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MIA paper for peer review: State of the Field special issue

TITLE

The trans-disciplinary challenge

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the permeability of the field of China media research, its openness to new ideas; it argues that we need to adopt a wide angle view on research opportunities. Expansion of China's media during the past decade has opened up possibilities for broadening of the field. The discussion first identifies boundary tensions as the field responds to transdisciplinary knowledge; in the second part the paper addresses challenges faced by Chinese researchers or visiting scholars in 'Western' media environments. Finally the paper addresses what a wide angle perspective might include.

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Keywords: transdisciplinarity, Chinese media, soft power

Introduction: taking the wide angle view

In this paper I offer some observations on the field of Chinese media studies.¹ My comments might be of particular interest to students and researchers balanced between disciplinary boundaries. While it is important to include Greater China in the discussion of the field of Chinese media studies, my comments relate specifically to the PRC and its media as an object of study. I believe that most research on Chinese media, including the media of the region, fits into existing academic disciplines and divisions; however I also believe there are opportunities for the field to extend. In the final section I make a brief note of some of these opportunity areas.

In 'state of the field issues' such as this a danger of generalisation exists: there will always be readers who will be the 'exceptions'. There is also a tendency to nominate certain contributions as noteworthy while ignoring others that are outside one's line of vision or which are at the margins of the research field. Accordingly, I don't propose to provide a list of exemplary studies. With this caveat, I begin the discussion with a physical model.

One way of imagining the field problematic is to compare the long view and the close-up; for instance, the long view takes in the system and identifies the boundaries, a bit like looking

¹ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer of an earlier draft of this paper.

out the window from an upper story city building, observing the central business district, clusters of buildings, and streets arranged in a grid. There is a sense of patterning and order. However, this long view can have the effect of obscuring the dynamics of traffic, people, and markets. The close-up view on the other hand reveals people talking on mobile phones, people hurrying to work; people engaging in noisy negotiations, and talking in different languages. Collisions occur; people disagree; it is not so neat and tidy.

By definition, a field is an attempt to input some sense of order, some normative boundaries. In the past a conventional approach was to compartmentalise research into three category areas: industries, texts, audiences (Cunningham and Turner 1997). The core concern of the first category was media production; that is, the media were cultural institutions that were either private or public. The political economy of the media examined ownership, concentration and how this impacted on the diversity and plurality of texts, the second category. Much of the scope of media studies has been, and continues to be, concerned with texts and representations. The third division, audiences, is self explanatory, and has created its own momentum as cultural studies methodology has supplemented quantitative media research. While these three divisions have organised much of the research field they are also interdependent. For many researchers, especially students doing a PhD, the problem is whether one or not needs to account for all three layers. Focusing on reception or textual analysis is likely to provide a richer in-depth analysis. But there are limits to what can be done in a PhD dissertation.

In a book co-edited by Donald, Keane and Yin (2002), the authors suggested that the Chinese media field in the late 1990s illustrated tensions between three forces, described using an analogy by a Chinese media scholar (He 1994): cadres/officials (*lingdao ganbu*), the bosses (*laoban*) and consumers (*laobaixing*). Compared with the industries, texts, audience triad this 'three olds' approach emphasises the middle role of the market; that is, the officials still called the shots and made policy and the audience was becoming more diversified, but the reality was that markets would eventually create their own momentum. In a sense this has occurred, rather unevenly; while still heavily constrained by censorship and non-competitive practices, entrepreneurs and independent producers are redefining the field. The question is: how can we research this market stratum if we are not insiders?

The long view has given us a familiar profile of the Chinese media field. For many commentators it represents a cumbersome apparatus dominated by extremely conservative policy makers in Beijing. Taking this long view it is easy to come to the conclusion that the media is still the mouthpiece, unlikely to conduct major reforms in the near future. For others,

however, Chinese media is a highly differentiated field with contrasting regional dynamics. As well as globalisation and localisation, Chinese media studies researchers need to be cognisant of a range of subfields: mobile devices, video games, social networking, celebrity studies, and viral marketing to name a few. In order to understand the changes in Chinese media they might need to embrace the fields of economic geography, urban informatics, development studies and law.

