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China and the Internet : Politics of the Digital Leap
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- 1 This edited volume provides a very comprehensive picture for scholars who want to “get their feet wet” in the area of information and communication technologies (ICTs), covering infrastructure, technological development, security and bureaucratic operations of the Internet, in China. The in-depth analyses focus on how political and economic constraints—manifested in forms of legal control, economic policy, political intervention and foreign policy—have shaped, limited and steered the development of ICTs in China. A recent CNNIC report indicated that the total number of Internet users in China has already exceeded 100 million, which is the second largest Internet market in the world (behind the United States)¹. Given this figure and the potential revenues that can be generated from this huge and growing market, this book provides a timely and critical scholarly work for us to reconsider not only the consequences of China’s globally-connected Internet hype, but also the forces that operate behind this expansion. Understanding the latter will also practically enhance the growing foreign investment in the hardware and software of ICTs in China.
- 2 The major argument made in the book is that developments of ICTs in China are greatly dictated by the political system in China. For example, in his study of broadband, e-commerce and e-government, Dai dissected the national, provincial and municipal strategy of China, concluding that political considerations must outweigh economic benefits when it came to telecommunication reforms in China. Wacker is more explicit in explicating the PRC’s formal censorship and informal control over the Internet, and that ironically it is the Western firms that supply the technological means for China to exercise such political control. Obviously, while this kind of political analysis dissects the power structure, a limitation is its general neglect of the process and impact of ICTs

on the public. To be fair, I think the authors have garnered some user data to supplement their top-down analysis.

- 3 In consideration of the political economy of communication technologies in China, this volume offers two thought-provoking views. First, Monika Ermert and Christopher Hughes' chapter on the nature of domain name relates China's ICTs development to the global geopolitical issues. Practically, this is a significant theme not only for China, but also for Europe and other countries in which the technological backbones, standards and languages of the Internet are highly dependent on the United States. Theoretically, the analyses also broaden the perspectives of the book to cover external, global factors that hinder the development of ICTs in China.
- 4 Second, the state's implementation of new laws controlling the ICTs, media, foreign investment, and management of joint ventures, was thought to be the PRC's passive response to its entry into the WTO. Although there are places in the book echoing the view that these legal structures exist in the form of "weak" laws, barring foreign entry rather than enhancing development of the ICTs, and thus regard the few successful cases in China barely as "anomalies", (for example, in Dai's case study of Murdock's Phoenix, which the author would conceive as an exception to the game), this book in general hints at a more advanced view of the state. While the former view probably regards the state as passive policy maker, and thereby hindering the development of ICTs and scaring investors overseas, the latter, newer view suggests that the state is conscious of making "weak laws." In fact, it is only under these loosely written laws that China is able to define the situation case by case, exercise tighter control of the Internet, and develop its ICTs with greater national security.
- 5 I have to point out that this politics-prior-to-economics argument is not entirely a fresh idea in China studies. Scholars have long established the argument in China media², and there are growing empirical studies that have confirmed the omnipotence of the state in carving out a media empire³.
- 6 There are also some micro contradictory viewpoints. While most articles seem to offer their views from the political economy of the state, Zhang illustrated that different state or semi-state organisations such as MII, SARFT and many other parties are competitors in the lucrative market and simply take different attitudes over converging business. Among all these state organs, clearly, some rank economic interests over the state interest. While not refuting the overwhelming power of the state, Wacker also indicates that the control of the ICTs in China could involve "a complex interplay between the state, the key commercial actors, namely ISPs, ICPs and the official media" (p. 73). It is these views within the analysis that make the arguments more stimulating. The strength of all this exploration lies in probing circumstances in which the political demands might be overridden by economic constraints, ad hoc bureaucratic decisions and macro policy, to name a few. This drives readers and would-be researchers to reconsider the complex, interdependent factors that affect the ICTs, rather than reducing all technological development to politics.
- 7 In terms of the originality of the studies, the data and figures released in the book are new. Those who can read Chinese materials can also easily acquire the research reports and the cited original research articles on Chinese websites. Much of the authors' work is largely based on secondary analysis of these published data. Given the importance of the impact of ICTs on worldwide business and the political world-order, there are many

up-front surveys on China's ICTs by formal survey groups (e.g. CNNIC), private consulting firms and the United Nations. These data will be out-of-date when new data are published. This makes the book's figures and data its most valuable asset.

- 8 A few similar works on the study of Internet development in China supply more extensive first hand data on the problem. Zhang and Woesler recently provided a better description of the development of Internet surveillance by citing cases and methods applied by the government to control Internet users, websites and service providers⁴. Also, whereas the legal aspects are only mentioned briefly in a few chapters in this book Nah, Wong and Seok's book comprehensively documented technical and original laws or regulations, economic and social issues specifically on e-commerce in China⁵.
- 9 I would suggest that the main value of this book lies in its ability to synthesize the secondary data and reinterpret it in new ways for the reader. For example, while integrating Machiavellian views on how the state can dictate the development of the Internet, Wacker weighed current studies and concluded that the resistance of the people and the democratic potential of civic virtual space is an area that needs to be explored. With repeated interpretation and integration of the literature, the reader gets well acquainted with different views and is inspired with new approaches and perspectives regarding ICTs in China.
- 10 Lastly, because of the numerous and diverse viewpoints, I would argue that the value of the book extends beyond the development of ICTs in China and includes those factors governing the growth of the Internet which parallel other communication technologies such as the fax machine, the mobile phone, digital television, and so on in China. Moreover, ICTs are not just technologies per se ; the politics and economics of ICTs epitomise the dynamics of the political economy of the Chinese state.

NOTES

1. CNNIC, The 16th Statistical Survey Report on the Internet Development in China, July 2005, <http://www.cnnic.net.cn/download/2005/2005072601.pdf>.

2. For instance, Zhao Yuezhi, "Transnational Capital, the Chinese State, and China's Communication Industries in a Fractured Society", *Javnost : the Public*, Vol. 10(4), 2001, pp. 53-74.

3. Michael Curtin, "Murdoch's dilemma, or 'What's the price of TV in China ?'", *Media, Culture & Society*, Vol. 27(2), 2005, pp. 155-175. Anthony Fung, "Think Globally, Act Locally : China's Rendezvous with MTV", *Global Media and Communication*, forthcoming.

4. Zhang Junhua and Martin Woesler (eds.), *China's Digital Dream - The Impact of the Internet on Chinese Society*, London, European University Press, 2003.

5. Nah Seok Ling, John Wong, Seok Ling Nah, *China's Emerging New Economy : The Internet and E-commerce*. Singapore, Singapore University Press, 2001.