

China's Integration to the Global World: A News Corporation Case

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The world starts to operate in a different way since neoliberalism gained momentum during the Reagan administration in the United States and his European counterpart, Margaret Thatcher, ruled the United Kingdom in the 1980s. The market-driven world then endorses integration of economies by means of the increasing interdependence between nations as well as the decreasing trade barriers (Kamalipour, 2007, p. xii). This phenomenon then popularly and loosely termed as globalization due to its extensive scope and complexity (Downing, 2007; Flew, 2008; Robertson and White, 2007).

Central to this phenomenon, is the existence of global communication media, particularly in the discourse of power distribution and domination (see Foucault, 1982). As McGraw III (2005, p. 556) posits, globalization is the dynamo behind economic growth which in turn become the driving force for the increasing number of people who need to keep informed on what is happening around the globe. These people have a growing thirst for information; hence, this is where the global media play its part. Furthermore, Flew (2008, p. 193) argues that the importance of media in global realm is not only related with its role as the international distributor of messages and meanings, but also from 'the perceived role in weakening cultural bonds that tie people to nation states and national communities'.

However, as Shi (2005, p. 33) succinctly puts it, without the involvement and commitment of China, the global media system would not exist and will remain as a 'myth'. News Corporation, for example, would be stuck with its international company status, and not a global media giant (see Chalaby, 2005), if it had not penetrated China. According to Gershon (2007, p. 58), globalization is driven by privatization and deregulation trends, the development of ICTs, market integration and the fall of communism. China, interestingly, with a long history of communism and notorious authoritarian leadership style, joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in December

2001. This decision then leads into a question on whether China's WTO membership with all of its implications has fully integrated China into the global media system. This essay hence will try to answer the question by examining China's media policy in relation with globalization and put News Corporation's effort in penetrating the biggest market in the world as a case study. Despite the growing pressure and the need to benefit from the free-market, China only half-heartedly relaxed its control over media. Thus, China integration to global media system is all but political; a sphere that is kept solely within the control of the Communist Party of China (CPC).

Globalization and the Media

As aforementioned, the rise of market ideology started during the 1980s. With the United Kingdom and the United States as the pioneer, the rest of the world seems to follow suit. Neoliberalism has realigned world economies and national boundaries which has impacted the media industries. Government intervention has gradually lessened, deregulation and privatization is currently a common practice in telecommunication and broadcasting industries (Jin, 2007, p. 180). Leading finance institutions in the world such as the WTO, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank also play significant role in fostering neoliberalism by promoting free trade agreement around the world (McGuigan, 2005, p. 230). In the other hand, although market-led economy advocates freedom and efficiency, issues such as equality and community continues to surface. There are challenges when the 'global' meets the 'local'. For example, in many countries, such as China, Singapore and Malaysia, wealth generation that is promoted by globalization has been confronted by cultural autonomy issues (Weber, 2003, p. 275-276).

The advancement of technology also plays an important role in globalization. Boyd and Barrett (2006, p. 27-28) argues that globalization is 'dependent on, and a promoter of, ICT'. Along with the global economic order and Western transnational corporations (TNC), ICT become the driver of globalization that outmanoeuvres local and global regulatory entities. It also viewed as the window of opportunity in which people can have access to information (Ishemo, 2004, p. 65) that opens the possibility for

the less developed countries (LDC) to leapfrog several stages of development and catch up with the developed nations.

The global integration, made possible by the advancement technology among other things, open the gates for corporate consolidation. In media world, this process then resulted in the establishment of a handful of media corporations with exceptional global reach. Transnational media companies like Time-Warner, Viacom and News Corporation take control from content production to the distribution chain (Chalaby, 2005, p. 29-30). Remarkably, according to Gershon (2007, p. 57), most companies transformed into global media player through a 'gradual evolution' rather than a 'deliberate choice'.

