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Communication, Public Opinion, and Globalization in Urban China

As China is increasingly integrated into the processes of economic, political, social, and cultural globalization, important questions arise about how Chinese people perceive and evaluate such processes. At the same time, international communication scholars have long been interested in how local, national, and transnational media communications shape people's attitudes and values. Combining these two concerns, this book examines a range of questions pertinent to public opinion toward globalization in urban China: To what degree are the urban residents in China exposed to the influences from the outside world? How many transnational social connections does a typical urban Chinese citizen have? How often do they consume foreign media? To what extent are they aware of the notion of globalization, and what do they think about it? Do they believe that globalization is beneficial to China, to the city where they live, and to them personally? How do people's social connections and communication activities shape their views toward globalization and the outside world? This book tackles these and other questions systematically by analyzing a four-city comparative survey of urban Chinese residents, demonstrating the complexities of public opinion in China. Media consumption does relate, though by no means straightforwardly, to people's attitudes and beliefs, and this book provides much needed information and insights about Chinese public opinion on globalization. It also develops fresh conceptual and empirical insights on issues such as public opinion toward US-China relations, Chinese people's nationalistic sentiments, and approaches to analyze attitudes toward globalization.

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Preface

In *2012*, the Hollywood blockbuster about a group of people running for their lives during a set of catastrophic events constituting "the end of the world," the world's governments collaborated to build a number of huge ships that would save at least those people who are rich enough to pay for the limited places on board. Responsible for constructing the ships is China. At one moment in the movie, a character opined that only China can complete the building of the gigantic ships on time.

It is probably not a mere coincidence that this "China as savior" theme would appear in a movie that was shown about one year after the global financial turmoil in late 2008. Yet the line uttered by the character in the movie is not necessarily meant to be a compliment. For people outside China, the line could readily be interpreted as a sarcastic statement, a veiled attack on the authoritarian nature of the Chinese state, an allusion to how many workers would have to suffer if such a project were to be completed within a very short period of time. Nevertheless, movie-goers in some cinemas in mainland China did reportedly take the line literally and applauded.

This anecdote points to many of the basic issues involving the intersection of China, globalization, and media communication. As the most populous country in the world, China is, first and foremost, a huge and expanding market in the eyes of multinational corporations. This point is certainly not lost on people in the media industries. Yet entering the China market is complicated. Entry barriers are formidable in the form of import restrictions and quotas—the film *2012* was one of the 20 foreign films allowed to be shown in China's cinema in 2009. In some cases, severe content censorship is assumed or imposed. Then there is the need to develop the contents in ways that would appeal to the Chinese audience. Finally, it is important to figure out what meanings Chinese audiences would derive from the media contents.

These issues point to the structural and individual-level barriers that exist between the Chinese people on the one hand, and foreign media and cultures on the other. Even in cyberspace, the Chinese government has erected barriers to forbid people inside China to access numerous prominent websites such as *Facebook* and *YouTube*. However, the presence of such barriers is only part of

the much more complicated story about global media and communication in China these days. Looking at the situation from another perspective, people in mainland China may actually be having better and more ready access to the world's media when compared to people in, say, the international metropolis of Hong Kong. Take ppstream as an example. The website provided internet users with access to a wide range of television dramas, movies, animations, comics, television variety shows, etc. from both within China and around the world. The point worth noting here is that, if one tries to access ppstream from Hong Kong, one would find almost no American and Japanese movies and television dramas available on the site. Yet these contents would become available when one accesses the site from within China. In fact, just based on personal experience, most of the Japanese movies available on ppstream within mainland China would simply be unavailable anywhere in Hong Kong—not on the internet, not in DVD shops, not in libraries.

Making such access possible in China is a confluence of factors and conditions: the lack of copyright protection, the presence of overseas Chinese who have immediate access to foreign media materials, the collective endeavor of the so-called "subtitle groups" organized by ordinary people themselves, the presence of a huge and diverse population such that all kinds of non-mainstream and alternative contents would have their followings, etc. In any case, it is nowadays not uncommon for movie lovers in Hong Kong to get pirated DVDs of foreign movies from across the border in China, not necessarily because they do not respect copyright, but simply because DVDs of non-mainstream foreign movies are often unavailable in the small market of Hong Kong and can be found only by crossing the border.

These types of phenomena and issues have existed in China for many years. Our fascination with these and other related issues and phenomena was one of the main reasons behind our decision, back in 2005 and 2006, to conduct a large-scale survey study of Chinese people's attitude toward globalization. To our knowledge, ours is the first large-scale and relatively comprehensive survey examining how mainland Chinese perceives the world and understands the processes of globalization, and how such perceptions and understandings relate to their basic value and attitudinal orientations on the one hand, and patterns of media consumption and social communications on the other. Our survey questionnaire encompasses questions about people's local, national, and foreign media use, traveling experiences and transnational social connections, interests in foreign affairs, cultural values and nationalistic sentiments, attitude toward foreign countries, perceptions of the United States, awareness of the discourses of globalization, and perceptions of the impact of globalization on their country, their cities, and themselves, among others. In the extant literature there are, of course, the occasional studies by interested scholars on more narrowly defined aspects of the problematic. Those studies provide us with valuable information and insights about some of the issues we are interested in. But our survey should remain unique in its scope and scale.

