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Edward Herman and *Manufacturing Consent* in China

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Abstract

Boosted by a Chinese translation of *Manufacturing Consent* in 2011, “manufacturing consent” and “propaganda model” have become fairly well-known terms in the Chinese communication studies field. Actual understandings and invocations of these ideas, however, are complex and multifaceted. Graduate students tend to have a superficial understanding of these ideas without a grasp of Herman and Chomsky’s broader critique of the political economy of global communication. State propaganda officials and communication strategists tend to accept these concepts for their demystification of the US media system on the one hand, and use *Manufacturing Consent* as a “how to” guide to enhance the effectiveness of Chinese official communication on the other. While there are also examples of more substantive expositions of Herman and Chomsky’s ideas on their own terms, a strong liberal perspective continues to take the US media as a normative model for China and ignore works such as *Manufacturing Consent*. As China expands its global reach, how Chinese scholars come to terms with Western critical communication scholarship and develop their own indigenous critique of the political economy of global communication has emerged as an issue of both theoretical and practical importance.

Keywords

Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent*, Propaganda Model, China, Chinese Communication Studies

I never met Professor Edward Herman; however, his work had a large impact on me. In fact, the mere mention of his name immediately brought up the titles of three of his single-authored or co-authored books, *The Real Terror Network: Terrorism in Fact and Propaganda*; *Global Media: The New Missionaries of Global Capitalism*, and of course,

Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media. As a researcher from China and as somebody who undertook to study “the regime of objectivity” in North American news media as part of my graduate work, these works constituted part of the foundations for my critical knowledge on the political economy of US and global communication. The “five filters” that shaped US media coverage of global affairs, especially those in relation to different countries in the rest of the world, the US media’s “double standards” in reporting human rights abuses and political violence, the distinction between “worthy” and “unworthy” victims of human rights abuses, as well as the distinction between state-sponsored or “wholesale” terrorism and “retail terrorism”, were some of the powerful concepts that linger in my mind.

So, not surprisingly, when I had a chance to co-edit a translation series of English language critical political economy of communication books for Peking University Press in China in the late 2000s, *Manufacturing Consent* was a clear choice, and to my surprise, it was not yet translated into Chinese at the time. The book, along with four other English language political economy books, were included in the small trial series. Published in 2011, the Chinese edition of the book, according to an editor at the Press, had a first press-run of 6,000 copies. As of mid-May 2018, 5,300 copies had been sold. However, this is not the whole story of the book’s circulation. When I checked the Chinese Internet, it immediately became clear that there is another world of the book’s circulation: like many other academic books, PDFs of the entire Chinese version of the book are available in China’s cyberspace for free downloading on many websites. Thus, there is no question that the actual circulation of the book is much wider than the hardcopy.

A Famous Book with a Not So Famous First Author

How was the reception of Professor Herman’s work in China? I contacted B, an earnest and hard-working doctoral student in China, for a quick reality-check in the late afternoon of May 15, 2018. Maybe it was pure coincidence; maybe I was blessed by Professor Herman’s spirit: B told me that he had been reading *Manufacturing Consent* all day that day! Why? Because, a few days ago, in the middle of finalizing his doctoral dissertation on the media in the Middle East, he had come across a translated book by another Western scholar who criticized the “Propaganda Model”.

So, he decided to reread the book to find out what exactly the target of the specific critique was and whether it was valid.

B's experience of being triggered to reread the book because of a criticism of it is probably not untypical. Because the "Propaganda Model" has been so influential, it has attracted many criticisms. These criticisms, in some cases by "big name" Western scholars, unintentionally contributed to its publicity, even though it may have also simultaneously contributed to the model's marginalization and dismissal. For example, many years ago, when I suggested a doctoral student in the US to read the book, she immediately dismissed it as not worthwhile her time. When I asked the reason for her quick dismissal, she responded by saying that it is "instrumentalist", and she cited an authority who had said so.

