

Negotiating with the global: China's response to post-WTO foreign media penetration¹

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China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in December 2001 has invited a growing research literature on Chinese media-transnational capital relationship in the post-WTO context.² This is typically reflected in relevant articles in two recent special issues from *Media Development* (vol. 44, no. 3, 2003) and *Javnost-The Public* (vol. 10, no. 4, 2003) on recent Chinese media reforms and Chin-Chuan Lee's (2003a) new-edited volume *Chinese Media, Global Contexts*. While these recent publications provided many insights about the issue, there was little data and analysis available to paint a picture of *how* Chinese media policy decision makers responded to media globalization pressure in the post-WTO context. This lack of policy analysis in literature resulted mainly in the fact that some substantial policy changes

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² In this study, except otherwise stated, the term "media" refers to the four major conventional print and electronic media (newspaper, magazine, radio, and television) and Internet media companies.

just happened in the past one and half year or so and relevant reforms are still ongoing. A very challenging fact in the rapidly changing post-WTO Chinese media context is that any “timely” research could soon become “outdated”.

This study attempts to achieve two research goals: to identify and to interpret Chinese policy changes in relation to transnational capital’s access to the Chinese media market in the post-WTO context (since late 2001). The study finds that Beijing has adopted a pragmatic (as it has been doing so in the past two decades plus), partial opening up policy, aiming at absorbing Western capital and know-how on the one hand and losing no ownership and political control of the media sector on the other hand. In other words, Beijing has tried to apply some carefully planned devices to accommodate and localize transnational capital for its own purposes.

The data used in this study were mainly collected via online research which I feel very useful and effective for a research project focusing on an ongoing media reform program like the current one. Most data used were taken from reputable Chinese and international media outlets’ websites. Because of the diversity and richness of online media reports on certain issues, I was able to compare relevant data and cross-check their reliability.

The WTO entry: Impact and response

While under the terms of China’s membership in the WTO the media sector was not required to open to foreign investors (Dudek & Xu, 2002; Hughes, 2002), the Chinese government has surprisingly taken some significant initiatives to negotiate with transnational capital. Long before China’s WTO entry in 2001, media-transnational capital marriage had already happened in a *de facto* way in China. By the middle and late 1990s, the *de facto* capital-media marriage that started soon after Deng Xiaoping’s call for further reform and opening in early 1992 (Chan, 1993; Yu, 1994) had been an open secret (Dong, 2000; Li, 2001; Yang, 1998, p. 6). For nearly a whole decade in the 1990s, Beijing adopted a largely wait-and-see strategy, looking closely at possible impact of the media-transnational capital “affairs” on the media sector and in the meantime studying possible policy responses. By the beginning of the 2000s, as “wolves are coming”, a metaphorical Chinese warning of the approaching invading transnational corporation power, was likely to become a very reality with China’s coming WTO entry, China’s media policy makers were under growing pressure on how to response to media globalization in the post-WTO context. To legitimize the *de facto* media-transnational capital marriage or continue the “muddling through” policy, China’s media policy makers must make a decision.

Beijing acted swiftly. Actually even before China’s formal entry into the WTO in December 2001, China “helped” some foreign investors to be one of the first to share the great

China media cake. For example, in October 2001, Hong Kong-based Phoenix Television (co-owned by Rupert Murdoch's Star Group and Chinese capital) gained permission to directly broadcast non-news programs to cable television viewers in Guangdong province that marked China's opening up to foreign satellite television after a decade long resistance ("China Opens Satellite Television Market", 2001). In less than two weeks time after the Phoenix deal, Hong Kong-based China Entertainment Television's (CETV) also gained permission to provide non-news Mandarin programs to Guangdong's cable television channels. But the deal was not unconditional. Instead, CETV's parent company AOL Times Warner agreed to distribute China Central Television's (CCTV) English-language Channel 9 by cable to three American cities (Landler, 2001, quoted in Lee, 2003b, p. 9). Following this model, on 19 December 2001, one week after China's formal entry into WTO, Murdoch's Star Group won a deal with CCTV, China International Television Corp (CITC), and Guangdong Cable TV Networks (GCTN). According relevant agreements, Star would distribute its new Mandarin-language general entertainment channel to cable systems in Guangdong from early 2002 and in return News Corp's Fox Cable Networks agreed to distribute CCTV-9 in its U.S. market. This was the first time that China granted a new foreign channel cable carriage rights in the Mainland ("Star Group to Telecast", 2001). Following this were a series of post-WTO deals. In late 2002, again, Murdoch's Star Group signed a deal with HRFTG to co-produce and co-broadcast television programs for HRFTG's millions of viewers in central China and Star's Guangdong cable television market, the first pact of its kind that signaled Chinese authorities' nodding to joint production of some television programs (Gibson, 2002). In April 2003, U.S. CNBS Asia Pacific and the Shanghai Media Group signed a deal and the two sides agreed to exchange programs for use over each other's channels (Leow, 2004). On 9 February 2004, the government formally lifted its ban on foreign investment in television programming. One day later, being reportedly approved by the CCP's powerful 24-person Politburo, the State Council (China's cabinet) released a circular that formally permitted private capital's access to the commercial sectors of state-owned newspapers, broadcasters, and other media outlets. Being "the first (since 1949) to legally crack the formal state monopoly over the (media) industry", this "groundbreaking policy shift" suggested that "China has cleared private investors to take direct ownership stakes in the media". According to Reuters, though the circular "does not directly endorse the legalization of foreign investment in the legalization of foreign investment in the Chinese media but nor does it specifically rule it out" ("Media Moves towards Privatization," 2004). In an interview with Reuters, Yu Guoming, journalism professor of Beijing's People's University believed legal recognition of foreign ownership of Chinese media would be just a matter of time (Ansfield,

