

# New Media for a New China

Edited by

James F. Scotton and  
William A. Hachten

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication



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*For Christine and to the memory of Harva*

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**Wynne Wang** covers China’s financial markets for Dow Jones Newswires in Shanghai and is a photographer. Wynne holds a bachelor’s degree in broadcasting at Fudan University. She is married to Robin Xiong. They have a big family with two cats and two dogs.

# Preface

During recent years, and particularly in 2008, the eyes of the world have been on China. Several extraordinary news events occurred in that year – a revolt in Tibet, a devastating earthquake in Sichuan, and the spectacular and dramatic Olympic Games in Beijing.

News coverage of these news events – more properly news processes – provided insights into the ways the Chinese media function as well as how the controlling Communist Party reacted to and tried to shape both Chinese and worldwide perceptions of these events. And then, during the early months of 2009, China was wracked by the same global recession that hit the rest of the world.

These events provide the prism through which we have in part studied China's vast media system and how it relates to authority and society.

Both Professors Scotton and Hachten have had a long interest in China and have taught about Chinese mass communication in their journalism and communication classes. In 2001–3, Scotton spent 18 months in China as a visiting Fulbright professor at two universities. In 2007, he was a visiting research associate at Fudan University in Shanghai. On one trip he worked as an editor at the *Shanghai Daily*.

In the early planning for this textbook the authors realized that for such a broad subject it was desirable to include contributions from scholars active in Chinese communication education. So, drawing on his contacts, Scotton recruited several Chinese professors who are affiliated with Chinese or American universities. We are pleased that they have joined our efforts and believe their contributions were essential to this study.

This book is intended to be a textbook for students and scholars who wish to know more about Chinese mass communication. We hope the book will introduce students to the fascinating and complex ways that China's media interact with the nation's 1.3 billion inhabitants – the world's largest

media audience. The Chinese people not only receive much information from their government-controlled media (and sometimes from foreign sources), but they often share information with others and initiate communications via cell phones and personal computers. Daily, Chinese news enters the international news flow and much foreign news finds its way into China. Increasingly the world realizes that China is too large and too important to be ignored in global communication. We hope, too, that this book is of interest to the many Chinese who read English.

We have tried to make this text as current and as topical as possible. After all, the news media are mainly concerned with what happens today and tomorrow.

For much of modern history, China has been remote, xenophobic, and self contained with little interest or involvement with Western nations and their affairs. All of that, of course, has changed. With a vibrant economy and spectacular growth and modernization, China has become thoroughly integrated in globalization becoming a major player in world trade and finance. Throughout this dramatic rising up, China has been aided and abetted by modern mass communication.

(Editors note: Some of the chapter notes do not have page numbers. This usually means the material was retrieved from the Internet. No web addresses are given since the material can be obtained from the Internet via a search engine. Also, if no retrieval date is given the material was available, via a search engine, at the time of writing.)

# Introduction

The social and economic juggernaut of today's China has exploded onto the stage of our globalized world, and with it has appeared an expanded and vast system of modern communications that enhances and facilitates – but also threatens – the new and self confident nation of over 1.3 billion inhabitants.

The earlier or “old China” utilized the traditional media – newspapers, magazines, radio and even television – all tightly controlled and in fact owned by the ruling Communist Party. By the 1970s, these traditional media expanded after China's leader Deng Xiaoping told party members that making money was acceptable . . . even desirable. His successor Jiang Zemin went further and told the party that if some media could not make a profit in this new market place then those media would close.

These expanding media became part of a rapid economic revolution changing from Marxist communism to authoritarian capitalism (see Figure I.1). Concurrently, the Chinese joined the digital revolution and became conversant with communication satellites, computers, the Internet, email, cell phones, CDs, DVDs and all that went with them, including numerous and uncontrolled blogs. So China now has a modernized, Westernized multi-media society that has been caged within an authoritarian political system that is having difficulty maintaining control over it.

This book will analyze the diverse roles and interactions that China's media play to its vast audience – more TV viewers, more cell phone users, more readers, and more computers sending more e-mails than in any nation in the world. This flood of content enhances as well as threatens the existing political order.