Increasingly the field of media studies globally is messy, constantly changing, churning, and often leading into interpretative cul-de-sacs. The macro (long view) has dominated Chinese media studies; an ideological divide has prevailed between liberal democratic and socialist media systems for the past several decades. The anthropological perspective is important—the researcher ‘situated’ close to or within communities, interpreting meanings, intentions and actions of players. Until recently research on Chinese media has struggled to get in close to its subject, often because researchers (the author included) are regarded as ‘outsiders’. Many researchers have been denied access to informants; this is fairly symptomatic of research in Chinese media although the degree of restriction varies with the topic; sometimes access may be granted but one cannot be sure of the validity of sources. In many instances an astute researcher can read the environmental conditions and draw conclusions. To say that it is not worth doing ground research, that is talking to officials and industry leaders because they are unlikely to be reliable witnesses, is not a valid position. Because the vantage point to examine Chinese media has *generally* been from the outside, this has generated more textual interpretation (content analysis, discourse analysis, policy analysis); as a result there has *generally* been more broad brush stroke analysis than nuanced interpretation.

Both views—the long view and the close up—are necessary to understand Chinese media studies and the changing environments in which it operates. Macro analysis needs more micro research; this is beginning to take place. Many research students from China have been equipped with new tools as the focus has shifted from preserving the ideological focus to examining local innovations in media. More specifically for my argument, there is another variety of the ‘long view—close-up’ problematic. Analysts seeking to understand systemic implications needs specialist inputs such as might be provided by grounded field research but they also need information from a diversity of perspectives. For this process to occur the boundaries of the field need to be relatively porous. Let’s call this a wide angle view.

The wide angle view connects with transdisciplinarity, essentially the idea that different research perspectives can offer insights into our understanding of Chinese media and communications. In *Insatiable Curiosity: Innovation in a Fragile Future*, Helga Nowotny writes

about famous artists and scientists who credited crossing of intellectual boundaries for their insights (Nowotny 2008: 65). Crossing disciplinary boundaries is often proposed as a vehicle for brokering new insights and knowledge in universities although in practice implementation is often less fruitful than its ideal. Transdisciplinarity is similar to cross-disciplinarity but whereas the latter generally arises within the context of disciplines (for instance economics, law, education), transdisciplinarity includes frameworks of enquiry that are not necessarily governed by academic conventions.

One of the challenges of cross-disciplinarity is that theoretical traditions are relatively longstanding in established disciplines. Media studies, a relatively recent disciplinary mix, is no exception. Shifting disciplinary boundaries to accommodate different perspectives often requires translation of foundational concepts. Accommodations of this kind often make publication difficult; readers are more often than not specialists in one disciplinary field.

Outside the field, where such rules and conventions don't apply, there is an abundance of knowledge. Information flows freely and with less regard for citations and theory on Wikipedia, in commentary circulating in the blogosphere and on myriad business platforms informing the operation of Chinese and Asian media industries. Meanwhile, cross sectoral and multi-institutional engagements assist new modes and forms of research (Rossiter 2006). This transdisciplinary model is a feature of various forms of contract research where requirements of academic rigour rub up against practicality; for instance, in project teams jointly comprised of academics and industry partners.¹ In many instances the academic insistence on theory has to be put aside.

It is useful to remember that the derivation of the word 'theory' is to view from a certain perspective. Indeed, much can be learnt about the limitations of theory from practitioners who work in fast changing cross media environments: in internet based content industries, in mobile content sectors and in animation and games. As Caldwell notes, media practitioners engage in theoretical discussions in a rather different manner than academics, 'through tools, machines, artefacts, iconographies, working methods, professional rituals and narratives ...' (Caldwell 2008, 26). Furthermore, practitioners and 'industry partners' alike have their own discourses, which while at times may appear at times to be public relations and industry spin, constitutes a body of knowledge that connects different communities of practice. At the same time media industry work is characterized by sharp deadlines which don't allow for deep reflective thinking (Wyatt 2010). The contrast, between the academic's pursuit of theory and the practitioner's bottom line thinking, is one of the challenges of transdisciplinarity.