2004). More recently, in March 2004, two rival U.S. media giants, Viacom Inc and Sony Pictures Entertainment were reported to be planning to set up television programming joint-ventures with relevant Chinese state-owned media conglomerates (“Media Market Open”, 2004; “Viacom to set up first China TV venture,” 2004). In April, News Corp told *Asian Wall Street Journal* that it was discussing more possible joint-ventures with its Chinese counterparts in both print and electronic media (Leow, 2004). In May, Singapore-based MediaCorp’s Channel NewsAsia International became the second Asian-owned news network (following the Star Group) to win landing rights in China after signing an agreement with CCTV. According to the agreement, Channel NewsAsia’s international news and information TV channel will be available to viewers in top hotels and residential compounds reserved for foreigners, while CCTV-9 will be carried by StarHub Cable Vision in Singapore by June (Siow, 2004). In the magazine sector, “international publishers have been piling in” getting into the mainland and by late 2003 “more than 50 foreign magazines have Chinese-language editions, with a dozen more expected in the coming years” (“Foreign Magazines”, 2003). While transnational capital’s this “glossy gold rush” (“Foreign Magazines”, 2003) into post-WTO China may “far have refrained from plunging in headlong from the word go” (Leow, 2004), this first wave of foreign investment seems to just start.

Three strategic considerations can be identified from these Chinese policy changes. First, financially, considering the increasingly expanding media sector’s urgent need of access to international capital market and foreign investors’ mounting interest in the Chinese media market’s huge potential in the post-WTO context, the government faced growing pressure to have a clear and positive policy response. While even in the pre-WTO years a government ban of media-transnational capital marriage (see, Zhao, 1998, p. 176) remained unpopular, such a ban in the post-WTO context can become even more infamous and face stronger resistance from both home and abroad. Pre-WTO state monopoly of the media sector significantly limited the media industry’s access to a diverse domestic and international capital market. Meanwhile, with limited lending ability China’s debt-laden state banks as the media industry’s major capital providers were struggling in meeting with the industry’s mounting financial demand. Though no data is available to paint an exact picture of the industry’s capital shortage, there were signs allowing no optimism. For example, in the late 1990s, to ease the industry’s financial pressure, the government had to offer the industry preferential treatment in taxation and many news media were allowed to reinvest most of their profits in themselves, rather than required to hand over to the government (Zhao, 1998, p. 161). Even in China’s most developed Guangdong province, the total estimated annual advertising spending was about 10 billion RMB (US\$1.2

billion), far below the local media industry's financial demand (Yang, 2002). The television sector has been the most popular in the market. But even China Central Television (CCTV), China's most profitable news organization (largely because of its monopolized position as the country's only national TV network), only ranked the fiftieth among the world's television corporations (Lin, 2000). These factors, in the face of growing spending (such as salaries for employees, expense of equipment renovation, and business expansion), caused capital shortage and financial difficulty in many media organizations, particularly in the print media sector. Some market observers already warned that capital shortage could soon become the "bottle neck" for the media industry's further development (e.g., Dong, 2000, p. 1).

