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The Nail House: Global Media, Local Politics

May 15, 2007 | Volume 1 | Issue 1
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I've traveled to Asia many times over the past decade, and if everything works flawlessly, the trip takes about 24 hours door-to-door from my home in Madison to a hotel room on the other side of the world. Then it usually takes another 72 hours before my body begins to adjust to the rhythms of Asia. In the semi-hallucinogenic

haze of jet lag, one becomes acutely aware that the titanic global struggle between corporate America and radical Islam figures little in the daily calculations of Chinese citizens who worry more about the dramatic changes taking place in their own backyards. Yet this doesn't mean they're globally disconnected. In fact, the opposite is true.



The Nail House, China

Most recently, their concerns were crystallized in television images of the stubborn nail house, a lonely brick structure sticking out of a vast pit dug around it by shopping mall developers in downtown Chongqing. Refusing to make way without a fight, Wu Ping vigorously waved a Chinese flag from the rooftop of his home, while his wife, Yang, regaled television reporters with vigorous criticism of the moneyed and politically-connected interests that threatened their home. The particulars of the case are perhaps less significant than the fact that the Wu family staged a self-conscious media war, receiving widespread TV coverage and more than 10 million Internet page views before government officials clamped the lid on it. An opinion poll conducted by one of China's most popular websites, QQ.com, showed support for the Wus running four-to-one.

Depending on whom one listens to, China is either teetering on the brink of

greatness or catastrophic demise. It is at once the most powerful economy in Asia and perhaps the most fragile, with some experts estimating that more than a hundred million of its citizens have taken to the road in search of work, while hundreds of thousands more have stayed at home to organize demonstrations for economic equity and social justice. Sit-ins, marches, and militant clashes with authorities are now regular occurrences, as government officials scramble to respond to the rising tide of protests.

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Such a world is a long way from the end of history that Francis Fukuyama and others anticipated only a decade ago. At the time, it was suggested that the most momentous decisions after the Cold War would revolve around a set of rather mundane choices: Coke or Pepsi? Sony or Panasonic? MTV or ESPN? Media metaphors flowed easily then. Satellite TV and the dawning of the Worldwide Web seemed to augur a collapsing of boundaries and the ultimate triumph of consumer capitalism, leading to an era of global peace and prosperity. US leaders during the 1980s and 1990s contended that that trade liberalization, new technologies, and Western expertise (the Washington Consensus) would unleash the productive power of lesser-developed nations, a classic reassertion of the development paradigm that had fallen into disfavor during the 1970s. They likewise resurrected the end of ideology as the end of history, which played as a companion theme to the weightless economy and the global communication grid.

Of course the worm turns and now, in the new millennium, cultural and economic difference again seem as intractable as jet lag. Societies have grown wealthier, but disparities have grown greater. Global communication technologies have furthermore engendered disjunctive aspirations and imaginations on the part of media users. That is, rather than fostering spontaneous development, television exposure seems to be exacerbating tensions between global imagery and local experience. This media lag engenders much discomfort among the poor, but it also makes it possible for the Wus of Chongqing to lay claim to global standards of personal rights and governmental transparency, neither of which were available to them through local institutions. Television has created a space for Wus to imagine and perform their protest for appreciative audiences near and far, and to bring pressure to bear on powerful interests who aren't accustomed to such scrutiny. Like

global finance, world trade, and political liberalization, television is a powerful change agent in Asia.

The medium spread through the region at a remarkable pace during the 1990s, adding close to two billion new viewers. In China alone TV access has risen from virtually zero to some 90% of the population over the past twenty years. A medium that was originally intended to foster economic development and national unity has become a source of significant anxiety among leaders in Beijing, sparking debates over rising expectations and growing social activism. A similar trajectory of rapid adoption has taken place in India and the Middle East where policy makers also fret that the rapid diffusion of television exerts intense pressure to deliver the fruits of economic and social development quickly. Just as jet lag challenges one's physical and mental capacities, so too is media diffusion challenging the institutional capacities of Asian societies. In this state of disjuncture, disparities of wealth seem to take on vivid significance in the lives of viewers. Rather than fostering aspirations for modernization and development (a desire to catch up), television makes uneven development fantastically apparent to TVs newest audiences.

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Put another way, if one looks carefully at a map of the world's proven oil reserves, it is glaringly obvious that resources in the Middle East eclipse the combined reserves of the rest of the world. Likewise, if one examines the geographic distribution of the world's manufacturing workforce as a function of labor cost, one quickly is alerted to the significance of places like Guangdong province or Andra Pradesh. Now compare these global maps of resource distribution to maps of resource consumption, energy use, and per capita income. The disparities are stunning but nevertheless commonly pass without critical comment in the mainstream media. Yet even though television rarely acknowledges these disparities at an explicit level, it prismatically refracts them through the disjunctive delivery of fantasy images of consumption to the shantytowns and cramped quarters of the world's working poor. Moreover, television's fixation on female consumerism offers up relentless images of feminine agency that are commonly embraced by young women who leave behind the drudgery of familial servitude for a chance to migrate to the workshops of

transnational capital. Social tensions therefore multiply beyond class issues to controversies over gender relations and family values, as well. Therefore, like jet lag, media lag intensifies one's sensitivity to now and then, here and there, us and them.

It's noteworthy therefore that the end of ideology coincided with the emergence of development communications during the 1950s and that the end of history accompanied the dawning of a global communication grid during the 1990s. Yet we have neither transcended ideology nor history. Instead, the globalization of electronic media and the resulting phenomenon of media lag is actually fostering ideological and historical awareness despite (or perhaps because of) television's fixation on abundance and consumerism. It is therefore worth paying attention to the operations of both ideology and history as we reflect upon the recent increase in TV viewing around the world. For the social transformations that accompany new communication technologies often take time to register. In Asia, those transformations are perhaps just beginning.

Tags

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