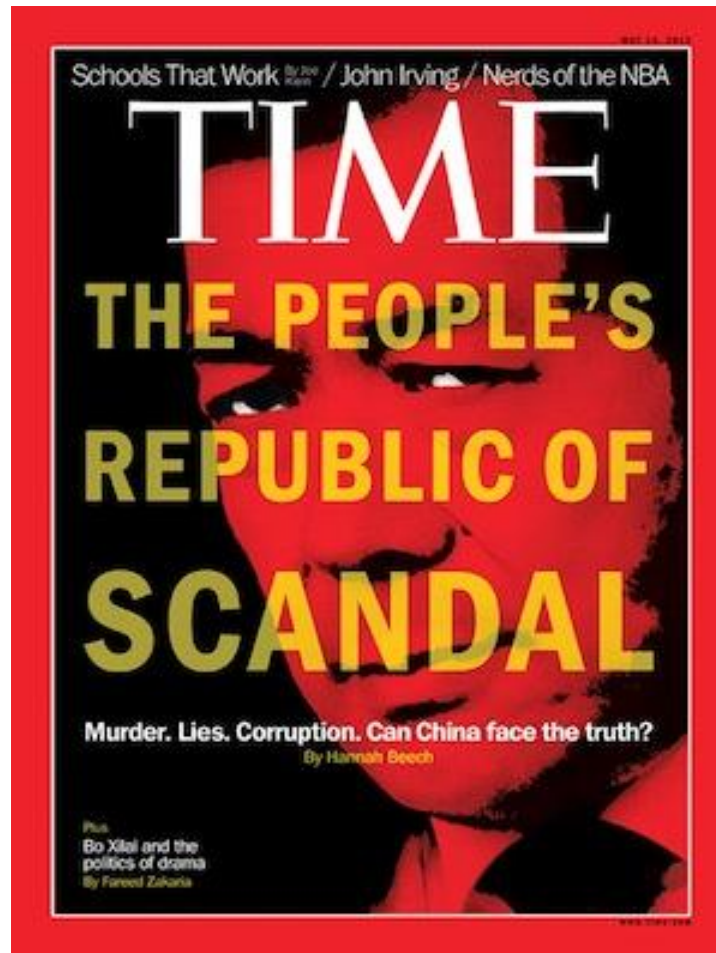
- There are intensive domestic and global struggles over China's past, present, and future – this was symbolized by a small but interesting episode in early 2011, in the controversy over the Confucius statue in Tiananmen Square;
- This year, the Bo Xilai saga and the ongoing CCP 18th Congress have exposed the extent of elite conflict and division

- At the same time, the transnational communication war over the Bo Xilai saga has also demonstrated the inadequacy of any nation-state-centered analysis of “communication and global power shifts:” is the communication war over Bo Xilai simply one of Western media vs China or are there transnational interests at working?

What constitutes “Chinese culture?” Confucius, May 4th or the “Communist Revolution”?



When the PRC becomes PRS, who are the winners of the global communication war over China?



At the same time, within the Chinese news media and the broader cultural realm, there is a newly gained cultural confidence:

- On the one hand, a growing discourse lays claim to the transformational power of Chinese culture in transcending the problems of Western capitalist modernity. For example, a May 8, 2009 People's Daily commentary argues: although the European Renaissance initially liberated humanity from the darkness of the Medieval age, it has now degenerated into the "virus" in *Matrix*. It then calls for a "Renaissance of the New Era" which will redeem humanity by drawing on the Chinese state's "double-harmony model" – a harmonious Chinese society and a harmonious world – and its newly articulated "human-centric, all-rounded, coordinated and sustainable scientific developmental outlook" which embodies the "profound wisdom of Chinese culture" (Ye 2009).

- Nor has China's official discourse entirely buried the revolutionary tradition. For example, a May 30, 2009 People's Daily commentary called for China to seize the "ethical-political high ground" by anchoring Chinese discourses on global affairs in the spirit of the international communist movement, especially its concern for the "emancipation of humanity as a whole", so that the "rise of China will not only benefit the Chinese people, but also humanity as a whole" (Wu 2009).

Here is what Hu also said at the 18th CCP:

- “倡导人类命运共同体意识”、“弱肉强食不是人类共存之道，穷兵黩武无法带来美好世界” (“promoting the consciousness of the shared destiny of a common humanity”; “survival of the fittest is not the way of being for humanity, militarism won’t bring a good world”)

While what the CCP says is relevant, above all, it is the struggles by the lower social classes that matter most

- As Arrighi also emphasises (2009, 79), “Chinese peasants and workers have a millennial tradition of unrest that has no parallel anywhere in the world”. It was this tradition and the unbearable conditions of Chinese peripheral capitalism that had led to the rise of the CCP and formation of the PRC state in the first place. And it is this tradition and the injustices of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” in the reform era that has engendered resistances of all kinds – from the Foxconn mass suicides to farmers’ protests at Wukan village.
- Also important are the languages, tools and mental frameworks of their struggles -- and I am not sure the Western media, and for that matter, the privileged Chinese netizens that the Western media love to quote, fully captured the complexity of these struggles.

- In conclusion, if China needs to revisit its developmental path and make it ecologically, socially, and culturally sustainable, Western nations – especially the US -- also need to overcome the legacies of Orientalism, imperialism, cold-War inspired anti-communism, as well as ongoing “capitalist-imperialist” driven anti-China rhetoric and its own consumerist capitalist path that has come to depend on Chinese credits and “cheap” labor
- However, the complicated intersections of the political economy and cultural politics of transnational capitalism pose profound challenges for a rapidly evolving global media and communication order in this regard – but there is not reason for those who are committed to a more just global social order to give up in trying.