Reorienting Global Communication

Edited by Michael Curtin and Hemant Shah

Indian and Chinese Media Beyond Borders

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INDIAN AND CHINESE MEDIA BEYOND BORDERS

Edited by

Michael Curtin and Hemant Shah

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Reorienting Global Communication: Indian and Chinese Media Beyond Borders *Edited by Michael Curtin and Hemant Shah*

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Contents

Illustrations / vii

Tables / viii

Acknowledgments / ix

Introduction / 1

Part 1: Global India Media

1. Nonsense as Sense-Making: Negotiating Globalization in Bombay Cinema / 17
   Lakshmi Srinivas
2. "From Bihar to Manhattan": Bollywood and the Transnational Indian Family / 41
   Aswin Punathambekar
3. Home, Homeland, Homepage: Belonging and the Indian-American Web / 60
   Madhavi Mallapragada
4. Transnational Brides: Wedding Magazines and the Invention of a Cosmopolitan Indian Tradition / 83
   Sujata Moorti
5. Mapping Tollywood: The Cultural Geography of "Ramoji Film City" in Hyderabad / 104
   Shanti Kumar
6. The Global Face of Indian Television / 118
   Divya C. McMillin
7. Localizing the Global: Bombay's Sojourn from the Cosmopolitan Urbane to *Aamchi Mumbai* / 139
   Sreya Mitra

Part 2: Global China Media

8. Whose *Hero*? The "Spirit" and "Structure" of a Made-in-China Global Blockbuster / 161
Yuezhi Zhao

9. The Deferral of Pan-Asian: A Critical Appraisal of Film Marketization in China / 183
Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh

10. Cultural Globalization and Chinese Television: A Case of Hybridization / 201
Joseph M. Chan

11. East Asian Pop Culture: Its Circulation, Consumption, and Politics / 220
Chua Beng Huat

12. Enacting the Family-Nation on a Global Stage: An Analysis of CCTV's Spring Festival Gala / 240
Zhongdang Pan

13. Bound to Rise: Chinese Media Discourses on the New Global Order / 260
Chin-Chuan Lee

14. Chinese Techno-Nationalism and Global WiFi Policy / 284
Jack Linchuan Qiu

Contributors / 305

Index / 309

Illustrations

1.1 Scene from *Kal Ho Na Ho*, a Bollywood romance set entirely in New York. 25

2.1 A surprised and overjoyed Anjali (Kajol) embraces her son Krish (Jibraan Khan) after he leads his classmates in a rendition of the Indian national anthem. 55

6.1 Zee TV's *Saat Phere, Saloni Ka Safer*, one of the growing number of women-centered narrative dramas that dominate Indian prime-time television. 133

7.1 Amitabh Bachchan in *Don* (1978); a stock shot of the Bombay skyline that reiterates its role as the "generic metropolitan other." 153

8.1 These posters for Zhang Yimou's blockbuster film *Hero* feature Jet Li, who played an assassin called "Nameless." 162

9.1 Jet Li, Andy Lau, and Takeshi Kaneshiro in Peter Chan's costume action film *The Warlords* (2008). 197

11.1 The heroine of *Jewel in the Palace*, Dae Jungeum, was mentored in culinary and herbal arts, ultimately rising to become head of the emperor's kitchen. 231

13.1 This *Global Times* headline reads, "Twenty-two scholars debate over China's future: Virtual consensus on 'economic rise,' a new focus on 'uncertainty.'" 264

14.1 Advertisements for wireless Internet services in Shenzhen, Guangdong Province. 285

Tables

2.1 Profiles of Families Interviewed 44
9.1 Box-office Revenue of Pan-Asian Coproductions by Applause Pictures (2001–2004) 191
9.2 Box-office Revenue of Pan-China Coproductions (2000–2008) 196
10.1 Market Shares of Television Receivable in Guangzhou during Prime Time 209
10.2 Origins of Nonlocal TV Drama Series in 2002 210
13.1 Themes of the Articles, 2000–2005 268
13.2 Keyword Search on "Peaceful Rise" 274

Introduction

Before its New York opening on April 30, 2007, *Spider-Man 3* had already premiered in nine countries, including Russia, Brazil, and Japan. So important is the global market for Hollywood blockbusters these days that studios now pay substantial attention to international promotion and distribution. During its theatrical run, *Spider-Man 3* raked in more than $500 million from the overseas box office, a figure far exceeding ticket sales in the United States. Consequently, it's somewhat understandable that reflections on the globalization of media often begin and end with reference to the seemingly pervasive presence of Hollywood movies around the world. In dollar figures, the raw power of American movies is undeniable, with films such as *Spider-Man 3* bringing in some $900 million worldwide.