Rapid economic growth has created myriad problems for China – widespread pollution, social stresses, and widening disparities between the newly rich urbanites and poverty ridden peasants in over 500,000 villages.



**Figure I.1** Shanghai's Pudong District, which was farmland just 25 years ago. The central areas of China's commercial capital are ablaze with lights every night. The Oriental Pearl Tower sends radio and television signals to 16 million people in the Shanghai area. In the foreground a tourist boat navigates the Huangpo River.

*Source:* Wynne Wang

With social and economic transformation in the burgeoning great cities have come some civil unrest and a rising yearning for greater civil liberties and human rights. Still controlled and restricted by an authoritarian Communist Party, the media are seeking greater freedom and autonomy. The nation faces a growing struggle between an autocratic government trying to perpetuate itself and a restive urban population – better educated, more affluent and tuned-in to the outside Western world. How will China deal with its vast social problems – harshly or democratically? How China evolves has important implications for the rest of the world. And China's media are right in the middle of this struggle.

Moreover, media in China are major players in the global communication system. They send out news and entertainment and receive both from the West. But many Chinese have long avoided paying for the pirated movies, music CDs, cell phones and computer programs that flow in from abroad. Many believe that China must change its ways and become a full

and responsible participant and partner in international communication flows.

From another perspective, the media in China are leading a new revolution. At what some see as “breakneck speed” the media, including Internet blogs and cell phones, are pushing political and social institutions toward change – and openness. This revolution is fueled by a fierce nationalism. Most urban Chinese are proud of their new China and deeply resent criticism from abroad.

Those foreign critics are sometimes unaware or unappreciative of how much the media are changing in China and tend to measure the Chinese media by Western standards. In an attempt to counter this there are many chapters in this book written by Chinese authors. Westerners, particularly Americans, also have a fundamentally different view of government and its role in society. As an article co-written by an American and Chinese author has noted, people in China tend to respect government as a wise parent; Americans distrust government as an always threatening and obtrusive agency.<sup>1</sup>

Although government owned, China’s media are as varied as you would expect in any country the size of the United States with four times the population (1.3 billion). The sheer size and reach of media is mind boggling. For example, in 2008 China had 250 million Internet users, 350 million cell phones and perhaps 300 million blogs and countless bloggers building an “all to all” communication network.<sup>2</sup> China Central Television (CCTV) has 16 national channels including one predominantly in English (CCTV-9) that attempts to compete with CNN and the BBC. There are six national radio channels including one aimed at Taiwan. Provinces and cities have their own TV and radio stations, many grouped for better management and financial support. There are hundreds of daily and weekly newspapers and thousands of magazines and journals on every conceivable topic. For example, Fudan University’s Journalism Department library in Shanghai makes available 87 Chinese magazines and journals on the subject of communication.

The Chinese government tries to control all media including the Internet and cell phone communications but that is a nearly impossible task. Bloggers, many of them young, are especially likely to challenge authority (as they say, “go under the firewall.”) In 2007, bloggers led the way in exposing corrupt officials who let mine and brick kiln owners kidnap and enslave child workers in Shanxi province. A local television picked up the story and it became a national and international scandal. With cell

phones, citizens in Xiamen spread photos of protests against a proposed chemical plant in that scenic seaside city. Government officials were forced to cancel the project. Such citizen-led protests clearly upset government officials but even the government's official English-language newspaper, *China Daily*, saw benefits. After the Shanxi scandal one of its columnists called for more investigative journalism.<sup>3</sup>

The media in China by some measures are as free and vigorous – within limits – as most media in the world. Perceptive editors and broadcast news directors know which stories are acceptable and which are not. A leading financial magazine, “Caijing,” can expose stock market manipulations and even corrupt public officials but its editors know “where the line is.”<sup>4</sup> Thousands of talk radio show callers can harangue local officials about potholed roads and poor health services but program hosts are careful to steer clear of sensitive political issues.

As elsewhere, most media content tends to be entertainment. Young people spend little time following political, economic, and social issues. Surveys show their media time is mostly spent keeping up with music, sports, lifestyle information, and social interaction. A small portion is interested in the “news” and they tend to look at weekly digests in such-scandal focused publications as *Southern Weekend*.<sup>5</sup> Also popular are China's afternoon tabloid newspapers with their diet of sex and crime plus some stories on private or even local government corruption.

