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Title:

Mapping digital life in China [Review of the Book Digital media in urban China: locating Guangzhou, by Wilfred Yang Wang]

Date:

2020

Citation:

Martin, F. (2020). Mapping digital life in China [Review of the Book Digital media in urban China: locating Guangzhou, by Wilfred Yang Wang]. Cultural Studies, 36 (1), pp.167-169.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2020.1809688>.

Persistent Link:

<https://hdl.handle.net/11343/322011>

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Mapping Digital Life in China

Review of Wilfred Yang WANG, *Digital Media in Urban China: Locating Guangzhou*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2019, 161pp, ISBN 978-1-78660-732-4, e-book \$43.99, hardback from \$111

Based on digital ethnography of online worlds and parallel offline political events in Guangzhou over the past decade, this book provides a fascinating and readable critical account of practices of digital placemaking. It shows us how Guangzhou people's digital engagements, interwoven with their corporeal actions in place—speaking and typing Cantonese, demonstrating in the streets, taking photographs, uploading images and texts that map the city—produce the city as a socio-spatial location.

A central preoccupation running through the chapters is the tension between the particularity of locality in the everyday culture of Guangzhou people, and the drive toward cultural unification and centralization represented by the PRC party-state and Chinese nationalism under the regime of President Xi Jinping. Given the unfolding pro-democracy movement in nearby Hong Kong, the book couldn't be more timely. Case studies include the *Southern Weekly*'s critique of Xi's "Chinese Dream" speech in 2012 and protests by journalists following censorship of the article; pro-Cantonese public protests in 2010 and their aftermaths; the popularity of Hong Kong media in Weibo communities in Guangzhou; the online boycott of nationalist anti-Japan demonstrations in Guangzhou in 2010; and a Guangzhou-based Facebook page maintained by the Guangzhou diaspora.

This book is important for cultural studies in five key respects. First, it adds much-needed nuance to our understanding of "China" and "Chinese digital media" today. Instead of attempting to take a top-down view of Chinese digital media in general, the book instead focuses on digital media culture as produced and lived in one specific geosocial site. This is not simply a matter of working at a convenient scale. Rather, the book's project is to decenter and complicate the idea of "China" itself as a national abstraction. The specificity of Guangzhou here is absolutely indispensable—reading the book, one is brought to understand that there is simply nowhere else like this city. Paradoxically, however, this approach has wider implications because it's also generalizable: to a certain point, one can imagine related projects about digital Chengdu, digital Wuhan, or digital Qingdao. Each would be different in

a whole host of important ways—but each would also make the same point, that there is no single thing called “China,” only an agglomeration of places marshalled together by the always unstable, precarious forces of the state and its drive to impose unity across difference.

Second, the book makes a substantial contribution to complicating the reductive view of Chinese life and politics as a simple story of the (repressive) state versus the (resistant or brainwashed) people. Examples show how, while Guangzhou’s digital cultures seek consistently to differentiate themselves from the state’s centralizing ambitions, nonetheless they tend not to advocate separatism, instead enacting a kind of ambivalent, negotiated quasi-identification with the nation *alongside* a commitment to Guangzhou particularity. As is pointed out in chapter 5, “Place making is not necessarily a rejection of the sense of nationhood, but it is a question of *from whose* perspective the idea of the nation and state should be constituted. [... Guangzhou people’s online practices] effectively renarrated an alternative vision of nationhood, one that differed from the format the state imposed.” (106) Case studies also show how the state ultimately quietly accommodated many of Guangzhou people’s demands in various localist protest movements. This may be an awkward truth for some scholars outside China, who prefer to champion instances of the heroic and absolute resistance of local populations to Beijing’s centrist rule. But the fact that this book captures the actual complexity of Guangzhou people’s orientation toward the state testifies to the integrity of its scholarship.

Third, the book makes an exemplary contribution to studies of media that are based not in theoretical abstraction but in on-the-ground investigation of what people do with media. That is, it contributes to what David Morley (2009) and others have called a “non-media-centric media studies.” In its case studies, the book is motivated by the desire to find out how digital media are instrumental in making places, social worlds, and subjectivities. Its key questions are not about how media work “in social context”—as if the social were merely a kind of background—but rather, how media *make the social*.

Fourth, the book furthers a project we might call grounding globalization. It is all about digital flows and mobilities—between people, between technologies, across the city and across regional and national borders. This is, in that regard, a study of aspects of cultural globalization. But it argues passionately for the local character of digital media, including

purportedly “global” media as well as what we assume are the “locally particular” media of non-Anglophone communities.

Fifth, the book makes a conscious, careful and passionate effort to develop a theorization of digital media adequate to indigenous context. This is not a simplistic attempt to evacuate all reference to Western theories and frameworks (which would be inappropriate in the context of Guangzhou’s modern history, and also impossible). Rather, the book presents a series of deeply researched, thoughtful, ambitious and erudite considerations of how normative concepts based on Euro-American historical experience—including citizenship, civil society, and the public sphere—may *or may not* help us understand digital media cultures in Guangzhou. It also offers exceptionally rich discussion of Chinese intellectual contexts, with regular reference to classical literature and philosophy as well as contemporary Chinese social and media theory. The depth of this cross-cultural referencing is rarely seen in works written in English.

In all of these ways, this book challenges us to fundamentally re-orient how we understand Chinese digital media. In doing so, it makes a substantial contribution not only to Asia-related cultural studies, but to cultural and media studies as broader transnational fields.

Works Cited:

Morley, D. (2009). For a materialist, non media-centric media studies. *Television & New Media* 10(1): 114–116.

Word count: 960 words

Reviewer bio: Fran Martin is Reader in Cultural Studies at the University of Melbourne. She has published widely on gender, sexuality, media, and youth cultures in transnational Sinophone worlds.

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