

Preface

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Yuqi Na's book *The Chinese Internet: Political Economy and Digital Discourse* is an excellent and insightful study of the political economy of the Internet in China. It combines critical theory and empirical social research in order to show what role ideology has played among powerful political and economic groups that have shaped the development of the Internet in China as well as among Internet users. The author also studied how Chinese Internet users have reproduced and challenged Internet ideologies. Methodologically, this study combines theory construction, critical discourse analysis, and focus groups. It analyses official documents, speeches of Internet corporations' CEOs, as well as data the author collected by conducting focus groups with Chinese Internet users (manufacturing workers, programmers, and white-collar workers). This book gives particular attention to the roles of informational developmentalism, techno-nationalism, consumerism, technological determinism, and digital individualism in the context of the Internet in China.

The Internet in China and China's Political Economy

Why is a study about the political economy of China's Internet important? In 2022, the world's largest transnational digital and media corporations listed in the top 100 of the Forbes Global 2000 list of the world's largest transnational corporations were Amazon, Apple, Alphabet, Microsoft, Verizon Communications, AT&T, Tencent Holdings, China Mobile, Comcast, Alibaba, Meta Platforms, SoftBank, Intel, Nippon Telegraph and Telephone, Sony, Taiwan Semiconductor, Deutsche Telekom, Cisco Systems, Walt Disney, and IBM (data source: <https://www.forbes.com/lists/global2000>, accessed on April 17, 2023). Twenty out of the world's largest transnational corporations are part of the media and digital industries. Industries and companies organizing mediated communication and digital communication play an important role in the world economy. Of course, also financialization in the form of banks, insurance companies, and real estate as well as classical manufacturing, construction, and oil and energy companies play an important role.

The majority of the world's large transnational media and digital corporations have their headquarters in the United States. Some have their headquarters in China. "BAT" (Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent) is a term that has been established for characterizing large Chinese Internet corporations that have shaped the Internet in China. TikTok has become one of the most popular apps in the world. It has both an international English version and a Chinese version (Douyin, 抖音). The Chinese corporation ByteDance which created the app has become one of the major players in the Internet economy. In 2022, China had more than 1 billion Internet users, and about 70% of its population used the Internet (data source: <https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm#asia>, accessed on April 17, 2023). It was the country with the largest number of Internet users in the world. In 2022, TikTok was the world's most downloaded app (<https://www.businessofapps.com/data/most-popular-apps/>, accessed on April 17, 2023). At the same time, it has also been involved in controversies about critical infrastructures that include communications as infrastructure.

Given the significant role of China's digital industry in the world (digital) economy, we need to better understand how the political economy of this industry works. This book is an outstanding contribution to this task that utilizes the approach of the Political Economy of Communication.

Table 0.1 shows the development of the share of agriculture, manufacturing, and services in the Chinese GDP. The data indicates that China's economy has been undergoing a simultaneous process of post-industrialization and industrialization. As a consequence, construction, manufacturing, the finance sector, and the digital sector have become key aspects of the Chinese economy. Agriculture has at the same time become less important. In 2021, China accounted for 30.3% of the world's manufacturing value-added and 15.2% of the world's services value-added (data source: World Bank Data, accessed on April 17, 2023).

Since the 1970s, China has become an important economy where commodities as part of an international division of labour are assembled and manufactured. But manufacturing is not the only global aspect of China's economy. Also, services such as finance and digital technologies are important aspects of China's role in the global political economy. China's Belt and Road Initiative is not just a project that constructs physical infrastructures in other countries but also includes a digital component, namely the Digital Silk Road Initiative. China's political economy has played multiple roles in the global political economy. China in the world of finance has become an important creditor.

Table 0.1 The development of the share of economic sectors in the GDP, in per cent

<i>Country</i>	<i>Economic sector</i>	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2020
China	Agriculture	35.1	29.9	26.8	14.9	9.9	8.0
	Manufacturing	40.4	48.2	41.2	45.7	46.4	38.0
	Services	24.5	21.9	32.0	39.4	43.7	54.0

Source: UNCTADstat (accessed on April 17, 2023)

Political Economy and Ideology Critique

Political Economy as a field of study is focused on the interaction of politics and the economy. This includes not just the analysis of how regulation and the state interact with the economy but also the interactions of worldviews and ideology with the economy. Yuqi Na's book gives particular attention to the analysis of the interaction of the economy and ideology in the context of the Chinese Internet.

