

emotions that are documented, even celebrated in this study: rage at the machine, suffering as performance of indignation, violations celebrated in gory detail. Chai Ling sticks in my memory as a great performer of similar rituals. That is why I approached this book with hesitation and continue to wonder why we have to “betray” authority in order to “resist” it.

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The Politics of Chinese Media: Consensus and Contestation

BINGCHUN MENG

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Students of the media in China, not least those of us who are concerned with the political dimensions and implications of the media’s position in the authoritarian information order, are increasingly well served by theoretically driven, richly empirical studies. This book should be added to the list.

Despite the circumscriptions that have been brought to bear on all sections of the public sphere under Xi Jinping’s rule, the media and cognate areas of activity (the entertainment and celebrity industries, digital platforms, etc.) are experiencing a dynamic expansion, complicating how we understand media production, reception and governance – and the politics that condition them.

The first standout feature of this book is its recognition of the diverse sources and multidimensionality of “the politics.” It encompasses the power politics of the Party (for example invoking Wang Hui’s idea of “depoliticized politics”), the institutionalized politics of bureaucracy, the political economy of the media industries, the cultural politics of individual and societal meaning-making, and the politics of media itself in the form of the logics that determine what media do, how media interact with society (refracted by class and subject to Marxist ideology) and the allocation of financial and symbolic capital. An underlying premise is that media and politics are mutually constitutive in a dialectical relationship where “the media do not simply reflect or act as the tool of real-life political struggles: they are part of those struggles” (p. 15).

The second standout feature of the book is how seriously it takes history. Not in a teleological sense or in a chronological telling of the commercialization–conglomeration–convergence trajectory of media in the reform era (although it is covered), but rather as a foundation and incubator of the theorizing. I have seldom read a study of the contemporary landscape that is so clearly informed by the resonances, continuities and trajectories of the past – specifically the socialist past – delivering compellingly on the truism that China’s past reveals a lot about its present.

You would be right to intuit from this snapshot that this is a dense and deeply theorized study (not the kind of book you can dip into with the TV on in the background). Indeed, it is one of the more ambitious and sophisticated attempts to conceptualize and situate the role of the media in contemporary China since Zhao Yuezhi’s *Media, Market and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line* (University of Illinois Press, 1998).

Notwithstanding the demands that such theory and history make on the reader, this is an engaging book with abundant empirical detail to invigorate, should attention start to flag. A case study on gendered consumption, intriguingly entitled “Calling all “spendthrift chicks,”” looks at the relationship between e-commerce, discourse and value change; another, poignantly and succinctly entitled “Sustaining cruel optimism in precarious labor,” looks at the function of Reality TV talent shows as a form of hyper-commercialized television programming; a further case study on cybernationalism (“From ‘iron and blood’ to ‘little pinkos’”) looks at the normalization of aggressive nationalist behaviour online, and provides an important corrective to perceptions of how “normal” it really is.

The book covers a lot of ground: a political economy of the film industry; an analysis of journalistic practice in news media; a sustained reading of a filmic paean to the socialist worker; a case study of the online discourse on parenting. With so much going on, some old hits are inevitably given a re-run (we perhaps do not need another accounting of SuperGirl or the “soft power” expansion of PRC media overseas). And some important developments like the shift in the production and consumption of media products to digital streaming and the popularization of demotic *wanghong* do not get a showing.

The one thing that falls somewhat flat in my view is the concluding chapter. Anticipating a tour de force fusing of conceptual and empirical strands and a compelling (re-)statement of how history and politics elucidate a theory of the media, the author surprised me by proposing to “problematize the way in which the international media bring history into their reporting of the present” (p. 179), specifically through a critique of reporting on the purported resonances between Xi and Mao. This decision struck a false note for me because the framing of this proximate issue is neither especially prevalent, impactful nor revealing; an unvariegated “international media” is not particularly useful analytically; the preceding sophisticated theorizing simply does not need “international media” as a foil; and it is a distraction from the book’s primary locus, i.e., media in China. Despite this qualm, this is an important and accomplished book that should grace the shelves of everyone with an interest in how to understand the complexities of Chinese media and its intersections with history, politics, political economy and society.

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Trading Caterpillar Fungus in Tibet: When Economic Boom Hits Rural Area

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Every springtime, Golok, a high-altitude region in Qinghai, turns into a bustling market place that attracts hundreds of people from other regions of Qinghai and neighbouring provinces. They come to gather or trade caterpillar fungus (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*), a fungus long used in traditional Chinese medicine that has in recent years become a sought after commodity on the Chinese market. The price for this natural resource, which is endemic on the Tibetan plateau, has soared and, thus, created