The global stage

Global Media: Foreign Media Organizations in China

In the globalization age, information flow, just like commodity flow and capital flow, increasingly takes place at the global stage. Global media and communication, although certainly has its flaws, has become a prominent phenomenon today. This constitutes the international environment in which the current development of media in China takes place.

Globalization and Global Media

When communications satellites and computer networks took off in the early 1990s, the world found itself faced with a new generation of media technology which not only undermined geographical distances but also national borders. Fueled by a wave of communications policy deregulation, changes in the media industries soon led to the belief that the whole world was now linked by global media which transmit messages in split seconds to audiences everywhere, including those living in the most remote corners of the world. The era of " global" media thus pronounced itself arrived.

In recent years people have come to witness interesting, albeit somewhat puzzling, developments in the world of media, specifically the transnationalization of national, or even local, media in many parts of the world. These developments have painted a media landscape that quite different from what people used to be familiar with.

In the discourse of globalization, there does not seem to be a generally accepted definition of the term. On many different occasions the term has been defined as the free worldwide flow of the production elements and resources, as borderless or stateless economy. It is also widely viewed as the

cultural, political, and economic, integration of the whole world. Even before the term " globalization" became a catchword in the academic and popular vocabulary in the 1990s, global operations and transnational corporations in many industries had long aroused academic attention. In addition, many scholars have long been noticing the connection between the media and globalization. For instance, McLuhan, a media theorist, was claimed to have suggested their connection " by combining ' the medium is the message' with his ' global village'" (Rantanen, 2004: 1.)

Globalization suggests simultaneously two views of culture. The first, taking a monoculturalist point of view, treats globalization as the " extension outward of a particular culture to its limits, the globe," through a process of conquest, homogenization and unification brought about by the consumption of the same cultural and material products (Featherstone, 1995: 6). The second one, adopting a multiculturalist stand, perceive globalization as the " compression of cultures" (Featherstone, 1995: 6).

While the meaning of globalization remains ambiguous, " global media" or " media globalization" have quickly become clichés in media studies. Two questions can be raised about the use of such terms, however. First, what is meant by a globalized media industry, and secondly, can we assume that a genuine globalization of the industry has already taken place? More precisely, what is the direction of changes that we can observe now- globalization, localization, or something else?

Too often when the term " global" is used in conjunction with the media, it refers primarily to the extent of coverage, with the popularity of satellite

television and computer networks serving as evidence of the globalization of communications. However, the linkages brought about by the globalization process are largely confined to OECD and G7 member countries, which constitute one-third of the world population. And even when a medium, e. g. CNN, can put over 150 countries on its map, the rate of penetration and actual consumption can present rather a different picture. As Street (1997: 77) has said, the fact that a product is available everywhere is no guarantee that it achieves the same level of popularity, let alone acquires the same significance, meaning or response (Featherstone, 1990: 10). It is no secret that CNN's audiences normally account for only a small fragment of a nation's population.

But even with its conceptual flaws corrected, coverage is merely one of the important dimensions of the media industry. The meaning of a globalized industry would be seriously distorted if other dimensions were left out of the discussion. These dimensions, including the dynamics of the market, modes of production, the contents and messages transmitted, are closely related to the perception of the role and function of media in the globalization process, the direction of change in the industry, and ultimately, the cultural images presented by the theories of globalization. What roles and changes, then, should be expected to see in the media industries according to the monoculturalist point of view?

Media Development in China
Since the 1990s, with broadcasting and newspapers outlets already reaching large numbers, China has moved onwards into a new stage of media development, prioritizing quality improvement, intensive

management/operation instead of increase in numbers, and optimization of the industry structure. In the globalization context – with a goal of making its media more competitive and more effective in the mass media market, as well as to strengthen the media industry, China has been adopting the strategy of optimization of the media industry structure (Zhang, 2007: 78). The country has closed down, combined, or transformed several media organizations that failed to satisfy the needs of the market competition.

In recent years, China's media development is also mirrored in the adoption of the latest information technologies, most especially the Internet, by media organizations. In the late 1990s, media organizations in the country used computer technologies extensively. The fever in adopting Internet technologies was spurred on primarily by factors like the eagerness to embrace the trend throughout the world, towards building an information superhighway, the need to stay competitive with other media institutions, and the desire to grasp the opportunities for the station's or paper's new development (Zhang, 2007: 78).

The Chinese experience suggests a strong link between globalization and the enthusiasm of the media organizations to adopt Internet technologies. Starting from the year 2000, media in the country have maintained such desire to adopt state-of-the-art information and communications technologies. Along with the ever-increasing media websites, a new type of websites has emerged – sites jointly established and operated by several media institutions in a region (Zhang, 2007: 78).

Presently, new media technologies are in the spotlight in the technological stage in China's media industry. For example, CTP technology is widely used in the country's newspaper industry. Digital TV and digital audio broadcasting have also emerged in China. Internet protocol TV (IPTV) is also one of the highlights in the current development of the Chinese TV industry. In the area of online outlets, news websites have become a recent type of media outlets in the country. News websites are composed of three levels: websites of large national media organizations, major provincial/municipal ones, and city-level ones (Zhang, 2007: 79). Moreover, cross-media operations in mass communications constitute another important aspect of the development of media in China (Zhang, 2007: 80).