The transnationalization trend in the media sector started in 1985 when the United States' Federal Communications Commission (FCC) allowed merger and acquisition in which larger company take over smaller entity in order to expand its audience share (Jin, 2007, p. 183-185). It increased the number of television station a network could own to twelve stations and practically give way for ambitious media mogul such as Rupert Murdoch to procure vast concentrations of power (Gomery as cited in Jin, 2007, p. 186). Later, as Murdoch and his News Corporation demonstrate, this strategy then resulted in a wider audience reach, increased power and an undeniably greater share of profit.

The media industry, the market and power then intertwined within the globalize world and put issues such as 'struggle for control of global communication' at the foreground. Daniel Headrick (as cited in Winseck and Pike, 2008, p. 8) then points out that the communication media in this context has served as 'weapons of politics'. Thus, not surprisingly, the concern on cultural domination as feared by the nationalists has evolved into the issues of media domination (Banerjee, 2002). In a similar vein, Hamelink (as cited in Chan and Ma, 1996, p.46-47) argues that the so-called 'global communication' is actually the propagation of transnational mass-market advertising and media products created by a handful of media giants. The global, according to Sreberny (2005, p. 13), can be perceived as Western hegemony. Thenceforth, what about the local?

China: the Media Sphere and News Corporation

Since the CPC took the state power in 1949, the mass media has become the ideological vehicle and propaganda platform. It was firmly controlled by the party and serves as its mouthpiece. The radio, film and television stations are under the guidance of the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) whilst the press, books and magazines are supervised by the State Press and Publication Agency. The press, as Zhang (2004, p. 165) explains, must endorse state policies as well as to 'educate, organize and mobilize' the masses. Private and foreign media ownership was prohibited since the early 1950s (Huang, 2007, p. 416), thus, before 1978, all media were state-owned and available for free.

Television broadcasting in China has started as early as 1958 with the establishment of Beijing Television (Rydholm, 2005, p. 8). Since the government uses all available media to maintain *status quo* through strict control over information dissemination, television becomes the most influential medium for political propaganda. However, Chinese media started to develop rapidly since the economic reform and the open-door policy initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978 (Chan and Qiu, 2002, p. 27). China then began to shift away from a 'command economy' into a market-led economy and started to be incorporated into the world economy (Ngok and Zhu, 2007, p. 221). Moreover, television industry then experienced a dramatic change with considerable development in services (Weber, 2002, p. 56).

The open-door policy then created an 'ideological incongruence' for the authorities because they have to juggle between economic augmentations and political indoctrination. Hence, in order to lessen the resistance from the beneficiaries of the existing system, some adjustment need to be made (Ngok and Zhu, 2007, p. 221). The CPC needs to maintain the equilibrium between the control and propaganda discourse with competition discourse.

After the open-door policy, or some will refer it as the post-Mao era, advertising was then introduced to the Chinese media operation (Lee *et al.*, 2006; Rydholm, 2005). According to Lynch (1999, p. 55), the advertising industry grew almost immediately after Deng Xiaoping secured power. Advertising is no longer perceived as 'a tool of capitalist domination'. As a result, two decades later, in 2003, China's advertising expenditure was

the third largest advertising market in the world after the United States and Japan (AC Nielsen as cited in Po, 2006).

During the 1990s, the media sphere in China experience a dramatic change. Within this period of time, the party propagates a market economy with 'Chinese characteristics' as the foundations of accelerating economy and social development that is in line with the reformation and the open-door policy (Xin, 2006, p. 53). Marketization and privatization of media entities are encouraged because of several reasons. The first is to solve the shortcoming of funding from the party, whilst the second is to prepare and strengthen local media in terms of scale and competitiveness as part of the Chinese government strategy before joining the WTO. As a result, new media genres, programs and publications are flourished (Chan and Qiu, 2002). However, during the 1990s, the most important change in media sector has been decentralization, despite the obvious fact that only civil and non-political topics are encouraged and the public are nurtured to participate in the economic development (Lee, 1994, p. 13). Interestingly, the television set ownership in China increased significantly during the 1990s. According to ITU publication in 2002 (as cited in Jin, 2007, p. 182), the total quantity of television sets in China jumped from 660,000 in 1970 to 380 million in 2000. The figures can be attributed to the economic growth as well as the aggressive content development on the broadcasters' side to attract audiences and advertisers due to the fierce competition resulted from the privatization and corporatization of the media.