But entertainment, especially the reality television shows, attracts huge audiences. The annual CCTV New Year's gala attracted 800 million viewers in 2007 with even a brief appearance catapulting some performers to national stardom. One hugely popular reality show put on by a provincial station, “The Mongolian Cow Sour Yoghurt Super Girl Contest,” drew huge national audiences away from the national TV channels. Millions decided the best singer by cell-phone voting. A “cultural journal” which lost its government subsidy attracted a new paying audience with photos of seminude models and celebrity interviews.

Government officials are not always happy with these developments but find it increasingly difficult to restrict the media. Almost all government subsidies have disappeared. Editors and program managers have to pay their bills with circulation and advertising revenue, so they have great leeway in developing popular fare. China's major media have been reconstructed economically but their social functions are now less clear.<sup>6</sup>

The government goes to great lengths to monitor the new media. A reported 50,000 government agents monitor the Internet for signs of



dissension. Foreign journalists in China find it difficult to get access to officials and some report outright harassment. Foreign media trying to get established in China find the rules changing suddenly. After years of negotiating his own entry into China's booming media market, media mogul Rupert Murdoch said Chinese officials seem "paranoid" about what gets through media channels.<sup>7</sup>

Chinese media policies seem unpredictable. Reports of more liberal policies and then more stringent controls have appeared in the same week.<sup>8</sup> Chinese regulations regarding media access sometimes seem to go unenforced. Satellite TV receivers officially require licenses in China and are supposed to be strictly limited. Yet, hundreds of satellite dishes are visible on roof tops and balconies in cities such as Shanghai.

Our first chapter considers three major news events in China in 2008 – the worst protests in years against Chinese rule in Tibet in March, a devastating earthquake in Sichuan province in May, and the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing in August. Hachten and Scotton collaborated in reporting how China's journalists rose to unprecedented heights of professionalism in reporting these events in both the old and the new media. It also records how the Chinese government censors worked to control and censor this news.

Chapter 2, by Hachten, traces the development of media in China and tries to fit the Chinese media experience into one or more of the theories that scholars use in an attempt to explain how the media work. He notes that the most successful Chinese editors have learned to gauge the rivalries in Beijing so they know what is and is not permissible to present to the public. All the time these editors must balance the political sensitivities of China's government leaders with the demands of readers, listeners, viewers, and advertisers.

Scotton's contribution in Chapter 3 shows the enormous impact – not always positive and not always welcomed by the Chinese government or even the Chinese public – that the new media are having on Chinese society. Computers, cell phones, iPods, and other electronic devices are giving the Chinese people new ways to communicate with each other and with people all over the world despite rules and laws that are supposed to limit or prohibit this.

Newspapers remain strong in China with hundreds of millions of readers. In Chapter 4 Guo Ke examines how they are increasingly breaking away to follow independent news sources and controversial stories. Chinese newspaper editors have become expert in discerning the underlying goals and even the moods of Communist Party officials and are quick

to move into controversial topics and just as quick to back away when they feel goals and moods are changing. How one Beijing newspaper reports the world to its audience is seen in an excerpt from Michael Meyer's book, *The Last Days of Old Beijing*.

In Chapter 5 Chen Peiqin describes the magazine industry in China which is, as she notes, "an industry in transition." International conglomerates have moved, with Chinese partners, into fashion, sports, and business magazines, areas which the government sees as non-political and therefore open to foreigners. Foreign partners are also welcome to invest in more politically sensitive areas as long as editorial control remains in Chinese hands. But, as Chen suggests, financial influence inevitably translates into editorial influence.

Radio has developed rapidly in China especially in recent years following the government's authorization that allowed stations to develop their own programs. Authors Chen Peiqin and Haigui Liu show in Chapter 6 how talk programs, call-in programs and music programs have grown with some hosts becoming personalities in their own right in the station's city and province. As more prosperous urban Chinese drive to work in private cars, morning and evening drive-time programs have prospered. Computers, a new outlet for radio in China, have brought rapid development of digital radio.