Although mainstream American communication scholarship constituted the bulk of Chinese textbook knowledge, the "Propaganda Model" has also earned a place in the "established" knowledge system in the journalism and communication research field, even though it was typically attributed to the more famous Noam Chomsky alone. For example, *Manufacturing Consent* was one of the twenty titles in a widely circulated list of must-read books for graduate entrance examinations administered by a leading school in the field, with Noam Chomsky listed as the sole author of the book. In another case, "Norm Chomsky: The Propaganda Model" was featured in a concise half-page dictionary-style codification of "core knowledge" in a book self-advertised as China's most valued reference guide for journalism and communication students wishing to undertake graduate entrance examinations. Given that reference guides like this are indeed very popular among those who wish to master the basic repertoire of ideas and concepts for graduate studies in the field, there is ground to believe that many Chinese scholars with post-graduate degrees have heard of the model. Chomsky's famous status as a linguist has no doubt contributed to the model's authority and wide popularity.

According to W, another graduate student at a leading Chinese university I interviewed for this piece, he bought the book when he was a third-year undergraduate student, and he had heard of the concept multiple times and in

different contexts in lectures during his undergraduate studies. Like B, while W is also aware of the name “Herman”, and he even remembered that Herman is indeed the first author of *Manufacturing Consent*, he has no idea of who Herman was, or what field of specialization he was in, although he assumes Herman must be a white male American scholar.

An Easy to Follow Model in a Not-So-Easy to Finish Book

To gain a rudimentary knowledge of the “Propaganda Model” through study guides and undergraduate lectures is one thing; to have actually read *Manufacturing Consent*, especially from cover to cover, is another. Here again, the respective experiences of B and W were probably typical of those of other Chinese graduate students. And they are unsurprisingly similar.

B told me that he first purchased the Chinese translation of the book when he bought another book in the Peking University translation series and found out that this book is also part of the series. That is, like many others, he had already heard of the book before its Chinese translation. He tried to read the book during the first year of his doctoral study; however, after having read the first chapter in which the “propaganda model” was described, he found the detailed case studies in the book, especially the analysis of US media coverage of small third world countries in Central America and Southeast Asia, hard to focus on. In particular, he found it difficult relating to the details of the unfolding events in these small countries. As B reflected on this situation after having spent two more years studying the media in the Middle East and gaining a critical perspective on international political economy since his initial encounter with the book, one needs background knowledge of international relations, especially Cold War-era geopolitics and the internal politics in different world regions, including the complex intersections of domestic, regional, and global politics in countries such as Cambodia, Laos, Guatemala and Nicaragua, to actually appreciate the empirical analysis of the book. Similarly, W said that other than learning a bit from the first chapter of the book and having a vague idea about how the US media are involved in “manufacturing consent”, he did not get into the rest of the book at all.

Thus, it seems that while the book's critique of the US media registers well with Chinese students, the book's substantive insights into the political economy of international communication and the role of the US media in international politics did not register much. This, of course, is highly consistent with the prevailing media-centric mode of learning among Chinese media and communication students. In short, the "propaganda model," or "manufacturing consent" more popularly, was taken by Chinese students solely as theory about the US media.

Furthermore, these two interchangeable concepts exist in the universe of "abstract knowledge", not as part of the organic everyday framework for understanding US media coverage of global affairs. To be sure, many take these two buzzwords as effective demystification of an idealized US media system, thus contributing to a critical understanding of the US media. However, Chinese students and scholars also filter this framework through their own lens, experiences, and academic concerns. My cursory survey of the Chinese academic literature in relation to *Manufacturing Consent* supports the impressions I got from discussing with graduate students such as B and W regarding the "uses" or "misuses" of the book.

Instrumentalist and Critical Readings of *Manufacturing Consent*

To begin with, because the "propaganda" nature of a media system or the role of media in "manufacturing consent" is taken for granted in official Chinese media theory, readers will find the model's revelations easy to accept. In fact, because the book is seen as confirming an instrumentalist view of the US media, it may contribute to reinforce official Chinese media theory. For example, in a review of the book for a journal targeting Chinese officialdom, the reviewer, a Chinese propaganda official, introduces the book as an informed analysis of the role of the US media from within the US. Specifically, the reviewer discusses the relevance of the book for China in two regards (Wu, 2013). First, in light of the heated ongoing debates about the role of the Chinese media, the reviewer suggests that those who idealize the U.S. media system and advocate its full imitation in China should cool down and take a careful reading of this book first. Second, the reviewer believes that the book provides useful revelations of how the US government manages the media. That is,

rather than resorting to blunt measures of control and censorship, the US government is able to administer sophisticated measures of “soft control”, thereby turning its agenda into the media’s agenda. Thus, in making the media “willingly” “dance to its tunes”, the US government “silently” accomplishes its objective of controlling public opinion (Wu, 2013: 110). In short, the reviewer sees the relevance of the book not just as a critique of the US media system, but also as a “how to” for Chinese officials in terms of “manufacturing consent.”