According to Wang (2006, p. 191), a consumer revolution is happening in China due to the extraordinary economic development over the past twenty years. Nationalism and consumer culture in China, as Gerth (as cited in Wang, 2006, p. 191) argues, are 'parallel social forces that mutually define each other, and consumerism has played a central role in China's nation making'. The propagation of a new economy with 'Chinese characteristic' has flourished the consumerist desires without confronting the stable and smooth governance (Fung, 2006, p. 85).

The decision to foster competition among domestic media institutions through privatization and corporatization is, as aforementioned, part of the strategy to create a competitive industry that, in a long run, is able to face foreign competition (Lee *et al.*, 2006; Keane, 2004). The concern over Chinese domestic media competitiveness in the

global world then resulted in the trend of media managers went abroad to learn more about the way Western media giants operate. As Lee *et.al* (2006, p. 585) put it, 'Beijing suddenly argued that these state media conglomerates, if armed with sufficient economies of scale, would pre-empt post-WTO foreign challenges'.

After Deng Xiaoping's further economic reform in the 1990s, China was then preparing itself to join the WTO and benefited from the globalization. Until the late 1990s, China had rejected foreign investment and foreign ownership in the communication industry. However, in 2000, China authorized foreign investor up to 49 percent of Chinese video and audio distribution companies as well as the companies that 'build, own and run cinemas' (Hazelton as cited in Jin, 2007, p. 189). Interestingly, according to Zhu (as cited in Huang, 2007, p. 418), the foreign investment could not exceed 40 percent. Nonetheless, these two figures illustrate the relaxation of control over Chinese media system.

According to Yin (2006, p. 37), the biggest media in China, *People Daily*, defined China's involvement in globalization as the accession of China into WTO. Joining the WTO had been the goal for Chinese government since 1986 because as Xiaoming (2004, p. 303-304) sees it, the membership denotes the integration with the global capitalist system as well as to reinstates 'China's rightful place in the international system'. Therefore Chinese authority then start to promote global integration as the only way to the economic affluence (Guo, 2008, p. 354). Simply put, for China, globalization brings about potential of economic, political and cultural challenges while offering economic benefits at the same time.

Politically and ideologically, as Huang (2007, p. 422) puts it, the government has become increasingly confident in implementing a partial media privatization policy. However, Zhongshi Guo (as cited in Fung, 2006, p. 74) examines the Chinese media reform after its accession to the WTO and finds that after the reform, the media policies are far more restrictive than liberalizing. While foreign investment and joint venture operations are encouraged, the government continues to strictly regulate the foreign ownership of mainstream media (Weber, 2002, p. 69).

With the complex and difficult approach that the Chinese government enforced, the question for the rest of the world thus: why China? As formerly mentioned, China's

involvement and commitment to the global media system is essential. Hence, 'engaging China' has become the most important agenda of transnational media corporations (Shi, 2005, p. 34). The remarkable economic growth along with the largest population in the world as its citizen means a large advertising market potential and profit. Therefore media conglomerate, Rupert Murdoch, who has the ambition in global media expansion, is eager to gain (wider) access to 'the world's fastest growing television market' (Curtin, 2005, p. 159).