In Chapter 7, on television entertainment, Anne Cooper-Chen rightly points out that most television in China, as elsewhere in the world, consists of entertainment shows. This entertainment includes the same movie reruns you find on TV networks everywhere, but Central China Television (CCTV) has developed its own entertainment shows that capture enormous audiences during Chinese holidays. Lately, however, provincial and even city TV stations have come up with programs that can steal away huge parts of this national audience and foreign satellite channels are constantly seeking a route to these Chinese viewers.

In Chapter 8 Cooper-Chen and Scotton describe how CCTV is trying to remake itself in order to keep the audience its national news programs have attracted for decades. CCTV tries to reach overseas audiences with English, French, and Spanish channels. It has ambitious plans to launch an international 24-hour news channel in English to compete with CNN and the BBC in an effort to win friends for China and to have more influence in the world.

Scotton, in Chapter 9, examines Xinhua, the giant state news agency that can control the content of much of China's media when it wants to exert

its authority. It is the voice of China's government and can insist that the Chinese media report only its version of the news. Xinhua faces the problem of all media operations in China. It wants to expand its reach and influence in the world but it relies on government subsidies, which make it unlikely that it will break away from government control.

According to Hong Cheng in Chapter 10 if the media in China are becoming more independent of direct government control, the growth in advertising must be given major credit. He points out that China's media get at least 80 percent of their revenue from advertising, a big change from the days of heavy government subsidies. Advertising has grown in the traditional media, including radio as advertisers try to reach those urban commuters in their new cars. It has also grown on the Internet and advertisements are common in subways, buses and taxis as well as on many billboards and as neon signs on the sides of buildings (see Figure I.2).

In Yan Jin's Chapter 11 on public relations she reports that even the Chinese government has embraced public relations campaigns. Government officials find these campaigns can be more effective in persuading citizens than the old straight propaganda approach. Meanwhile public relations professionals try to define public relations in the Chinese



**Figure I.2** Huge neon advertisements are found on buildings in Chinese cities.  
*Source:* Wynne Wang

context, seeking a moral and ethical basis for their work. The profession is growing rapidly and is finding a place in the curriculum of more Chinese universities.

China's film industry has been suffering from too much success with its own blockbuster films like *The Warlords*. One result, Yong Liu reports in Chapter 12, has been the freezing out of independent film makers and even medium-budget movies. Investors see a high-budget film with lots of name stars as a safer bet. Chinese film makers have their own battles with the censors, often over sex scenes rather than political themes. They have also increased their own demands for a crackdown on DVD pirates since they are biting into their own revenues.

China has had some English-language media for many years, the earliest served small settlements of foreigners in coastal cities. China also used English language print and broadcast materials to reach the outside world. There were blatant propaganda broadcasts and publications in the years dominated by Mao Zedong but these became increasingly sophisticated after the reforms of Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s. Guo Ke points out in Chapter 13 that the demand for English-language learning material also supports many publications and broadcasts in English. English has been seen by both citizens and government as China's vehicle for entry into the global communication village.

There are Chinese-language media outside China that serve the huge audience of Chinese who have migrated to and settled in other countries. These are examined by Hachten in Chapter 14. By far the greatest proportion of this Chinese audience lives in Southeast Asia where they often form an affluent and influential part of the society, but many live elsewhere, particularly in Canada and the United States. They have had their own media, of course, especially in the early years after emigration as they struggled to adapt to their new societies. The Chinese government also tries to reach them with its own messages, trying to keep them as a supportive audience even as they learn to live in their new countries.

This, then, is China and its media at the start of the 21st century. China has a booming economy that produces huge trade surpluses amid some of the most modern and populous cities in the world. Prosperous urban Chinese struggle with such Western problems as traffic-clogged freeways, water shortages, and deadly air and river pollution. But Chinese in the less prosperous areas often lose jobs and benefits as old state-run factories collapse.