What these numbers don't convey, however, is the relatively modest reach of these blockbusters. Given the premium price of Hollywood movie tickets, the number of people who actually saw *Spider-Man 3* in a movie theater was only 125 million worldwide. Compare this to the Indian superhero movie *Krrish*, which premiered only a few months earlier. In India alone, it sold an estimated 110 million tickets. Worldwide figures are hard to come by, since Indian movie companies have far less control of overseas markets, but one can imagine that audiences in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the Gulf States were similarly enthusiastic, as were audiences in markets where Hollywood ticket prices are beyond the reach of the average citizen. Based on this comparison, one might reasonably presume that *Krrish*'s cultural impact was on a par with *Spider-Man 3*. In fact, it is quite likely that *Krrish* reached more cinemagoers than its Hollywood counterpart, as is commonly the case with Indian blockbusters these days. The spatial location of Indian movie audiences may differ, but one could certainly argue that *Krrish* is something of a global phenomenon in its own right.

Krrish is also a global movie in another sense, for it was conceived and produced by a Mumbai (a.k.a. Bombay) studio with transnational audiences in mind. This was not always the case with Indian movies, but since the mid-1990s, overseas viewers with familial attachments to the subcontinent have come to figure prominently in the strategies of so-called Bollywood filmmak-

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ers and distributors. *Krrish* sold only $1.5 million movie tickets in the United States, but that's largely because it's extremely difficult for foreign movies to get screen time in the crowded American market. Therefore, video sales and online fandom offer a better measure of popularity. According to Yash Raj Films, one of Mumbai's most successful studios, Indian movies generate more $100 million per year in U.S. video and soundtrack sales, making it the most lucrative growth market for the Indian movie industry. It's also estimated that the volume of pirated materials is even larger. In the early 1990s, overseas markets for Indian movies were relatively inconsequential. Today they represent one of the most important parts of the business and, as a result, global perspectives have come to influence the conception and execution of many Indian films.

Chinese movies are undergoing a similar transformation. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is a spectacular example of this shift, but just as intriguing are films such as *Kung-Fu Hustle*, starring Hong Kong's Stephen Chow, which earned more than $100 million in theaters worldwide, and *Hero*, starring China's Jet Li, which earned $177 million. All three of these films not only captured the attention of audiences around the world but were also the product of a multinational collaboration, drawing upon finance, talent, and creative resources from Chinese societies around the world. Again, box-office revenues tell only part of the story, as these films earned much of their income in markets with lower ticket prices than their Western counterparts.

Chinese television is also becoming more transnational. In 1991, Hong Kong entrepreneurs launched Star TV, hoping to create a pan-Asian platform of satellite TV programming, but instead Star helped to spark the deregulation of television industries throughout the region—thereby instigating lively competition for the attention of viewers. Today, Star is owned by a Western conglomerate that competes with other Western conglomerates for a stake in Chinese TV, but just as importantly, Asian media companies that used to operate national or local television stations in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taipei now run television services that operate throughout the region. Facing growing competition in their deregulated local markets, these companies have been prodded to expand their geographical reach, not only throughout Asia but also to cities in Europe and North America where Chinese audiences can now access tens of thousands of hours of programming via cable, satellite, and home video.

Over the past twenty years, market forces, technological innovation, and government deregulation have engendered new conditions for the produc-

tion and distribution of commercial Chinese television. Even in the People's Republic of China (PRC), where the state owns all television stations and cable systems, the number of services and the range of competitors have increased dramatically. And although state ownership remains the standard, television institutions have faced dramatic reductions in state subsidies, forcing them to rely on advertising revenues and new entrepreneurial initiatives. This has resulted in joint ventures with commercial television partners from such places as Taipei, Tokyo, and New York, and it has even encouraged the Beijing-based national network, CCTV—which is the only television service officially authorized to operate abroad—to forge distribution agreements that for the first time give it carriage in Europe and North America. Media experts say it's only a matter of time before restrictions loosen further, allowing other PRC broadcasters to extend their reach overseas. Building in part on the success of Star TV, Indian entrepreneurs have likewise established transnational television networks. Networks such Zee TV, Sun TV, and Sahara One now provide a variety of programming in a variety of Indian languages to viewers around the world.