This instrumentalist reading of the book is not uncommon and it needs to be understood within the context of Chinese officials’ and scholars’ instrumentalist preoccupations with improving the party-state’s communication strategies and its approaches to media management, so that its controlling methods are less arbitrary and its propaganda techniques are more effective – keep in mind that the term “propaganda” is understood in a positive, or at least neutral pre-Cold War sense. Similar to the perspective of Wu, in an article entitled “Western propaganda models and techniques” by communication scholar Wang Junchao (Wang, 2009), the “propaganda model” is discussed both in terms of its debunking of the “myth” of the US media as a diverse and free system and its revelation of various “propaganda techniques” in the US. Within the context of this article, which provides large inventories of various western propaganda techniques during both peace and war times, it is clear that the author’s interest in the “propaganda model” lies primarily in the ways it sheds light on how propaganda is done in the US.

I could not have imagined such a reading when the book was included in the Peking University translation series. And I am not sure whether Professor Herman would turn in his grave on learning such an instrumentalist reading of the “propaganda model” in China. After all, as communication scholars, we are all too aware of multiple readings of a text in different contexts. For myself, I found Wang Junchao’s following concluding remarks interesting to note: while some of the propaganda techniques in the West are reflective of the common characteristics of communication and persuasion, and are thus worthy of being borrowed by the Chinese media, others – such as “fear-mongering”, “scapegoating”, “sensationalist agitation” and “covered up lies” – are of a “manipulative” and even “fascist nature”.

As such, these techniques are incompatible with “the Marxist propaganda principle of seeking truth from facts”, let alone “the basic propaganda principles of China’s mainstream media” (Wang, 2009: 72).

Apart from the above instrumentalist understanding of *Manufacturing Consent*, there is a more philosophical and critical understanding of the book. Such a reading links Herman and Chomsky’s critique of the media with the latter’s linguistic theory, and his belief in the potentiality of human beings for freedom and autonomy, as well as his critique of the existing systems of statist and capitalistic domination (Shan and Li, 2008; Wen and Wang, 2011). In an article entitled “Media control and its core issues within the overriding perspective of Orwell’s problem,” Shan Bo and Li Jiali, two Wuhan University communication scholars, presented a comprehensive analysis of Chomsky’s linguistic and philosophical inquiries in relation to novelist George Orwell’s problem of explaining why we know so little, given that we have so much evidence (Shan and Li, 2008). However, while the author credits Chomsky for having contributed a unique theoretical framework and methodological means to reflect upon “media control in the context of democratic politics” (Shan and Li, 2008: 74), they also provide a fairly comprehensive summary of the criticisms against the propaganda model and Chomsky’s other media critiques. In particular, they note how the model appears to have gone beyond what is acceptable to mainstream media analysts who believe that despite its problems, the US media system is still sound, and how, in these days of postmodern theorization, the model’s holistic mode of analysis and problem-solving could easily provoke dismissal and derision. Further, they note how the model has been criticized as a case of “conspiracy theory” and “Marxist instrumentalism”, and how “even left-wing media analysts” have critiqued the model for being “instrumentalist” and “functionalist”. Finally, they also point out that Chomsky’s anarchist syndicate society is of a utopian nature (Shan and Li, 2008: 81-82). What is also significant, though, is that the authors did not engage with Herman and Chomsky’s substantive critique in *Manufacturing Consent* of the role of the US media in sustaining an exploitative and dominative international political economy; nor do they discuss the relevance of the critique to the Chinese context. Further, because Chomsky’s work on linguistics and his philosophical concerns

about human nature are the overriding entry point of the entire assessment, Herman's contributions are minimized throughout the article.