Second, Beijing's decision to partially open the media sector to foreign investors also reflected its strategic consideration to establish its own national and global media networks by cooperating with, and learn from, global media corporations. This strategy was typically reflected in those cable-television cooperation deals under which the Chinese media outlets and their foreign partners agreed to exchange programs for use over each other's channels as earlier discussed. Learning from Western know-how of modern media corporation management was extremely important for the increasingly capitalized Chinese media sector. As Leow (2004) noted, because "none of them (Chinese media groups) really knows how a global-minded conglomerate should behave or make money", China's media policy makers encouraged the media sector to learn from foreign media corporations in order to eventually "grow its (China's) own global media brands". A recent talk on China's permission of television-programming joint-ventures from Tong Gang, director of the film bureau of the State Administration of Radio, Film, & Television (SARFT), illustrated this idea clearly:

Allowing television-programming joint-ventures is part of an ongoing spate of industry reforms to bring foreign know-how to China's often tedious TV output. After joining the WTO...we've been seeking cooperation overseas and we want to inject fresh funds and experience into the industry. ("China Lifts Ban on Foreign Investment", 2004)

While China needs Western funds and know-how, very few Western capitalists can resist the temptation of the Chinese media market's huge potential. This mutual need paves the foundation of the Chinese-foreign cooperation. As Lyric Hughes (2002), publisher and CEO of China Online Inc., a U.S.-based media company, wrote: "Why are foreign media giants so focused on China? In a word, advertising." China's information industries grew at an annual rate of 25 percent in the past decade or so, three times the country's GDP growth ("China's Cable TV Shake UP," 2001). Between 1988 and 1998, the mass media industry in China was the most profitable industry with the high rate of investment return of 17-30 percent (Dong,

2000, p. 4). This suggests China's mass media industry "might be the last industry with staggering profits in the world" (Tao, 2001, p. 2). China has also been at the top of the list in advertising spending in the Asia-Pacific region for years. According to a recent survey conducted jointly by three Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan-based research firms, in 2003, expenditure on advertising in the Mainland (television, newspaper, and magazine) soared to US\$18.6 billion, increasing by 39 percent over 2002 ("Advertising expenditure", 2004). Many observers believe that as China's economic growth remains strong, the advertising business "will continue to boom as China heads towards an advertising bonanza with the 2008 Olympics in Beijing" (Hughes, 2002). It is for this reason, even theoretically nearly all foreign media investors currently "are losing money in China", according to Vivek Couto, executive director of a Hong Kong-based media consultancy, every major international media player wants a toehold in the Chinese market because "the point is, China is the green field" (Leow, 2004).

Third, politically and ideologically, by the early 2000s, Beijing seemed to have become more confident in adopting a partial media privatisation policy. To be sure, years before recent changes in media ownership structure, Beijing had introduced similar policy changes into the non-media state-owned enterprise (SOE) sector. Particularly, in 1997, the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was forced to make a long delayed decision to partially privatize the heavily loss-making SOE sector during its 15th national congress (see Jiang, 1997). Since then, thousands of loss-making SOEs were shut down or sold to private and foreign investors (Broadman, 1999). From April 1, 2002, foreign investors were even "allowed to hold the controlling stake in large SOE, apart from those of key importance to national or economic security" ("Foreign Investment in SOEs Encouraged," 2002). Before the decisive 1997 national party conference, the CCP and its government had resisted hard to prevent any radical reform of the SOEs. Ideologically, the CCP had held (and holds still but to a considerably much less extent) an orthodox Marxist belief that "any economic power... translates directly into political power. Privatization, as a transfer of ownership rights to private industries, clearly means an immediate weakening of the Party-state's position *vis-à-vis* the society" (Wu, 1994, p. 213). Politically, the Party had been frightened by the scaring prospect of millions of laid-off workers as a result of an even partial privatization plan. However, by the eve of the 1997 national party congress, China's communist leaders, while remaining firm to refuse a mass privatization solution, realized that if they continued to stick to the market socialism model and refused any substantial structural change in the SOE sector, the country's state bank systems could be soon totally destroyed by the heavily loss-making SOE sector that had already caused vast bad debts

(e.g., Dorn, 2001; Lardy, 2000). As well, by the late 1990s, as very few doubted that China's entry into the WTO was just a matter of time the government realized that the long-delayed serious structural reform in the SOE sector could not be postponed any more. In comparison with non-media SOEs, the media industry as a special SOE sector was (and is still) far more politically and ideologically sensitive. It thus took Beijing another four years or so to make a similar policy decision. As earlier discussed, after more than 20 years debates on "property rights" among China's political and intellectual elites (e.g., see Cui, 1998), the CCP's 15th national conference in 1997 marked the Party-state's significant retreat from its decades-long resistance to any privatization idea. The Party-state seemed to suddenly realize that its long time belief that capitalization meant the end of its monopoly of political power might be just an unnecessary or at least overstated psychological fear. China's modernized communist leaders might have learnt something from, among other capitalist authoritarian regimes, Lee Kuan-Yew's Singapore, an extremely successful capitalist economy under the People's Action Party's "soft-authoritarian" rule. In the media sector, Beijing now seems to believe that with some carefully designed "safety devices" (as discussed in the next section), the party state's political and economic control of the media sector may be well safeguarded under a partially privatized media system.