Chinese media studies: emerging trends

At various times in the past the field of media (and communication) studies has been resistant to change; it has developed rituals and group solidarity, as well as its organisational forms. Organisations such as the International Communication Association (ICA) and the International Association of Media Communication Research (IAMCR) have been adapting to changes in media technology and practice. Some divisions initiated in the era of mass communications have been reconstructed, some superseded.

One of the impressions one gets in attending large forums like these is the number of Chinese students studying abroad who have taken advantage of the variety of theories on offer. Chinese media studies in 'free world' universities was founded on Western theories, approaches and methodologies: civil society and the public sphere, media effects, uses and gratifications, modernisation theory, four theories of the press, mass communication theory, and information society theories (Curran and Park 2000)ⁱⁱ These are still dominant approaches in large gatherings such as ICA and IAMCR. In particular, the Chinese media studies field's coherence around a core platform of political economy has engendered robustness and longevity. The reason for the robustness of political economy is that it offers a systemic model of media control and ownership, made stronger by close examination of these specific areas of enquiry. It has aligned itself with the grand narratives of democratisation and freedom of speech; these political values have taken root in former authoritarian regimes; for instance Taiwan, South Korea. The tradition includes an insistence on pluralism which brings a strong critique of transnational media. The work of Chin-Chuan Lee and Zhao Yuezhi has been exemplary in this regard while remaining cognisant of the changing dynamics of China's media reforms.

Tried and tested theories are the strength of Chinese media studies? However, in the light of calls for inter-disciplinarity by academics and research bodies, can Chinese media studies embrace new approaches?ⁱⁱⁱ Is Chinese media research a stage on which we are likely to find innovations in the field? Has the expanded field of China's media industries, and its aspirations to internationalise, or at least achieve greater regional success, changed the field of research?

The rise of East Asian media industries over the past two decades have caused a shift to analysis of localisation (Fung 2008; Keane, Fung and Moran 2007; Ma 2004), peripheral and regional media (Sinclair, Cunningham and Jacka 1996; Curtin 2008; Curtin and Shah

2010; Black et al 2010; Chua and Iwabuchi 2009; Erni and Chua 2004) and cultural and creative industries (Berry et al 2009; Keane 2007). While much work has concerned journalism, film, TV and media content emanating from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea and Japan, more recently the popularity of the concept of soft power has played Mainland China into the debate (Sun 2010; Keane 2010). Soft power is not a new idea. Coined by Joseph Nye in the early 1990s, it has been applied broadly in the field of international diplomacy (Nye 1990). One of the key elements of soft power is cultural exports, and in this respect China is following a path paved by its Asian neighbours. Japan has expressed its influence through popular culture (its so-called Gross National Cool) and South Korea has exploited the Korean wave, its emergence coinciding with another global sporting event, the 2002 World Cup.

Many Chinese PhD candidates have received national scholarships to study overseas in the past few years. This is part of the 'going out' strategy, although it is intended that they also 'go back' with useful knowledge. China Scholarship Council scholarships are administered on the basis of national research priorities and it is not surprising that many students arrive intending to study how to make China's soft power more appealing; that is, they generally expect to learn from the success of 'the West'.

In addition to the flow of students, visiting delegations and academic exchanges take place with a view to learn how the rest (and the West) organises the production of successful movies, TV, animation, and associated cultural activities. However, international examples and case studies, while satisfying the policy requirement of learning from success, cannot be transplanted into Chinese soil and be expected to thrive without a fundamental change in the way that information is managed. In the main most delegation visits are superficial encounters with international models. Censorship, the lack of a competitive market for content, piracy and IP infringement, uncreative production environments, ambiguous cultural and media policies, cronyism, rent seeking and a focus on outsourcing and low cost production mean that the international model is unlikely to produce rewards when and if it is transplanted.