Certainly, survey research has its own inherent advantages and limitations. The nuances in how people make sense of their environment, their experiences, and the media contents they consume, the complex interactions among personal life trajectories and communication behavior in shaping one's attitudes, and how people actually make use of media contents as cultural resources in their everyday lives are just some of the issues that survey research may not be particularly good at tackling. But what a well-conducted survey can provide is the broad and representative picture of the basic patterns of how Chinese people communicate with each other and with the world and how they perceive their local and global environment. A survey study can also allow us to examine whether there are solid empirical evidences supporting a range of oft-made claims, such as claims about the influence of foreign media consumption, claims about the relationship between nationalistic sentiments and attitude toward globalization, and claims about how Chinese people evaluate the United States. On the whole, our survey study provides a baseline for other types of research and analyses focusing on more specific issues and phenomena.

Our survey constitutes the baseline also in the sense that, admittedly, the data came from a study conducted a number of years ago, before numerous happenings such as the global financial turmoil and the Beijing Olympics in 2008, the World Expo in 2010, and so on. Nevertheless, we believe that the data remain valuable not only because they can serve as points of reference and comparison for any current and future studies, but also more fundamentally because of the continual and generalizable significance of the themes and questions generated by our analysis. For example, the analysis of urban Chinese residents' national, local, and foreign media consumption in Chapter 3 has generated the paradoxical finding that residents in the more internationally connected coastal cities of Beijing and Shanghai reported lower levels of foreign media consumption when compared to residents of the inland cities of Xi'an and Chengdu. This paradoxical situation, however, is quite similar to the above-mentioned case that people in Hong Kong may, in a sense, be considered as having more limited access to certain types of foreign media products when compared to people in mainland China. This particular paradox should be a meaningful theme that can guide future research on globalization and media consumption not only within China but also around the world. For another example, Chapter 4 presents an analysis of Chinese people's nationalistic sentiments and how such sentiments related to media communication and to feelings toward foreign countries. In the analysis, we differentiated between developmental nationalism from cultural nationalism, and we found both similarities and differences between how the two kinds of nationalistic sentiments relate to other factors. The distinction between developmental and cultural nationalism and their differential impact on public opinion should be another theme deserving continual research attention.

Certainly, the Chinese economy and society are developing at a rapid pace, and some of the concrete findings from our survey may have changed if we are to conduct the survey again today. The proportion of Chinese people who have the experiences of traveling abroad, for example, should have been increasing rapidly. More broadly, the continual economic growth of the country, combined with the economic troubles the world is seemingly facing, and in addition China's successful hosting of world mega-events such as the Beijing Olympics and Shanghai World Expo, should have given urban Chinese residents new found self-confidence about their own country and ways of life. The implication of such a development is unclear though. When Chinese people become more confident about their own country, the sense that China needs to learn from the West may weaken. Some Chinese may come to the conclusion that the political and social institutions in China do "work" after all. However, a more self-confident population may also be less defensive and thus more open toward foreign cultures. In any case, the status of public opinion in China can continue to change. As China is expecting to recognize its new national leader, Xi Jinping, in 2013, the world is paying close attention to Xi's approach to world affairs, which can have significant influence on how mainland Chinese thinks about the world and about globalization. After all, the Chinese state, as a main part of our analysis in this book suggests, does have substantial influence on public opinion within the country. Yet it is exactly because public opinion can be continually in flux that it is often more important to grasp the underlying themes and questions that one should focus on. We hope our book can contribute to the literature in this regard.

Acknowledgments

We are indebted to the City University of Hon g Kong for providing a grant to the Center of Communication Research for conducting this research. Since its inception in 2005, the Center has been taking advantage of Hong Kong as a focal institutional and cultural base for studying the forces, processes, and issues of technological convergence and media globalization in the whole Greater China and Asian contexts (Lee, 2011). This project was initiated and led by Professor Chin-Chuan Lee, the director of the Center. When we began the survey project in 2005 and 2006, the team included three of the present authors (Dr. Francis L. F. Lee, Professor Chin-Chuan Lee, and Dr. Michael Yao) as well as Dr. Zhou He and Dr. Wanying Lin, who also contributed substantially at the early stage of the project. When the Department of Media and Communication at the City University of Hong Kong was established in 2008 (with Professor Lee as the founding Head), Professor Tsan-Kuo Chang, Dr. Fen Jennifer Lin, and Dr. Fei Shen, who became members of the Department, were invited to join the team. Dr. Francis Lee took up the coordinating role and brought this manuscript to fruition. Dr. Charles Man, research associate at the Center of Communication Research, coordinated the process of survey administration and did initial data analysis.

