

# China Information

<http://cin.sagepub.com>

---

**Book Review: Haiqing Yu, Media and Cultural Transformation in China. New York: Routledge, 2009. xi + 217 pp., with index, bibliography, notes, glossary, appendix, pictures, figures, and tables. ISBN: 978-0-415-44755-3 (hc). Price: 80.00**

Daniela Stockmann

*China Information* 2010; 24; 114

DOI: 10.1177/0920203X100240010509

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://cin.sagepub.com>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

**Additional services and information for *China Information* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://cin.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://cin.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav>

Perhaps the impact of *New Masters, New Servants*, which is both standing on the shoulders of, yet in many ways improving upon, other feminist writers on China such as Solinger, Anagnost, Barlow, Rofel, and Pun, is going to be lessened due to the timing of its publication. Unfortunately this book, whose fieldwork was carried out between 1998 and 2000, is being published at a time when the theory and language of Spivak, Derrida, Lacan, and Foucault (and Butler, Harraway, Kristeva, Irigaray) have, whether rightly or wrongly, slowly given way to social theory less concerned with terms such as “signification,” “epistemic,” “discursive power,” “telos,” “allegory,” “textual practices,” and “heterogeneity.” However, while this language (within a language) has quietly fallen out of favor, this should in no way stand in the way of *New Masters, New Servants* being seen as perhaps the authoritative ethnographic text on rural-to-urban migration in China during the 1980s–90s. Therefore, this historically situated book, due to its wide-ranging in-depth analysis of reform-era China, makes informative reading for anthropologists, sociologists, political economists, social psychologists, and geographers alike. While the *baomu* under study may have trouble with the demands of *suzhi*, the same cannot be said for *New Masters, New Servants*, for it is a theoretical ethnography of the highest academic quality.

Haiqing Yu, *Media and Cultural Transformation in China*. New York: Routledge, 2009. xi + 217 pp., with index, bibliography, notes, glossary, appendix, pictures, figures, and tables.  
ISBN: 978-0-415-44755-3 (hc). Price: £80.00.

**Reviewed by:** Daniela Stockmann, *Leiden University, The Netherlands*

The Chinese media may be controlled by the government, but not everything that is published in the state-controlled media has necessarily been initiated by public officials. In *Media and Cultural Transformation in China*, Yu Haiqing argues that the changes of the Chinese media during the reform era has transformed the way in which ordinary citizens relate to the state.

Yu studies this relationship based on four case studies: the new millennium celebration, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) reportage, urbanites’ uses of the new media around acquired HIV/AIDS and SARS, and Falun Gong’s media campaign with the Chinese state. Each of these cases focuses on the role of different actors in Chinese “cultural transformation”—the state, netizens and cell phone users, journalists, and transnational actors. Relying on discourse analysis, Yu is particularly interested in narratives and counter-narratives of the nation in each case. She argues that the relationship between state and societal actors in the Chinese media is best characterized as a “third realm,” whereby space is negotiated between societal and political forces. The interplay between narratives (originating from the state) and counter-narratives (originating from societal actors) creates media publics or “discursive spaces” that make up an ever-changing mediasphere (p. 35). Instead of thinking about contemporary Chinese media as an emerging public sphere, the state has retreated from people’s daily lives, giving way to third realms. These third realms express “a sense of in-between-ness” in state–society relations (p. 35).

New media technology, such as the internet and cell phones, are the key media through which counter-narratives enter public discourse in each case. Yu's argument is thus much in line with most works on new media in China. In Chinese studies the internet is generally regarded as a means to strengthen societal forces at the expense of the state, despite state attempts to seek control through the means of technology. The most original and interesting aspects of the book therefore lie in the rich detail of individual case studies and the interpretation of public discourse by the author.

One aspect of particular interest to researchers of the Chinese media is the relationship between audiences and the news medium in China. Yu makes the important observation that the term "audience" replaced terms such as "the masses" and "comrades" along with the marketization of the traditional media (p. 9). This change in terms reflects a change in the relationship between ordinary citizens and the mass media. Based on detailed case studies of public discourse on HIV/AIDS and SARS, Yu develops the concept of "media citizenship" whereby citizenship is used as a synonym for active participation in public discourse and the political efficacy that accompanies it. Similar to the weapons of the weak described by James Scott's *Weapons of the Weak* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), Chinese netizens' and cell phone users' active participation in public discourse through the means of the new media is a contestation over ordinary citizens' "right to communicative means and space" dominated by the state (p. 111). When sending an SMS message or posting a message or article on a BBS, ordinary people can turn themselves from consumers of media into citizens of media. Because of the large numbers of these messages people can imagine themselves staying invisible while at the same time making their concerns visible to the state, even though in reality their message may have little impact on policymaking and individuals may be tracked down by the state through technological means.

While this is an interesting observation, it is based entirely on the subjective interpretation of the author. For example, Yu collected short messages circulated during the 2003 SARS crisis and interprets the meaning of these texts to the user. This research would have benefited from interviews, focus groups, or surveys with ordinary citizens to provide evidence of how people perceive their relationship with the news medium itself. However, the way in which Yu explains the meaning of individual messages is insightful and worth testing more systematically in future studies.

Overall, *Media and Cultural Transformation in China* is of interest to researchers of Chinese state–society relations for the questions it raises. When do societal actors at home and abroad place issues on the agenda and change public discourse in China? Why do they succeed in some cases but not in others? These are key questions that readers with an interest in media and state–society relations will take from this book.