Likewise, the Chinese Ph.D. student soon encounters the reality that international media systems based on competition and pluralism are more complex than socialist systems underpinned by ideology; it is not just a matter of replicating or localising foreign ideas. This is not to infer that Chinese media industries are unsuccessful. The Chinese media market is maturing, breaking away from its pedagogical moorings. Chinese television is more commercial than ever; Chinese cinema has experienced a recent period of box office success, and Chinese

independent production companies in film, animation, TV drama and associated production and marketing sectors are steadily increasing in number. Content that is politically valued continues to receive considerable government subvention (as it always has) while content that is deemed non-political, notably animation, digital content and television drama, draws increasing market investment. A considerable amount of research attention in the past few years, often on the part of China-based researchers, is therefore drawn to evaluating how China can follow the lead of Korea, Japan and Hong Kong SAR in producing compelling content (Zhu and Berry 2009; Berry et al 2009).

In addition to the maturing of media industries, large populations have access to low-cost technologies such as mobile phones and instant messaging services (Wang 2009). Qiu's seminal work on the use of low cost technologies in south China is an example of a breakthrough in the field, almost against the grain of conventional wisdom that the internet, and its affordances, was a technology readymade for the middle classes (Qiu 2009). For people born within the past two decades in China digital literacy is as readily acquired as the formal pedagogies of reading and writing. The revolutionary masses, which according to Mao Zedong were 'blank sheets of paper' requiring guidance from enlightened cadres, have fragmented into multiple communities. Some of these communities remain large, relatively homogenous and patriotic; others form and reform around issues and recreational pursuits and are less wedded to ideology. However, in order to understand the workings of the system, we need to get close, to engage meaningfully with players at all levels of the media ecosystem: officials, investors, producers, creators, audiences and users.

In the research centre where I work many of our Chinese research higher degree students come from a range of disciplinary and professional backgrounds. I believe this is evidence of a widening of the field of media studies in China as well as a recent convergence of media and communication studies centres in China with 'cultural industries' research centres. The cultural industries, sometimes called 'creative industries' or 'cultural creative industries', has become a growing concern for Chinese media academics and is feeding off, and feeding into research on China's media industries. At the Communication University of China (CUC) in Beijing there is a Cultural Industries Research Institute, coordinated by Fan Zhou and Qi Yongfeng. It has a close link with a CUC media research centre investigating 'cultural exports' (led by Li Huailiang).

One of the trends of this integration is an increase in the number of scholars from the discipline of economics, particularly institutional economics. Researchers invariably seek to

examine international models that can be applied to China. Currently the most widely applied model is the cluster, a term that has a variety of applications in China: from experimental district (shifan qu) to industrial base (jiju qu, jidi). The role of research is therefore to advise on the right policy levers to allow the accumulation and the upgrading of the economy, to encourage investments in clusters and in infrastructure. In economic theory this is essentially a neo-classical model with socialist underpinnings. The term ‘creative economy’, another new vogue term, encapsulates a range of emerging organisational strategies and attempts to generate profit in clusters, bases, zones, quarters, and in new industry sectors where business models are untested.

The largest cohort of Asian candidates comes from Mainland China, with qualifications in management, economics, journalism, law and international relations. Theory assumes a bridging role to help these students gain a grasp of the field and at the same time engage in conversations across disciplines—but which theory or set of theories: media theory, economic theory, Western or non-Western theory? For instance, how does one integrate Chinese institutional economics, essentially a concern with ‘productive forces’, namely the combination of natural resources, government policy, competitive markets, infrastructure, human capital, and business strategy with approaches that are new to the field, such as user-generated content, social network markets and open innovation. In much Chinese cultural research inputs of ‘capital’ are the dominant theme: for instance, intellectual capital, structural capital, technological capital, human capital, cultural capital etc. These ‘capitals’ can be ‘upgraded’, which may take place through investment or through the self-organizing activities of the market itself. However, these institutional understandings with their ‘interventions’ are far from an embrace of the invisible hand of the market.