We thank *Pacific Affairs* for permitting us to use a published article as the basis for Chapter 7 of the current volume. That publication was titled "Urban Chinese's attitudes towards globalization: A survey study of media influence" and appeared in volume 82, issue no. 2 of the journal (pp. 211–230). We owe a thank you to acquisition editor Liz Levine at Routledge for helping this book see the light of the day. As the book is about to enter into the public domain, we delight in participating in the discourse on the media-globalization nexus. We also bear the blame for the limitations that remain.

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1 Introduction

It is often claimed that we are living in the era of globalization. Anthony Giddens (1991) defined the term more than 20 years ago as "the intensification of worldwide social relations [that have linked] distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa" (p. 64). Theorists have debated about the point of origin of globalization, with some seeing it as a relatively recent phenomenon, as a "consequence of modernity," and others seeing it as having started six centuries ago, coterminous with the emergence of the capitalist world system (Wallerstein, 1999; Waters, 2001). But no matter when the process began, most scholars would agree that increasing global interdependence is a continuing process that speeded up in the last decades of the twentieth century. Today national borders are becoming increasingly porous for the flow of money, commodities, media, technologies, ideas, people, images, and viruses. Our lives are indeed increasingly affected by events happening afar, matters over which we usually have little control and about which we may have little knowledge.

Besides the "objective reality" of increasing global interdependence, globalization also involves a subjective component. Roland Robertson (1992), for example, defined globalization as referring "both to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole." Marshall McLuhan (1964) used to describe the rise of television as a harbinger of an emerging "global village." A more apt metaphor would indeed be what Saskia Sassen (1991) calls global cities, with international metropolises serving as the key nodes in the global capitalist system. For the residents of global cities, the reality of globalization can be easily felt in everyday lives, through encounters with tourists and migrants, exposure to foreign media, purchases of foreign commodities, working for or dealing with multinational corporations, and so on. The signs of global capitalism—ranging from Nike, Coca-Cola, and McDonald's to Prada, Apple, Microsoft, Google, and Giorgio Armani—are ubiquitous, and international nongovernmental organizations, such as Greenpeace, Oxfam, the Red Cross, and others often play important roles in linking domestic policies to global concerns.

Of course globalization is also an uneven process. Influences in some directions are much stronger than in others, and different countries are drawn into the processes of globalization in different ways and to different extents. Although the amount of time needed to travel from one place to another continues to shrink, some places remain much more difficult to get to as compared with others. As the common saying goes, when America sneezes, the whole world gets a cold. The European debt crisis is also having a significant impact on economies and stock markets throughout the world. One can only imagine, however, whether and how things happening in the world at large are affecting people living in societies such as North Korea and Burma.

Obviously China is somewhere in between the extreme self-enclosure of North Korea and complete openness to the outside world. On the one hand, capital flows are still under heavy control, as continual debates between China and the United States on the valuation of *Renmenbi*, China's currency, remind us. The household registration (*hukuo*) system continues to place severe limits on Chinese people's mobility even within the country, not to say in terms of traveling abroad. The media system in China remains tightly controlled by the state. In a seminal article in the early 1990s, communication scholar Joseph Chan (1993) described China's media scene with the phrase "commercialization without independence," and the phrase is as applicable today as it was 20 years ago (see Zhao, 2008). In addition, the Chinese government had a history of seeing foreign media as a threat, as agents bringing "spiritual pollution" to the Chinese people and society (Lee et al., 2011). Despite China's entrance into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, the Chinese government still imposes significant barriers, such as import quotas for movies, to the entrance of foreign media.[1] Even in cyberspace, Internet users in China may find it hard to access many foreign websites, ranging from the websites of some Hong Kong newspapers that are regularly critical toward the Chinese government to some of the most prominent websites in the era of Web 2.0, including Facebook and YouTube.

On the other hand, there is no question that Chinese citizens are increasingly connected to the outside world. In order to engage with global capitalism, the Chinese government has created numerous zones of "exceptions" (Ong, 2006)—the coastal metropolises, the Special Economic Zones, and the Hong Kong and Macau Special Administrative Regions—in which foreign capital, foreign people, and foreign media can circulate and move *relatively* freely. Meanwhile, China's international travelers may constitute only a small proportion of the whole Chinese population, but their sheer number is significant. And with their new-found spending power, their presence is now keenly felt by shopkeepers in places near and afar.

Many Chinese people are also active in defying state control in order to come into contact with the outside world. Despite restrictions on the import of foreign media, American and European films, television dramas, and