Because China is not discussed as an example of the US media's double standards in *Manufacturing Consent*, few Chinese students and scholars have made a connection between the "propaganda model" and US media reporting of China. Even though "anti-communism" was one of the five ideological filters in the model, as W told me, because China's official discourse frames the ongoing US and China conflict not in ideological terms, but only in terms of trade, national interests, and geopolitics, few will think of the model's "anti-communism" filter as having any relevance to or resonance with today's US media coverage of China. Instead, "anti-communism" was understood in the past tense, and most significantly, in relation to the bygone era of US-USSR Cold War rivalry. Thus, although many Chinese students and scholars are aware of *Manufacturing Consent*, and some even make critical analysis of US media coverage of China in their own work, the "propaganda model" has not registered much as an effective conceptual framework in Chinese scholarly analysis of US media coverage of China.

Finally, although there is a growing constituency of scholars who are interested in the Western critical political economy of communication literature, it is fair to say that the majority of Chinese communication scholars are still harboring liberal sensibilities and continue to hold the US media as a positive model and desirable alternative for China. While many among these scholars may have also heard of *Manufacturing Consent*, they have simply chosen to ignore the book. Some have continued to champion US-style professionalism as an ideal for China, without even bothering to offer a critique of the book's argument. For those who hold a linear view of history and believe that China's future lies in a US-style liberal capitalist democracy, it is even improper to introduce concepts such as "media imperialism" and the "propaganda model" into the Chinese communication field. Underpinning such a perspective is the following reasoning: in order to secure freedom and democracy for China, it is better not to engage with critiques of the US system and the larger international political economy. In this teleological and methodological nationalistic perspective, the problems of the US are the problems of an already

achieved democracy, while the Chinese are still starving for freedom and democracy! The fallacy of such a perspective is easy to point out: the US and China have always existed in a structural relationship within the global system. This is one of the key methodological insights of the kind of political economy of communication analysis that Professor Herman contributed to through his work. When *Manufacturing Consent* identified “anti-communism” as an ideological filter in the context of Cold War geopolitics, an argument was made that alternative developmental paths taken by people in the rest of the world were being blocked.

Concluding Questions

In May 2018, as I was contemplating on how to best pay tribute to the work of Professor Edward Herman from the perspective of a political economy of communication scholar with a research interest in China, the US and China trade war was at its hottest stage. Meanwhile, the Communist Party of China and China’s media and academic establishments were busy with celebrating the 200th anniversary of the birth of Karl Marx, culminating in a high-profile speech by Xi Jinping on May 4, 2018 in the Great Hall of the People. In this speech, Xi not only celebrated the continuing relevance of Marxism and communism, but also proclaimed the Communist Party of China to be a proven heir of Marxism and the international communist movement. That is, despite all its reformist twists and turns, China continues to wave the communist flag, at least at the level of official rhetoric. At the same time, Xi is also very clear on the importance of sinifying Marxism in the “new” era that his leadership has ushered in.

How will China’s new generation of scholars, such as B and W, develop their own knowledge of US, Chinese and global media in this new global political economic and discursive context? Now that there is not much more left from the “founding fathers” of mainstream American communication research to be introduced into China, in what ways will the work of Western critical political economists such as Dallas Smythe, Herbert Schiller and Edward Herman start to shape their conceptual map and perhaps even become the building material of their own China-grounded intellectual house? In other words, how will they sinify Western, critical political economy of communication to develop their own critical communication theory for

the 21st Century? Furthermore, as China tries to expand its global linkages through the “Belt and Road Initiative”, will B, W and their generation of young scholars become more attuned to the Western scholars’ critique of US cultural imperialism and the role of the US media as the “missionaries of global capitalism”? Do they learn these concepts in order for China to emulate the US style of hegemonic global communication or to avoid it? Will the regional and domestic politics of smaller Asian, African and Latin African countries become more relevant to B, W and their fellow young scholars as China gets more involved in the global political economy, including the political economy of global communication? If so, what substantive lessons will they learn from the kind of analysis that *Manufacturing Consent* and Herman’s other works had to offer? As we pay tribute to Edward Herman, his critique of global capitalism and US imperialism, these are some of the questions that I found relevant to raise.

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