Concluding remarks: the wide angle view reconsidered

An interesting tension exists between applied research and work that meets the expectations of the field. The research that we might undertake for policy makers, for industry partners, generally has less critical focus than what is presented for peer review. But applied research can provide a way for young researchers to both enter research culture and to gain wider perspectives. Ideas and knowledge move between applied and pure research although as mentioned earlier contract research has a bottom line and usually a shorter time frame.

Academic research is intent on generating ‘new knowledge’, which may take longer given that it has to pass scrutiny by peers. However, it is often difficult to know what new knowledge really is: is it about new ideas or it is about reinforcing the dominant paradigm, an area, a field? Indeed, the question of how much contemporary media research is new is a moot point. It can be argued that most research is simply renewing knowledge, adding to what there is, recombining and re-evaluating. When new combinations of ideas are recognised by publication, the field is extended.

The business of scholarship is about the exchange and consumption of texts through intellectual networks, enhanced by presentations at conferences and forums. This is where novice researchers may have their best chance to encounter or popularise a new approach. Research academics generally follow a career development course from Ph.D. and Masters into the academy where they will be mentored by senior academics and thought leaders. Paths, which are already been laid, invite newcomers (young researchers) to situate themselves within the culture of the organisation. Subfields can be unevenly populated, lonely places. It’s sometimes a question of chance what direction an early career researcher might take. In short, what we finish up researching depends to a large extent on where we work, the kind of intellectual environment that we encounter, often by good fortune, and the resources available. These existing resources and knowledge provide a foundation for making a contribution to the field.

In the beginning of this paper I proposed the possibility of a wide angle view (in contrast to the macro (long view) and the micro (close- up). Transdisciplinarity and cross-disciplinarity are components of the wide angle view. An ecological model is another way to frame the field in transition. The conventional *industries-texts-audiences* approach mentioned above is in effect a process model: the industries produce texts that are consumed and adjudicated by audiences. Usually these are examined as separate entities; in some cases film, television studies or games studies will bring together two of more of the domains. But the question that we perhaps need to reflect on is: how do these three levels interact to transform the ecology rather than just restrict? An ecological model—implying inter-dependency—draws on the Chinese ‘three olds’ model (officials, bosses, audiences) but reinterprets this as *institutions, markets* and *use*. ‘Institutions’ are the mechanisms of policy: changes in censorship regimes, copyright and IP regulations, market liberalisations, policies targeting specific sectors, regional and international treaties. ‘Markets’ include media products (texts) as well as networks and devices, low end technologies, advertisers, independent companies,

market research companies, and geographical clusters of activity. 'Use' embraces consumption, blogging, social networking, local community action, and varieties of user generated content.

In effect, this mapping of interactions opens up possibilities for disciplinary spillover effects. The top down model of media regulation has been the default setting and the Chinese government's clumsy attempts to regulate expression make it an easy target. The rise of the market and its complexities offers new opportunities to engage in research of Chinese production culture (cf. Caldwell 2008). Likewise the requirement that China become a cultural exporter is having noticeable impacts on market activity, stimulating the development of private and semi-private companies and associated content and distribution entities. In the future we might expect to see a more diverse field of Chinese media studies with insights from a wider research spectrum.

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ⁱ This model of trans-disciplinarity is seen in the Australian Research Council Linkage Schemes in which a partner organisation contributes funds and/or expertise. Often one of the challenges for participants is to arrive at a point where the practical knowledge of the industry partner aligns with the academic demands of what the Australian research Council call 'new knowledge'.

ⁱⁱ To this one might add cultural studies which itself offers a mix of critical approaches.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Australian Research Council encourages interdisciplinary research in many of its programs. See http://www.arc.gov.au/supported_activities/eureka.htm