Similar patterns are found in Indian and Chinese music, publishing, and Internet media, where increasingly transnational creativity and circulation foster new cultural forms and new audience affiliations. Yet despite these trends, the globalization of communication still is discussed largely from a Western perspective, positioning Hollywood and New York at the center of analysis. Not only is power seen as emanating from the West to the rest but so too is cultural influence, with media seen as the conduit for Western notions of fashion, taste, politics, and modernity. Global media conglomerates—most of them based in the United States—are portrayed as engines of innovation worldwide, transforming the style, content, and administrative structures of local and national media systems that now must compete with their counterparts from afar. Interestingly, these presumptions have circulated for some time, stretching back as far as modernization theory in the 1950s and 1960s, when it was suggested that exposure to mass media from the West would democratize nations and modernize the economies of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East.

Just as influential was the critical counterpart to these arguments, commonly characterized as the media imperialism school, an approach that grew influential during the 1970s by positing that Western media subject populations around the world to an increasingly homogenized set of values that serve the interests of Western capitalist institutions. According to this

critique, subordinate countries come to embrace Western media and the values they promote, such as individualism, consumerism, and commodity exchange. Rather than uniting people for positive social change, media imperialism fosters an exploitative global system that offers few opportunities for genuine advancement.

The essays in this volume challenge these approaches, not because they are wholly inaccurate but rather because Western media are now only one element in the increasingly complex global communication order and the movement of content is increasingly multidirectional. Although Hollywood—and the West more generally—are indeed influential forces, we wish to shift attention to other centers of production and other patterns of flow. We are interested in the fact that globalization is not a singular phenomenon that is characterized by cultural homogenization but is rather a trajectory of change that is bringing about new patterns of interconnection and interdependence that are multiple and complex. Since the 1500s, Western images and ideas have indeed circulated far and wide, but today "Chinese" and "Indian" songs, stories, and information flow through communication circuits around the world aimed both at migrant populations and cosmopolitan audiences, enabling new patterns of discussion and exchange. These new flows of imagery are substantially different from the cultural expropriations of the past, when Western powers mined traditional societies for artifacts to serve their own imperial purposes. Such Orientalist projects of the past were explicit and intentional exercises of centralized power that aimed to construct representations of both the modern colonizer and the colorful colonized other. Today, by comparison, the volume and velocity of cultural flows have increased, and the institutions that produce and circulate popular narratives have multiplied. Consequently, new patterns of flow and new relations of influence have emerged in the global cultural economy. Media conglomerates such as News Corporation may have imperial pretensions of their own and may generate billions of dollars in revenue, but, for example, the Indian movie industry serves far more customers in any given year and the Chinese popular music industry reaches far more ears, not just in Asia but worldwide. This is not to say these media are more powerful or more wonderful but rather to suggest that they are worthy of investigation on their own terms.

Furthermore, the social impacts of these media merit attention, since they have helped to foster new values and expectations among their viewers, forcing governments to pay attention to the changing patterns of cultural

exchange within nations and across national boundaries. For example, during the SARS crisis of 2003, many citizens of the People's Republic of China were getting their news about the pandemic from Internet sites maintained by Chinese newspapers in Vancouver, London, and Hong Kong. These transnational flows then engendered unauthorized subnational flows within the mainland, as online discussion proliferated and other media chimed in. Within weeks, Chinese officials were forced to reverse their policies and acknowledge the inadequacy of the government's initial response to the crisis. This is but one example of the multiple and complex patterns of media circulation that are increasingly common today, and one that had very little to do with Western media institutions.

When we began this project, we were surprised to find that little had been published regarding the globalization of Indian and Chinese media. Investigation of the popular press turned up some provocative essays, but few authors systematically considered Indian or Chinese media outside of national frameworks or connected their analysis of transnational media flows to larger questions regarding social and cultural change. This is precisely the terrain we hope to stake out in *Reorienting Global Communication*. Our title suggests that we're questioning the cultural presumptions of Orientalism and at the same time presenting a volume of alternative perspectives, hoping to shift or perhaps multiply the starting points for discussions of media and globalization. On the one hand, we wish to disrupt prevailing hierarchies of knowledge so as to privilege that which has been suppressed and thereby reorient the discussion of contemporary media. On the other hand, we believe that attention to the Chinese and Indian spheres of transnational circulation bring into focus a host of issues and dynamics that so far have received little attention. In that sense, we wish to reorient perceptions of cultural flow, offering an alternative mapping of the globe. Critical geographers and postcolonial scholars have sometimes tinkered with Mercator projections that are commonly used to map the world, suggesting other ways of representing geophysical and political relations. Likewise, the chapters in this volume rethink conventional representations of media, suggesting new ways of seeing worldwide patterns of cultural production and exchange.