As early as 1985, Murdoch's News Corporation had started its venture on taming the dragon by presenting 50 movies belongs to the Twentieth Century Fox to CCTV, the Chinese national broadcaster (Weber, 2003, p. 279). However, it was not until July 26, 1993, that News Corporation began to get a foothold in Chinese media system by purchasing 63.6 percent stake of STAR TV from Li Ka-shing family (Lynch, 1999, p. 185). Li Ka-shing's Hutchison-Whampoa retained the remaining 36.4 percent ownership until Murdoch took full control on July 1995.

Murdoch penetration was not going smoothly. In 1993, just months after he secured the majority stake of STAR TV, he states that "advances in the technology of telecommunications have proved an unambiguous threat to totalitarian regimes everywhere" (as cited in Lynch, 1999, p. 185). Shortly after Murdoch's speech, the Chinese authority bans the sale of satellite dishes. This action definitely curbed the plan to expand STAR TV services to mainland China. The initial plan was to expand STAR operation in China within three years time. Tighter regulations on international television signals directed into China were enforced with the reasoning that air signals are harder to regulate thus limited signal flow will solve the problem. (Weber, 2003, p. 283). Newspaper advertising for foreign satellite services was also prohibited and the government selectively 'showcase the prosecution of violators' (Curtin, 2005, p. 159), while interestingly at the same time promoting cable television services throughout China. Thus, the service cost was incredibly low and the Chinese do not need the costly satellite dishes and services. Although some (Curtin, 2005; Weber, 2003) believe that the immediate yet carefully calculated reaction from the Chinese officials were made to respond Murdoch's declaration, Lynch (1999) and Harrison (2002) argue that it actually was simply the reinforcement of the Decree No. 129 of 1993 "Provisions on the

Management of Ground Receiving Equipment for Satellite Television Broadcasting”, created before Murdoch’s London speech .

According to Chan (as cited in Curtin, 2005, p. 162), between 1993-1995, Murdoch invested nearly US\$ 1 billion and was losing money at the average of US\$ 1 million per week. However, Murdoch was determined to penetrate China’s market and came up with several strategies to re-enter the market. News Corporations uses a more co-operative approach in dealing with Chinese authorities. He uses a gradual campaign with the philosophy ‘to make friends, and eventually money in China’ (Mandese as cited in Weber, 2003, p. 284). The step-by-step approach was paid off with one project grew into bigger projects that eventually getting massive in size. Murdoch also decided to remove BBC News from STAR service and replaced it with Phoenix TV.

Phoenix TV is a joint venture with Liu Changle, an important figure in the People’s Liberation Army (Curtin, 2005, p. 163). News Corporation owned 37.6 percent ownership standing according to Weber (2003) whilst Curtin (2005) argues that it was 45 percent ownership on the joint venture. Phoenix TV is a Chinese language channel which offers movie and general entertainment programming, although today it emphasizes in news and information programming. The success of Phoenix TV is mainly because of its close relationship with the Party. It mixes capitalism with the party politics (Curtin, 2005, p. 163).

In 1995 News Corporations also launches Tianjing Golden Mainland Development Co. with 60 percent stake. The Tianjing Golden Mainland Development Co. is News Corporations first step in its localization strategy. Started from a table tennis tournament sponsorship, News Corporations then made a follow up of the first encounter by making a deal worth US\$ 20 million of investment in providing digital media equipment. It was initially did programme packaging and programme title design for Chinese local television stations including CCTV. Later, Tianjing Golden Mainland Development Co. diversifies its operation with most revenue come from advertising design and post production. In 1999 it focuses on producing domestic television programmes which distributed to 30 provincial television stations. All programs produced are apolitical which is suitable with the government guidance: no news, no sex and no criticisms (Weber, 2003).

To win and secure the support from the Chinese government, Murdoch then decided to sponsor the first (1995) and second (1998) large scale exhibitions of Chinese cultural treasures at the British Museum. He wants to show that he also respect Chinese culture, and not only interested in making profit. He also signed a deal for Deng Xiaoping's daughter with one of News Corporations publishing company, HarperCollins, to publish a biography of Deng Xiaoping (Weber, 2003). In 1998, News Corporations made a generous donation of 8.28 million Yuan to flooded areas in China. The establishments of personal relations with important figures within the CCP as well as other strategic decisions, illustrate Murdoch's determination in conquering China's vast market (Hughes, 2002, p. 210).