The media in China must live by new rules as government subsidies drop off and advertising and circulation revenues leap ahead. Media bosses thus have the incentives and budgets to develop more challenging content to attract larger audiences. A central problem for the media is to find a balance between satisfying their audiences and satisfying (or at least placating or not antagonizing) government officials. So far, the government retains firm if sometimes erratic control of all media from the most obscure journal and smallest provincial newspaper to the most popular Shanghai TV station. Even faculty members in the journalism and mass media programs that are now popular in hundreds of Chinese universities meet regularly to study government policies on news and information.

This book reports and analyzes the current state of media in China. It will include newspapers, magazines, radio and television – long standing media that are being used in ways that are not traditional, at least in China. The “new media” of the Internet, cell phones, and blogs will be highlighted because of their impact; they are rapidly changing the economic, political, and social landscape of China. The book will also include material on Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore as well as Chinese language media outside of mainland China. Hong Kong and Taiwan, which China has always argued are part of China, have greatly influenced media inside China. Chinese officials at first tried to block media influences from Taiwan and Hong Kong but everything from rock music to news and political discussions seeped around and under the barriers, often by way of widely available pirated CDs and DVDs.

As noted earlier, in order to minimize what some could consider a Western bias in this text, we have included major contributions by some highly qualified Chinese scholars, some teaching in China and some currently at universities in the United States. As will be seen, the contributions of Guo Ke, Peiqin Chen, Hong Cheng, Yan Jin, Yong Liu, Anne Cooper-Chen, Haigui Liu, and Yu “Leon” Liang have been substantial. Wynne Wang provided most of the supporting photographs.

Editors Scotton and Hachten believe the book realizes an important balance through their contributions. Any attempts at balance, however, are not meant to exclude differing points of view and opinions. The purpose of this book is to stimulate scholars and students and to contribute to the debate and discussion of a major region of the world’s journalism and communication.

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2008

*New Challenges to China's Media*

Three events in China caught the eyes of the world in 2008. They were the violent protests against Chinese rule in Tibet that erupted in March, the tragic earthquake in Sichuan in May that killed an estimated 70,000 people including thousands of school children who were trapped in buildings that some said collapsed because of shoddy construction, and the Beijing Olympics in August where the performances and the Olympic city itself dazzled a huge worldwide audience. Journalists in China and throughout the world rushed to cover these events, sometimes blocked, sometimes assisted, but always closely watched by Chinese authorities. Media reporting of these major stories and the government's reactions to them tell us much about media-government relationships in China today.

**Protests in Tibet**

In mid-March, Tibetan rioters attacked Han Chinese in Lhasa. For weeks, Chinese security forces tried in vain to extinguish the continuing protests. Chinese officials and state news media blasted the foreign media as biased against China, castigated the Dalai Lama as a terrorist "jackal," and called for a "people's war" to fight separatism in Tibet. The Communist Party seemed concerned with rallying domestic opinion by appealing to the deep strain of nationalism in Chinese society. Playing to national pride and national insecurity, the party used censorship and propaganda to position itself as defender of the motherland and at the same time block any examination of Tibetan grievances or its own performance in the crisis. Most vocal Chinese and the domestic media supported the government's stance.

US journalist Nicholas Kristof said it would be convenient if we could denounce the crackdown in Tibet as the unpopular action of a dictatorial government. But it wasn't. It was the popular action of a dictatorial government and many ordinary Chinese think the government acted too wimpishly, showing too much restraint toward "thugs" and "rioters." China and the United States, Kristof said, clash mostly because of competing narratives. "To Americans, Tibet fits neatly in a framework of human rights and colonialism. To Chinese steeped in 150 years of 'guochi' or national humiliation by foreigners, the current episode is one more effort by imperialistic foreigners to tear China apart or hold it back."<sup>1</sup> Even Chinese students overseas and some non-Chinese supported the government's stand in Tibet and accused the Western media of exaggerating and distorting the Tibetan situation.<sup>2</sup> The Chinese state media had inundated the public with many reports from Lhasa about the suffering of Han Chinese merchants and the brutal deaths of Chinese at the hands of rioters. The Tibetan crisis touched the raw nerve of separatism at the core of Chinese nationalism and China failed to provide an even-handed report abroad about Tibet. C.-C. Lee points out the Party leaders will use the media to rally Chinese nationalism against any perceived challenge to China's national sovereignty or international status and that this is standard practice for China's media.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, even the media coverage of the sensitive Tibet situation suggests that there is more media freedom in China today than in the old days of Mao Zedong. Even Xinhua, the tightly controlled official Chinese news agency, admitted in its reports that despite police efforts the riots had spread to Tibetan-inhabited areas in China outside Tibet.<sup>4</sup> Personal freedom to criticize the government has also grown considerably. Chinese people can express opinions that diverge from the party line and even something as sensitive as the Tibet policy in private conversations. However, the Communist Party, which maintains a monopoly of power, makes it clear that certain views cannot be publicly expressed. Views questioning the official policy on Tibet certainly fall into that category.