The changing policy and unchanged bottom line

The ongoing media opening up (to foreign investors) policy has so far taken a bold but cautious way, preventing to cause any political-ideological threat to the ruling Communist Party's power. As communist leaders in Beijing become more adaptable, they hold their authoritarian media policy bottom line firmly. This is typically reflected in the government's introduction of the following devices.

A "dual-track" policy. One important device is a so-called "dual-track" policy. Being introduced in early 2002, the policy aimed to separate media organizations' editorial and business operations. The editorial sectors must keep their "socialist" nature, namely: they must remain state-monopolized and no overseas and private investment would be allowed. For media organizations' operational sectors, they may be split off (with editorial sectors) and restructured into commercial companies. And these companies were allowed to open to investment from non-media SOEs by organizing shareholding or limited companies ("Chinese News Media", 2002). It took Beijing another two years to expand this "dual-track" policy to private and foreign investors (in early 2004)—allowing private and foreign investors' access to the commercial sectors of state-controlled media outlets ("Media Moves towards Privatization," 2004). To meet the challenges and opportunities brought by the "dual-track" policy, CCTV, for

example, announced recently that it would “spin off its production and non-broadcasting businesses” (Yan, 2004). However, as a Reuters report argued, while in theory the editorial sectors of the media remained under the control of the party state, “in practice, private entrepreneurs are becoming influential in content creation as well” (“Media Moves towards Privatization,” 2004). Typically, for example, having trouble getting licenses to publish their magazines in China, some foreign publishers have tried to “sign deals (with local media) in advertising or consulting, but actually help to produce content” (“Foreign Magazines”, 2003).

The state as majority-shareholder. To economically guarantee the politically-charged “dual-track” strategy successful, private and foreign investors have been told that they must not hold majority controlling of the stakes (“Media Market Open”, 2004; “Media Moves towards Privatization,” 2004). Similarly, foreign media firms must form a joint-venture with a Chinese state-owned media company who should be always the majority-shareholder to get a license to sell their products in China because “only domestic companies are entitled to hold licenses to carry media products” (Yan, 2004). As to foreign magazine publishers, a slightly modified rule applies: they can compete for government permission to license their brand names and contents for publication in the Chinese mainland. And not surprisingly, as a result of this, most foreign magazines published or distributed in China are non-political titles and “censor themselves or steer clear of controversy” (“Foreign Magazines”, 2003). This rule also applies to certain foreign newspapers. For example, Singapore-based Chinese-language newspaper *Lianhe Zhaobao* is already sold at certain locations in China as a result of its “non-critical editorial contents” (Yan, 2004). Similarly, some foreign satellite television firms, as earlier discussed, have also been allowed to air non-political programs through certain Chinese partners’ cable networks and in return foreign broadcasters must make similar arrangements for certain Chinese programs’ airing in their overseas cable television networks.³

No news, no sex, and no violence. China’s media authority has also imposed a no-news-sex-violence policy to monitor Chinese-foreign media cooperation (Landler, 2001, quoted in Lee, 2003b, p. 10), aiming at safeguarding the authoritarian Party-state from foreign criticism and the Chinese audience from the “spiritual pollution” of Western culture and lifestyle. However, this policy perhaps can be only partially achieved. This is not only because this policy faces

³ Foreign television broadcasters are currently not allowed to directly air to ordinary Chinese viewers though Beijing has permitted 31 foreign channels to broadcast to three stars or above hotels and approved housing compounds (“China Lifts Its Ban on Foreign TV Production,” 2004).

growing challenges from modern communication technologies such as the Internet (e.g., McCormick & Liu, 2003), but also and perhaps more importantly because long before this “three no’s” policy many new commercialized Chinese media outlets themselves had undergone a Chinese-style tabloidization by exploiting profitable sex-and-crime stories as well as “constructive” critical-investigative news (e.g., Zhao, 1998). Nevertheless, there is no doubt that, in the absence of press freedom, the media’s autonomy in reporting “hard news” is still extremely limited and has no warrants. As well, to monitor sex and violence materials in media content, some legal/policy regulations based on China’s cultural-ethical tradition rather than the Party-state’s political-ideological concerns are urgently needed.

The “meaning” of the changes: Some initial analyses

It is not an easy task to predicate the possible impact of transnational capital on China’s media democratization course and journalism professionalism. The following are some initial analyses.