Foreign Media

Since China entered the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, the government has eventually opened its domestic media market. Because of the the increasing degree of the media openness, foreign media organizations have begun to enter the Chinese media market. In 2001, from October to December, the government permitted three overseas TVchannels to go into Guangdong province. These are Star TV, Phoenix Satellite Television, and CETV, which is owned by AOL Time Warner. It is the very first time for China to allow foreign channels to be played on local cable and satellite system.

Despite these limited entries, the event has caused major ripples throughout the entire Chinese media industry. In addition, in October 2004, the State Administration of Radio Film and Television (SART| FT) enacted two regulation policies allowing foreign media in the country through more

diverse formats (Chan and Ellis, 2005: 1). It suggested a constantly-open media market toward foreign capitals in China, a fiery trial for the entire country.

Due to the easing of regulation, foreign media organizations have started to swarm into China. In 2008, SARFT approved 33 foreign channels. Many broadcasting organizations had branches in Beijing, Guangdong, Shanghai, and Chongqing. These include Time-Warner, Sony, Disney, News Corp, and Viacom (China Business New, 2008: 1). Shanghai, for example, houses competitive foreign media organizations like CNBC (US Cable Network), BBC (British Broadcasting Company), FBC (Italy FactBased Communications), NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corp.), and SUNSET (France), with investment flowing from the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Switzerland, Germany, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea, among others.

Localization

According to neo-Marxists, who advocate a homogeneous world view, one of the major characteristics of globalization is that everyone has the feeling of being a member of one single society. The feeling, as described by Albrow (1990: 8-10), is the sense of " the whole earth as the physical environment, where all are citizens, consumers and producers, possessed of a " common sense interest in collective action to solve global problems." The increasing interdependencies of nation-states has been cited as a major cause for nurturing such a feeling. Today the comforts and assurances of local communal experience are now undermined by distant social forces.

Communications media, TV in particular, is an important factor in the compression of time and space. It constantly brings distant events and concerns to the homes and minds of people around the world as they happen. This constitutes an intrusion of distant events into everyday consciousness. However, this compression of time and space is not without its limits. As pointed out by Mittelman (1996: 229), capital and technology flows must eventually " touch down" in distinct places. These places, in contrast to the global phenomenal world, are where everyone lives his or her local life.

To human beings, wanting a place where one feels a sense of belonging is natural. However, such a sense of place is cultural, as has been pointed out by Hall (1995: 178). Despite the intrusion of distant social forces, feelings and perception of people about their environment remain closely associated with the memories and personal ties they have, together with the social, cultural, and even geographical and climatic setting of their environments. The emphasis on what is called a " local culture" is " the taken-for-granted, habitual and repetitive nature of the everyday culture of which individuals have a practical mastery" (Featherstone, 1995: 92). This and the cultural forms, the common language, shared knowledge and experiences associated with a place, are the essence of the concept of local culture.

Global political and economic factors and media technologies serve to compress, but not eliminate, time and space. In addition, the sense of place, something associated with the essence of a local culture, has become a major determinant in the restructuring of the world communications industry. To suggest that media globalization is no more than a part of a

process of domination by Western media – and ultimately of the Westernization of world cultures – conflicts with the advocacy of Asian values in Asia and is reductionist.

To modify the monoculturalist image of culture, Featherstone (1995: 6) suggested that globalization may be better considered as a " form, a space or field, made possible through improved means of communication in which different cultures meet and clash," or simply " a stage for global differences." According to him, this conception points directly to the fragmented and de-centered aspects of the globalization of culture, and in the mean time suggests greater cultural exchanges and complexity.

One may argue that a multiculturalist view of globalization does not advocate the localization of transnational media as the only venue for communication as a platform for cultures to meet and clash. But powerful as the idea may be, this view does not offer a clear picture, nor an indication of, how the structure of the world cultural industries has, and will, change; how different it is from what we used to have, and how the ideals of " meeting/clashing points" may be achieved and professed. According to cultural and media imperialism theories, the demise of local cultures and cultural industries was something predictable, as a consequence of the importation of television programs. By the 1990s, however, it has become evident that the theories have suffered from a lack of evidence.

Destructive or Constructive?
Since many foreign media organizations have penetrated China, it can be argued that Western media products transmitted in the process will

challenge or damage the local culture. However, the impacts of these organizations in the local media market in China appear to be constructive, not damaging, to local cultural heritage.