## **Earthquake in Sichuan**

Chinese authorities were simply unable to control media coverage of the Sichuan earthquake in contrast with its tight control of media reports of the riots in Tibet just two months earlier. Within 3 hours of the Sichuan



earthquake the Central Propaganda Department in Beijing ordered newspapers not to send reporters to the quake areas. Some papers, including the *Oriental Morning Post* of Shanghai, simply ignored the order and by next morning had front-page earthquake coverage from Sichuan including photographs. Reporters from other newspapers soon joined in to fully report the earthquake.<sup>5</sup> Bloggers were also sending photos and information from all over the earthquake area, ignoring any restrictions. One complicating fact was that only on May 1 the government had put forth new rules that required authorities to make public any information involving the “vital interests of citizens.”<sup>6</sup> The Propaganda Department withdrew its restrictive order within a day. Originally apprehensive reporters soon found that they were free to move around and write whatever they believed was important.

One reason government authorities eased off media controls was that media reports were almost universal in their praise for the speed and efficiency of government rescue efforts.<sup>7</sup> The media had been faster and certainly provided major coverage of the earthquake, but their content reflected government policy. It focused on the relief efforts and did not go into criticisms of local officials and school construction. Shi Hong, network news coordinator for the Shanghai Media group, explained, “The executives have instructed us to go deep into the front line and send back vivid images of Shanghai people participating in the damage relief up there.”<sup>8</sup>

One thing the Sichuan earthquake did was at least temporarily silence critics of China's human rights record. The deaths of nearly 70,000 people from the earthquake brought a wave of sympathy for China from overseas and forced some critics of the Beijing government's policies, including its Tibet policies, to think twice about their tactics.<sup>9</sup>

Among the images that showed a new face of China were media photos of Premier Wen Jiabao visiting earthquake sites within a day of the disaster. Television, newspapers, and even video blogs showed “Grandpa Wen” directing aid workers and comforting parents and victims.<sup>10</sup> The Chinese government used the media to channel the emotions of the aftermath of the earthquake into grief rather than into the anger that had been shown earlier because of what many parents saw as the shoddy school construction that contributed to the deaths of their children. Later buses carried advertisements about the earthquake to further support the victims (see Figure 1.1).

However, angry parents could not be ignored by the Chinese media. A dramatic photograph of a senior official on his knees begging parents



**Figure 1.1** A bus advertisement reminds people to “Remember the Sichuan Earthquake,” Campaigns like this raised huge amounts for the victims.

Source: Wynne Wang

to trust the government to investigate the school collapses was published in *Southern Metropolis Daily*. The confrontation was quickly picked up by many blogs in China, which spread the photograph and the parents’ anger throughout the nation. *Southern Weekend* in Guangzhou, a newspaper that frequently investigates claims of corruption or serious government errors, ran an interview with a Sichuan education official who said that the earthquake alone could not be the cause of all the school collapses. *Caijing*, a business journal noted for its own tough investigations of private and official corruption, also called for a government probe into shoddy school construction. Even Xinhua, the official government news agency, said an investigation should move forward. Shortly after that Beijing sent a notice to all media to cut back on such coverage.<sup>11</sup>

A month after the earthquake local officials were trying to block foreign reporters from visiting quake areas and to prevent parents of victims from talking to journalists.<sup>12</sup> Officials told citizens not to talk to the media and to portray China in a positive light. The Government also moved to shut down their most vocal critics, including Huang Qi, a human rights campaigner. He was arrested while he was advising parents who lost