Transnational capital as a democratic force? In 1994, Rupert Murdoch clashed with Beijing when he proclaimed satellite television was a “threat to totalitarian regimes everywhere” (Gibson, 2002). Nearly 10 years later (and after an eight-year campaign to repair his damaged relation with Beijing during 1994-2001), in 2003, Murdoch addressed to Chinese leaders and officials in Beijing’s Central Party School (Chinese authorities’ top think-tank) that opening China’s media market up to the West “doesn’t represent any loss of power” (“Murdoch Urges China’s Leaders”, 2003). While Murdoch’s 1994 statement was largely a boast or exaggeration of transitional media corporations’ dubious role against authoritarian regimes, his 2003 claim seemed more close to the truth. It must be pointed out that transnational media corporations are fundamentally money-driven. As well, in the Chinese context, as earlier discussed, Beijing has put many policy devices to limit transnational capital’s power. Already, some transnational Internet companies have been accused to help Beijing for a more effective Internet censorship (e.g., “Firms Accused of Aiding Chinese Internet Censorship,” 2003). The case of Chinese media sector’s partial opening up to transnational capital had better to be understood as a part of capitalist media globalization rather than a hope for press freedom.

The party state, the middle class, transnational capital, and capitalist-authoritarian hegemony. There is a serious new-left warning in literature that the Chinese party state, the rising Chinese middle class including media managers and journalists, and transnational capital may form an interest coalition to create a capitalist-authoritarian hegemony against the increasingly marginalized Chinese farmers and the urban working class (e.g., Lee, 2003a; Zhao, 2003). With its significant critical insight, a hegemonic analysis like this however seemed to

have ignored many anti-hegemonic challenges in the Chinese society such as the astronomical figure of laid-off former SOE employees, the significantly marginalized Chinese farmers, rampant official corruption, the long queue waiting outside visa offices of Western embassies/consulates in Beijing and other major cities, and thousands of young university graduates' struggling for a minimum-wage job. How can a capitalist-authoritarian hegemony be build up among the people by using transnational capital-backed media to peddle populist nationalism, the magical capitalist market logic, and other hegemonic discourses/devices? Indeed, China's situation is still quite different from the typical hegemonic case of Singapore whose authoritarian government enjoys high public support (as the ruling People's Action Party has won majority votes in each election since 1959). To link China's media commercialization to "Party hegemony" (e.g., Zhao, 1998, 2000) appeared to have not only simplified the Chinese case by building "rather ill conceived and exaggerated narratives of capital domination in China" through "a nuanced hegemony analysis" (Lee, 2000, pp. 569, 570), but also ignored the fact that the media are neither the only power to shape public opinions nor as powerful as the "bullet theory" suggests—instead, audiences' selective and critical ability in communication process should be seriously considered (e.g., Klapper, 1960). Otherwise, it would be very hard for us to understand the appearance of some popular anti-hegemonic publications in recent years such as Chen Guili and Chun Tao's *Chinese Farmers Survey* (*zhongguo nongmin diaocha*), Zhang Yihe's *Unforgotten Past* (*wang shi bing bu ru yan*), and Jiao Guobiao's online *Declaration of the Campaign against the Central Propaganda Department* (*tao fa zhong xuan bu*). Before any conclusion regarding the matter can be drawn, further studies, particularly empirical studies, are urgently needed to identify the actual relationship among the party state, the media-journalists, and transnational capital.

The Chinese state as a protector? While some have charged the Chinese state as the major obstacle for a full-fledged private press (e.g., Chan, 1993) that would open far wider and comprehensively to transnational capital, others have argued that the government may protect China's national media industry from transnational capital's takeover (Touraine, 1997, quoted in Lee, 2000, p. 572). Foreign control of media ownership is a sensitive issue worldwide. Particularly, very few developing countries can afford losing control of mass media to transnational media giants controlled by the West. However, as earlier discussed, in the case of China, Beijing's partial media opening policy should be understood as a strategy that aims to protect not only China's national media industry, but also and perhaps more importantly its own economic and political control of the media.

Transnational capital and a law-ruled, more professional media sector. It can be argued that while the introduction of transnational capital into the previously state monopolized media sector may have little, if any, impact on the country's media democratization course, it may however help establish a more financially rational and professionally constructive media system. Because logically even media globalization in a non-Western, local context such as the Chinese one implies the need of a structural change toward a more independent (at least in terms of greater financial freedom and editorial autonomy), more competitive and law-ruled (as required by modern capitalist corporation system), and therefore more professional and less corrupt media system. But again, this theoretical analysis needs solid data support from future studies.

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