Yu Hong


The past two decades of development of the internet in China have been the subject of countless volumes and research articles, ranging from historical overviews and technical examinations to sociological inquiries and ethnographic reports. Yu Hong’s *Networking China*, the fifth volume in the Geopolitics of Information series published by the University of Illinois Press, makes a point of taking both a step back toward the broader scope of communication studies and a step forward toward the rigorous application of a political economy perspective to the infrastructural networking of the People’s Republic of China. Hong’s focus is introduced in the very title of this volume: *The Digital Transformation of the Chinese Economy*, a process that, in her view, brings together continuous efforts at economic restructuring and the global pull of digital capitalism. Historically, this book reaches back to the early stages of communications development in Maoist China but is clearly dedicated to a narrower examination of the role of information and communications technology (ICT) in the decade following the 2008 economic crisis (p. 1) and culminating in the ‘Internet Plus’ restructuring plan proposed by Premier Li Keqiang in 2015. In the words of the author, China and communications emerge as two ‘leading engines’ of the post-2008 global economy, and the increasingly pivotal role of the national policies and industries warrants an examination of the complex dynamics of the political economy of digital communications.

Hong uses the interplay between crisis and restructuring to frame the consolidation of communications as a ‘pillar industry’ in the Chinese context, and to highlight with precision how, when and where the layered processes of networking the nation become enmeshed with the global ideology that Dan Schiller calls ‘digital capitalism’ (2000). Communications in China have become ‘an emerging pivot of the ever-mutating capitalist political economy’ (p. 3), but this has happened in ways peculiar to a developmental context split between foreign investment in export processing and attempts at restructuring the state-controlled sector. Global digital capitalism, in Hong’s view, isn’t merely a collection of buzzwords but a pervasive interlocking of infrastructures, platforms, and service models that is already reshaping both economies and societies around the world. Given these premises, it becomes evident that the role of the Chinese state is central to the modernization of digital infrastructure, the restructuring of ICT industries, and the emancipation from path dependence in innovation, all processes necessary for potentially propelling the country towards a globally leading position. In a move that is shared by a
growing number of Chinese ICT researchers, the author refuses to approach her inquiry under a ‘dichotomous state-market and state-information framing’ (p. 6) and proposes, instead, to complicate the role of the Chinese state in digital restructuring:

rather than reify China exceptionalism in the networked age and posit some intrinsic sociopolitical logic of the ostensibly insulated communications system.... this volume places the swiftly changing communication landscape of China within the political economy of Chinese-style capitalism, which is intricately intertwined with the world economy. (p. 6)

*Networking China* is a declaredly state-centric analysis and aims to clarify that the state itself is rife with ‘contention, collusion, and compromises between regulatory bureaus and corporate actors, public and private sectors, transnational linkages and nationalistic interests, and powerful stakeholders and the rest of society’ (p. 10). Constrained by socialist commitments and globalizing convergence, the Chinese state is under pressure to find viable alternatives, and the success of its present technonationalist path of ICT development is all but certain (p. 12). Hong’s account follows these uncertainty and ambivalence through six evenly paced chapters, some reworked from previously published research articles, and each approaching the larger tensions between the export-processing economy and the state-controlled one from a specific perspective: sociospatial relations, telecommunications development, individual technologies (broadband, 3G, digital TV), and governance.

Chapter 1 establishes the rarely discussed spatial divides and profound contradictions resulting from decades of communications development in the country, focusing on the inequalities between coastal provinces and rural hinterlands and arguing that the economic restructuring of ICT industries has contributed to entrenching the infrastructural disconnection and industrial hollowing out of western China (p. 19). This systemic issue is further analyzed in chapter 2 through a history of Chinese telecom networks, demonstrating that the ‘coastal bias’ has been largely baked into infrastructural development (p. 41). After setting the stage, Hong discusses three technological domains: the broadband gold rush of the late 2000s and its influence on web-enabled consumption habits (chapter 3); the technonationalist forging of a ‘home-based industrial strategy’ through 3G network construction (chapter 4); the digitization of the TV media system and the resulting impact of online content-distribution platforms on the cultural industries (chapter 5). Chapter 6, titled ‘Building Network Nation’, revisits the volume’s arguments through the lens