

## BOOK REVIEW

**Gianluigi Negro. *Le voci di Pechino: Come i media hanno costruito l'identità cinese*. Roma: LUISS University Press, 2022, pp. 192. ISBN 978-88-610579-0-6**

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Gianluigi Negro's *Le voci di Pechino: Come i media hanno costruito l'identità cinese* (Beijing's voices: How the media constructed Chinese identity) presents a much welcome intervention at the intersection of Sinology and Media Studies from a historiographical perspective. By tracking the diachronic shifts and continuities across different communication technologies, practices, and policies in the People's Republic of China (PRC), the book develops a systematic understanding of the role of media in the construction of modern Chinese national identity. In doing so, it offers a valuable conceptual map for keeping track of the different actors and tensions that have shaped the Chinese media landscape from the rooftop loudspeakers of the Mao era to the Web 2.0 of today.

On the background of late Xi Jinping's autocratic push, the rabid proliferation of Wolf Warrior-like nationalism, and the steady flow of "good China stories" across all sorts of communication outlets, it would be easy and convenient to cast the whole of Chinese media as one broadcasting monolith geared at disseminating the party-state's directives. Yet, as this book's eight agile chapters show, this would be a simplification. While it remains true that the history of the PRC and its current political arrangement have characterized the country's media in their own distinctive ways, these emerge less as a uniform apparatus than a layered ecosystem in which political directives are negotiated with the demands of the market; foreign capital interacts with domestic investments; and Hollywood's latest movies coexist with state-sanctioned productions and national blockbusters. It is to eschew such simplifications and the ever-present scholarly vice of attributing "Chinese characteristics" to any

phenomenon originating from this fabricated entity we call "China" that Negro begins his analysis of the Chinese media system with a useful reflection on method (in chapter 2). Undergirded by solid familiarity with its variegated object of study as well as command of Chinese-language literature on the matter, Negro's "multifocal historical approach" succeeds in the goal of "opening up the past" as an interpretative horizon for understanding the present and the future of Chinese society, without falling into the traps of technological determinism and reventant orientalism. The result of this approach is, as Negro argues, a "de-Westernized" history of Chinese media that productively intertwines material and technological concerns, administrative practices, socio-political contexts, and the changing epistemological valences of the notion of media communication itself.

Negro's methodological considerations lay the premises for a necessary reflection (presented in chapter 3) on the key concepts needed for defining a history of media in the PRC. Taking the foundation of the socialist republic as its point of departure, the book triangulates Chinese media in terms of "communication," "system," and "propaganda." By focusing on the shifts in the idea of communication from pre-Yan'an *jiaotong* (interactive communication) to post-1949 *zhuanbo* (top-down dissemination) in the early years of the PRC, the book brings attentions to the early influence of Western models in the development of Chinese media, but more importantly to the gradual adoption of Soviet blueprints after 1949. The PRC's geopolitical alignment with the USSR led to a systematization of the media apparatus across a constellation of bureaus and organs under the umbrella of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) Propagan-



da Department, whose function was and is to shape public opinion and advance a coherent “collective vision” (*weiguan*) at the national, regional, and local level, according to the political leadership’s directives. This vision was the product of a propaganda (*xuanchuan*) project that was not limited in purpose to mass mobilization, but also included education, community building, and networking between the different layers of society. As Negro ultimately argues, while the processes of economic reform put into place by Deng Xiaoping from the late 1970s led to a progressive liberalization of the Chinese media ecosystem – and with it the transformation of the public from “citizens and spectators to users and consumers” (p. 49) – these foundational traits “continue to have a meaningful influence nowadays” (p. 65).

This system-oriented approach to Chinese media informs and is at the same time corroborated by the book’s three core chapters on the press and the radio (chapter 4), television and cinema (chapter 5), and the Internet (chapter 6). While – as the book’s structure suggests – each of these technologies could be considered as the most representative of one specific historical period (respectively the Mao era; the Deng era up to the third generation of the CCP leadership; and the post-Beijing Olympics globalized era), a closer look at their braided histories reveals, as Negro writes, “a continuity, rather than a discontinuity, in the evolution of China’s media system in the medium and long term” (p. 34). This continuity can be characterized as a forward-oriented circularity, to the extent that all these communication technologies were mobilized for showcasing to the national and international public what the new Chinese nation ought to be, while the idea of “new China” itself kept being updated: from the socialist project of Mao Zedong to the socialist market economy of Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin, the economic superpower of Hu Jintao, and the ultranationalist autocracy of today. Like these different visions of the nation, the media technologies that portrayed them did not progressively replace each other, but rather engendered “a complex process of stratification, ever more global today” (p. 148).

The strength of the book lies then in its capacity to cut through this layered history to show how each new media technology became, upon its adoption, a locus of convergence between political aspirations, technological innovations, economic concerns, and international resonances. Although the central government’s ever-present preoccupation with cultural hegemony and national identity (which translate into the practice of propaganda) played a crucial role in these processes, Negro’s particular attention to the administrative aspects of media technology adoption highlights how such concerns have always been grounded in the coordination of managerial practices and the proper functioning of material infrastructures at all levels of the country’s configuration, from the newspaper distribution networks (which relied on the national postal service) and the “radio reception operators” of the post-liberation era; the central state’s systematic overview of the “many processes of commercialization, pluralization, and liberalization of the television sector” (p. 90) that have been taking place during the 1980s; to the CCP’s ongoing efforts at reining in the tumultuous development of the Chinese Internet since the early 2000s (for example via the China Internet Network Information Center or the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission recently created by Xi Jinping).

All these threads are brought together by Negro in the book’s final chapter, which is centered around the notion of media convergence – “the gradual coming together of different media technologies that once used to be distinct [...] brought forth by the digitalization of media content and the central role of the Internet” (pp. 128–129). While the concept of media convergence stems from Western media theory, Negro correctly points out that the equivalent term *ronghe* also plays an important role in relation to media policies in the text of the *12th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development* drafted in 2011, as well as in the *Guiding Principles for the Promotion of an Integrated Development of Traditional and Emerging Media* – a white paper published by the Chinese government in 2014. Although the notion of *ronghe* as media convergence explains well the general orientation of the Chinese media

landscape of today, one wishes here that the author did not follow (as an historian) the party line in such descriptively close fashion. In 2009, media scholar Yang Guobin described the Chinese Internet as a “contested” space in which the state’s official narration clashed with a new public sphere then in the making; to a certain extent, the same could be said of the Chinese media landscape as whole. In this respect, Negro’s insightful analysis would have further benefited from also exploring those minor media outlets that, by trying to advance counter-narrations to the party-state’s vulgate of new China, were by the latter obliterated – one can think here of the independent animation of Pi San; the queer web drama *Addicted* (*Shangyin*); or the progressive online media platform Bullog.cn

(*Niubo wang*). Were such “voices” brought into the conversation too, the reader would have better understood the topology of the grounds on which the party-state’s battle for cultural hegemony is being fought.

These marginal notes notwithstanding, Negro’s book succeeds in presenting a history of Chinese media on their own terms – one that does not pander to predictable yellow-perilist expectations; does not indulge in Cold-War reductions; nor does it flatten its object of study through a Western methodological perspective. In an (Italian) publishing market in which a phantasmatic “West” is continually staged against millenarian dragons and empires, Beijing’s voices are definitely worth listening to.