Foreign programs offer great opportunities for reflexive awareness. Audiences do not just receive meanings passively. They are critical and active during the reception process. Watching Hollywood movies and foreign TV shows does not mean the local audience are being American. Instead, in theory, Chinese viewers form a reflexive awareness (who am I? or, who am not I?). Also, many studies in China and the rest of East Asia have suggested that the opposition to foreign culture has been engendered by watching overseas TV shows and thus evokes a protective attitude toward their local culture. While the purity of cultural identity remains a much debated issue, there is no denying that the Chinese audience are also reflexively considering their own identities while being faced with increased importation of foreign cultural products. Regional or national consciousness more than a homogenous global identity enlarges as exposure to alien cultures speeds up.

In spite of some visible evidence of cultural homogenization as part of the everyday life, like westernization, it seems that people have a stronger sense of membership in their groups (Morris, 2002: 278). In addition, according to Harvey (1989: 306), " localism and nationalism have become stronger precisely because of the quest for the security that place always offers". On the contrary, there is little evidence of " cultural abrasion", instead there is an increasing protective attitude and reflexive awareness within the receiving nations (Varan, 1998: 58).

The entry of foreign media organizations in China appears to be constructive, not destructive, when one views localization as a form of cultural adaptation. Cultural adaptation, in the mass media context, refer to a comprise strategy, like adding Chinese subtitles for overseas programs. It also refers to an active devotion into the local culture made by the transnational media. Foreign media organizations not only provide Chinese subtitles to achieve high ratings, but they also do research and make compelling contents for the local audience in China.

In order to produce a program that will fit with the Chinese culture and one that will not offend sensibilities, many foreign media organizations actively delve themselves into local cultures. They also try to penetrate the market by employing local production groups, such as producers, directors, and performers, as well as as original scripts.. The contents are produced to satisfy the local taste, full of cultural factors and traditional background. Thus what transnational media organizations have brought to the country seems not to be the threat of foreign or western cultural products, but the significant amount of foreign investment used to produce local cultural programs.

From the cultural point of view, these programs owned by foreign media organizations would not damage Chinese native norms or values. This is because many shows are produced considering the local audience and embedding with them strong traditional cultural background. From the economic point of view, the significant amount of foreign capital brought by the large media organizations can help the local media market prosper.

Basically, local media companies benefit from the competition by cooperating with foreign companies.

The localization process of the media in China not only induces the indigenized strategies of global companies; it also induces the globalized reactions of local media industries. The strategy of localization cannot be understood simply as a unidirectional flow of global power on the local media industry. Mutual influences suggest a complex and complicated reciprocal interaction between the global and the local, taking into consideration the reverse effects that the local brings to the global.

For example, AOL/Time Warner promised to air CCTV 9th channel through its cable network in Houston, Los Angeles, and New York. CCTV 9th channel contains music, news report, travel and leisure, nature, as well as mandarin education specifically designed to expand the Chinese traditional culture. The aim of such move appears to be the reeducation of the Americans and Chinese Americans and changing of their attitude toward China (Rowe, 2001: 1). This shows that Chinese TV officials have already realized the significance of exportation of Chinese programs. By borrowing resources from foreign media organizations, China is able to to send out locally produced products, shaping western attitude toward China and its culture ideologically.

It is also noteworthy that many other broadcasters throughout Asia have already begun to target people in overseas market. For example, TVB has been serving Chinese speaking subscribers in North America and Canada. Likewise, MBC, a Korean broadcaster, has established a channel aimed at

Koreans in the US. Zee TV, a South Asian broadcaster, has also penetrated The US and the UK (Chadha and Kavoori, 2000: 415).

As media globalization goes intensive, further reaction taken by the receiving societies is not limited to the cultural resistance of the local audience any more. It now has changed to the active competition among media organizations as well as the exportation of cultural products outside China. Such active activities from China, and also the developing countries in Asia, are seen to increase in the next few decades. With a stronger than ever economic development, the exportation of media contents will became more and more.

It can be argued that there is actually no absolute weak and strong culture in the media globalization trend. Every culture changes over time – no culture is exempt from this fact. In economic arena, the : Third World" or " developed countries" category has constantly been facing challenges and has been forced to change. The same is true in the media and cultural arena. No one culture in the world will be the stronger or weaker culture forever.

Conclusion

The influx of foreign media organizations in China has not yet threatened the local culture as seriously as many observers have proclaimed. There is a conscious effort among transnational media organizations to adapt culturally in order to produce programs that cater to the local taste and ones that embed traditional culture in them. Local Chines audience have a strong reflexive awareness, making them active viewers not passive. This safeguards local culture.

Similarly, the local media industry is not passively waiting for challenge; rather, local media organizations actively pose serious competition with media conglomerates, borrowing their resources to promote Chinese culture outside China and to educate people around the world about their culture. Cultural hybridization is expected to be promoted by the strong influences of local responses. Recent exporting activities in China and other Asian nations suggest a novel reciprocal interaction between the global and the local.

What the globalization of media brings to China, and the less developed countries in Asia, is not only the difficult challenges, but also the many benefit. While the eastern and western cultures become increasingly because of the media globalization trend, local cultures are also given the opportunity to keep its own characteristics and its independence. Overall, the consequences of media globalization to China seem to be constructive rather than destructive both from local cultural and economic points of view.