We focus on globalization because we live in an era where social relations stretch further across space, so that new spheres of activity emerge and existing spheres—domestic, local, and national—are, as Anthony Giddens suggests, interpenetrated by forces from afar. Our project invites an exploration of the ways in which global media are remaking human consciousness

in far-flung localities as well as an examination of the structuring forces that shape this process, such as market relations and capital flows. Numerous scholars from diverse perspectives agree that capital organizes the world into centers and peripheries, but too often, the centers are always Euro-American and much of Asia is situated on the periphery. Our project complicates this perspective by examining media institutions and texts that are often overlooked by scholars and by examining the ways in which transnational popular culture provides resources for everyday living and for collective social action. Our interest in globalization does not mean we are leaving the nation-state behind—but neither do we privilege the nation-state, as do most projects in media studies. Moreover, we do not presume that global media relations today can be explained by center–periphery theories from yesteryear. Instead, we wish to embrace prior concerns about media influence by exploring new and intricate patterns of cultural flow and increasingly complex plays of power.

We furthermore aim to elevate the visibility of scholarship about two of the world's largest sociocultural formations, India and China. At the national level, population figures and manufacturing growth are often used to justify attention to these two countries; just as importantly, both countries offer lessons regarding the legacies of colonialism and the enduring power relations of the world system. As they reemerge in positions of world leadership, many observers refer to them as sleeping giants that will influence many aspects of society and culture during the twenty-first century, from energy to ecology to global governance. Likewise, India and China are considered regional leaders, having important and enduring links to such countries as Malaysia, Pakistan, and Uganda where significant populations identify themselves as Indian or Chinese, and where civilizational influences—legends, languages, and religious practices—signify connections that stretch across national boundaries. Moreover, India and China deserve attention because in many ways they represent the return of the repressed, engendering anxieties in the West that have led to brazen attempts to manage and contain them. Such struggles deserve attention, as do the presumptions of civilizational coherence that invite us to perceive India, China, and the West as intelligible and opposed entities.

Additionally, we focus on India and China because they both have been shaped by legacies of colonialism and state socialism. Radically different in their histories and institutions, both countries began experimenting with liberalization of their economies during the 1980s and have subsequently

been swept into the tide of trade liberalization, with each becoming an important node on the global assembly line. No longer able to manage their economies internally, they likewise face challenges in the realm of communication, knowing that there may be no road back to a sense of confident, bounded control over the expectations and aspirations of their populations. Their attempts to manage this tumultuous transition have raised numerous concerns regarding creativity, free expression, and cultural identity. Lacking a stable set of external boundaries, both countries are furthermore so vast and diverse that they are experiencing significant internal tensions among and between groups. They are also undergoing noteworthy changes in household economies, gender relations, and generational aspirations. At almost every level—domestic, local, national, and transnational—questions and challenges arise; among the most telling is: What does it mean to be Chinese? or, What does it mean to be Indian?

Within this context of shifting cultural identities, we are keenly interested in media and democracy in the broadest sense. In the case of India, for example, media-intensive electoral politics provide the government with a stamp of legitimacy as it seeks to forge policy on a wide range of pressing issues, such as resource management, women's rights, and the political status of Indians in the diaspora. Meanwhile in China, the single-party state struggles with pressure to loosen its control of the cultural and political realms, while economic institutions grope toward global standards of market transparency. Both China and India in their own ways have been experimenting with degrees of freedom for domestic media and with incorporating foreign media into the mix of available services. This new cultural environment has implications regarding not only the range of available content and the directions of flow but also regarding the ways that media users interact. Debates about "homeland," diaspora, and political efficacy mix with reflections and anxieties regarding location and identity within a very complex transnational cultural geography.

Thus, we acknowledge the importance of formal politics but we also include under the rubric of democracy our interest in the dynamics of inclusion in and exclusion from the cultural formations of "China" and "India" as they intersect with broader questions about transnational flows of media, money, and people. We furthermore interrogate the nature of democracy itself in a world where Indians and Chinese are not contained within singular state boundaries. How does one conceptualize democracy, both in the formal sense and the expanded sense we employ here, within a transnational con-

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