Already for Marx the interaction of ideology and capital was an important aspect of the Critique of Political Economy. In *Capital Volume I*, Marx starts the analysis with a focus on the commodity. He first focuses on aspects of value and labour and then in Section 1.4 of Chapter 1 stresses the role of ideology when analysing "The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret" (Marx, 1867, Section I.1.4). The fetishism of the commodity is an ideological aesthetic that makes social relations disappear behind the appearance of commodities, capital, and money. Specific "*social relations of production between people appear as relations of things to people, or else certain social relations appear as the natural properties of things in society*" (Marx, 1867, p. 1006). Ideology is a structural feature of commodities that makes the existence of commodities, money, exchange, value, and capital appear natural and thing-like. What disappears behind the aesthetic and omnipresence of commodities and money are the social relations in which humans produce and reproduce society, i.e., the historical, relational, and dialectical character of society. "The social relations and therefore the social position of the agents of production in relation to each other, i.e. the *relations of production*, are themselves produced: they are also the constantly renewed result of the process" (Marx, 1867, p. 1065). Ideology in general naturalizes, reifies, and essentializes domination. The analysis of the economy and culture, labour and communication, capitalism and society belong together. All too often they are broken apart so that ideology critique is not seen as part of Critical Political Economy and Critical Political Economy is situated as external to ideology critique. Hence, for example, Critical Labour Studies and Critical Discourse Analysis have developed quite separately as two approaches to the critical analysis of society. Yuqi Na's study is situated in the context of Critical Media and Communication Studies. It avoids the separation of economy and culture by focusing on the analysis of ideology not outside but as a constituent part of political economy.

The Political Economy of Communication

The Critique of the Political Economy of Communication has developed as an important approach and subfield of Media and Communication Studies.

Political Economy of Communication "*is the study of the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources, including communication*

resources” (Mosco, 2009, p. 2). This definition stresses that the approach’s focus is on (a) the analysis of power relations in the context of media and communication (media power, communication power) and (b) that such power has an economic dimension as it has to do with the production, distribution, and consumption of information. What needs to be stressed is that in a Political Economy study, among the power relations studied, socio-economic relations, especially class relations, are considered to play a special role. It is assumed that in class societies, all power relations interact with and are influenced and constrained by class relations.

Graham Murdock and Peter Golding provided the following definition of the Political Economy of Communication: “The obvious starting point for a political economy of mass communications is the recognition that the mass media are first and foremost industrial and commercial organizations which produce and distribute commodities. [...] In addition to producing and distributing commodities, however, the mass media also disseminate ideas about economic and political structures. It is this second and ideological dimension of mass media production which gives it its importance and centrality and which requires an approach in terms of not only economics but also politics” (Murdock & Golding, 1973, pp. 205–207).

Murdock and Golding stress that the Political Economy of Communication analyses the economic character of communication systems, which in capitalism means their role in the production, distribution, and consumption of commodities. Murdock and Golding stress that media in capitalism have a double role in fostering (a) commodification and (b) ideologies.

In the book *Media, Economy, and Society: A Critical Introduction*, I present an introduction to the Critique of the Political Economy of Communication (Fuchs, 2024). My understanding is that the Political Economy of Communication and the Media is an approach that uses social theory, empirical social research, and moral philosophy for analysing the roles of communication and communication systems (media, communications) in society, especially the interaction of politics and economy in the context of the media and communication. It studies how the interaction of communication, politics, and economy works and this interaction’s roles in society. It sees the dialectic relationship between the economy and politics as the most important factor shaping communication and society. An important focus is the analysis of the production, distribution, and consumption of information in the context of society. The Political Economy of Communication and the Media often is a critical analysis of how communication and communications work and are organized in capitalist society works and how they impact on and interact with society and the lives of humans in society. *This critical analysis is also termed Critique of the Political Economy of Communication and the Media*. It gives particular attention to the analysis of the capitalist mode of producing information; communication labour; the production, distribution, and consumption of information and communication(s) as commodities; the space and time of communication; the interaction of politics and the media

economy; ideology critique; communication in the context of class and social struggles; and alternatives to capitalist communication(s) (non-capitalist communication(s)).

Yuqi Na's book is situated in the field of the Critique of the Political Economy of Communication, to which she makes an important contribution.

Critique of the Political Economy of Communication analyses the relationship between capitalism and communication (Fuchs, 2020). Given there are capitalist digital corporations in China, including, for example, Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent, and ByteDance, the question arises how the political economy of China in general and its digital dimension look like. David Harvey stresses that China's political economy is neither similar to Western political economy nor completely dissimilar from it. Authors such as Harvey and Huang, therefore, speak of capitalism with Chinese characteristics (Harvey, 2005, Chapter 5; Huang, 2008). In her book *Communication in China: Political Economy, Power, and Conflict*, communication scholar Yuezhi Zhao (2008) analyses the Chinese characteristics of the political economy of China's media system.

Building on and extending Critical Political Economy approaches such as the ones of Harvey and Zhao, Yuqi Na analyses ideologies of the Internet with Chinese characteristics. *The Chinese Internet: Political Economy and Digital Discourse* is a pathbreaking major contribution to the Political Economy of Communication.

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