When China gained membership to the WTO, the market liberalization does not include the media sector. However, China then allowed Phoenix TV to broadcast in the province of Guangdong in exchange of broadcasting CCTV English language program in the United States (Schiller, 2005, p. 80). With the green light signaled from Beijing for News Corporations to operate (although limitedly) in China, News Corporations then continues to expand its business by signing a cooperative deal with Hunan Broadcasting Corporation to develop film and television projects (Weber, 2003, p. 280) in December 2002.

Through the encounter with the Chinese government, Rupert Murdoch learned the hard way in materializing his ambition in creating a global media company. As Curtin (2005) explains, Murdoch and his managers discovered that physical infrastructure is just as important as the satellite. News Corporations also recognizes the need to expand their market and not limit itself to a specific demographic as well as the need to tailor its program to attract more audience. They then came up with two Mandarin platforms; one that serves Taiwan and another one that caters eastern China. Personal approach is not a new strategy for Murdoch. However, instead of confronting the authorities, Murdoch and his teams learned to accommodate Chinese officials' wishes and establishing and using personal links with CCP elites carefully. Beijing, it turns out, is far more complicated than the simplistic and generic conception of a totalitarian country. Fortunately, News Corporations is interested in making profit in China, it is not interested in fighting social injustice or becoming a human rights' liberator. Thus, News Corporations does not mind

on being the 'red chip', the company that mix capitalism with party politics (Curtin, 2005, p. 163).

Global Media Integration?

The Western experience taught us that market economy is impossible without democracy. However, against all odds, in the last two decades, the Chinese government has been able to create a stable society and develop a market economy without democracy (Zhengrong, 2007, p. 338). This is mainly due to the concept of spiritual civilization, a set of values that re-emphasizing in 'national character; the importance of tradition, culture and family; ritual issues; and the subtle demonizing of the West as immoral and decadent' (Weber, 2002, p. 57-58). By promoting and evoking spiritual civilization, Weber and Jia (2007, p. 775-783) argue that the media sphere in China has reinforce the 'imagined Chinese community', that autonomous politically and culturally from, yet connected economically to, the global world. Hence, the core intention is to establish the 'imagined Chinese World' as a viable alternative to Westernization whilst still integrated to the rest of the world at the same time.

From the News Corporations' venture in China as presented above, Wong (as cited in Weber, 2005, p. 792) then explains China's success as controlled commodification; which from political economy perspective, suggests 'a deeper appreciation' on the dynamic relationship between the government, economy and the media in the material context of global capitalism. The introduction of free market has changed the global media system dramatically. Deregulation, liberalization and privatization within media sectors are common practice in today's global world that resulted in the diminishing of the state monopoly tradition (Jin, 2007, p. 192). Thus, globalization is then indicated by 'worldwide integration' as well as the materialization of the 'electronic global village' (Chalaby, 2005, p. 32).

What about China? For some, China's accession to the WTO with its market liberalization that attracts foreign media investors can be perceived as a positive shift. Something is obviously better than nothing. As Xiaoping (2002, p. 29) suggests, the media in China have changed dramatically and today, the media play an important role

within Chinese society. However, at the other end of the spectrum, Zhang (2007, p. 545) posits that the Chinese citizen's right to know is notwithstanding limited. Zhang acknowledges that the commercialization indeed has open up some space and, to some extent, has enabled autonomy. The relative autonomy, however, simply exist within the entertainment domain. The Chinese government reluctance to fully commit to the liberalization of its media, in my opinion, illustrates the government's half-hearted integration to the global media. The integration of China into global media system is unique, in which the government insist to keep the political issues within the control of the CPC.

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