Chinese Self-Hybridization: Cross-Cultural Competence in the Global Media

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Introduction

A number of issues in the discussion of cross-culture in the domain of global media I believe deserve our attention: a dearth of cross-cultural analyses of media consumption in spite of the wide availability of literature on mass media; the need to avoid arguments in favour of 'cultural essentialism' and 'media imperialism'; and a clarification of the distinction between 'cross-cultural' and 'intercultural' competence. In light of these markers, the paper looks at sources of complexity characteristic of cross-cultural production and consumption in the globalising media. In doing so, one cannot but pay attention to technological, economic, political and cultural aspects of media programming. An exemplary context for such an analysis, I suggest, is the reception of Chinese cultural products in the West. In my two case studies, I address (1) Western media coverage of some major events in China during 2008; and (2) the reception of Chinese cinema, exemplified by the films of Zhang Yimou. In both cases, as in many others, the paper concludes that cultural particularity is played down in favour of Chinese forms of *self-hybridization*.

Mass media literature

Mass media, including 'radio, television, film, and recorded music, and the print media of newspapers, magazines, and popular literature', are understood as 'artifacts, experiences, practices, and processes' (Spitulnik, 1993: 293). Following Spitulnik, I see the crucial problem for a satisfactory formulation of media power in 'where to locate the production of meaning and ideology in the mass communication process, and how to characterize the mass media are global 'vehicles of culture'. (Spitulnik, 1993: 295; 294) The media in this sense is a 'double edged sword, with the proclivity to be appropriated as a force of empowerment but also a tendency to be used as a means of subjection' (Zyani, 2011: 48; 50). These topics have been discussed at length within national frameworks, with foci on 'encoding/decoding' since Stuart Hall (Hall, 1980) to ethnography of consumption practices (Moores, 1995; 1990), and the constructivist nature of consumption (McCracken, 1990). In spite of Alasuutari's tripartition (Alasuutari, 1999), given their emphasis on national audiences, these studies are only marginally instructive when it comes to cross-cultural production and consumption. Much the same can be said about 'reinforcement models' or 'power models' in terms of media effects, or 'quantification models' and their 'behavioural' relations (Staiger, 2005: 66). As a consequence of the globalization of the media, it was inevitable then that the research focus had to shift towards 'the consumption of transnational media products' on a much wider scale (Bitereyst, 1995: 264; Kavoori, 1999). This, however, requires *cross-cultural competence* beyond 'intercultural competence', sensitive 'culture-specific knowledge', 'respect, openness, curiosity, and discovery', as well as 'cultural self-awareness', 'adaptability', 'ethno-relative perspective', and 'empathy' (Berardo and Deardorff, 2012: 45-47; Gudykunst and Kim, 1984).

For the purposes of this paper, I draw a sharper than usual distinction between *cross-cultural competence* and *intercultural competence,* the latter understood as the consumption of media products against the background of social interaction amongst different cultural groups (Shuang et al., 2011; Singer et al., 2011; Jandt, 2010; Nakayama and Halualani, 2010; Kim, 2010; Spencer-Oatey and Franklin, 2009; Durant, 2009; Gudykunst, 2005; Nishida, 2005; Vandenabeele, 2004; Barna, 1998; Bennett, 1998; Oetzel, 1995; Ting-Toomey, 1993; Kim, 1991; Gudykunst and Kim, 1984). Whereas this literature largely addresses the complexities involved in intercultural interaction, such difficulties differ somewhat from those characteristic of cross-cultural communication, which foregrounds the idea of a 'crossing' of a deep cultural divide at a distance (Gupta, 1998; Howes, 1996). Cross-cultural competence as used here refers specifically to the ability of media consumers to bridge the chasms that exist between culturally distant societies (Kincaid, 1987; Caldas-Coulthard, 2003). I suggest that a global media viewer in Toronto watching a program on *Dongba,* the Naxi script of the Lijiang region of Yunnan, China, is in a fundamentally different interpretive situation from that of a viewer

in Zurich watching French or Italian programs. The former is not normally in a position to back up the program by social interaction available to the latter. Much the same could be argued for the Western consumption of programs about North Korea, as well as about certain media contents about China, which is the emphasis of this paper. Empirically, the conceptual distinction between 'cross-cultural' and 'intercultural' is likely to give way to increasingly intercultural competence via *hybridization* as cultural knowledge accrues as a result of media content reinforcement and non-media acquaintance. For the purposes of global media research, cross-cultural competence can be regarded as a precondition of intercultural competence.

Cross-cultural complexities - cross-cultural competence
One of the effects of global mass media has been a complication of the consumption process of cross-cultural contents by technological, economic, political and cultural changes. Media technology has introduced an important game changer, digital communication via 'social media, smart phones, Skype, text messaging' and 'computer mediated communication' (Shuter ,2012: 1; 2011) Theorised by Virilio under the headings of 'speed' and 'dromology' (Virilio. 1986; 2001), or by Savat as the fluidity of 'digital being' (Savat 2013), digital communication has both aided and complicated the acquisition of cross-cultural competence. While access to global cultural products has increased sharply, their consumption has shrunk the timeframe within which foreign cultures can be assimilated. No longer is there time for the gradual immersion in a foreign culture. Digital mass media messages entail interpretive immediacy, requiring additional hermeneutic labour on the part of producers and consumers. Producers have to find pathways attractive to cross-cultural audiences; consumers need to adjust their traditional 'horizon of expectations' to achieve satisfactory readings across cultures (Jauss, 1982: 88f.; 141f.), or minimise the cultural barriers of 'lacunae' in favour of 'universals', as proposed in Ulrike Rohn's taxonomy (Rohn, 2010; 2011). In the face of such difficulties, the velocity of the Boolean bit stream partially compensates for the concomitant loss of cultural specificity by fostering a new cross-cultural hermeneutic reciprocity, in the form of *hybridization.* I employ the term in acknowledgment of Homi Bhabha's use of 'hybridity' in relation to his idea of a 'third space' (Bhabha, 1994b: 112, 117; 1994a), as well as Kraidy's analysis of 'hybridity' in terms of its usefulness and limitations (Kraidy 2005). But whereas Kraidy employs hybridity in arguing for 'transculturalism' as a way to overcome both meaning imposition by cultural imperialism and merely interpretive cultural pluralism, I use the concept to point to the emergence of a space between cultural essentialism and cultural imperialism. As the following case studies will demonstrate, this seems to be the space that is being occupied by what I will call Chinese '*self-hybridization*'.

Economic changes in the wake of digital technology have likewise complicated the process of cross-cultural exchange, demanding new forms of communicative competence.

As Anthony Smith has noted in broad terms, 'economics gradually absorbs anthropology' (Smith, 1986: 165). In the 'capitalism of higher-order production' the emphasis is on dispersive services (Deleuze, 1992: 6), one of which is cross-cultural media production. This complicates content transmission by introducing new forms of distribution, a feature that plays an important role especially in 'the globalization of Chinese television' (Zhang, 2011: 122; Loehwing and Motter, 2012; Moran and Keane, 2004). At the same time, given the continuing, even if gradually relaxing, interference in the economy of political control in the production of Chinese 'soft power', Western audiences not only have to interpret cross-cultural contents but also place them in the economic framework of an authoritarian regime by negotiating the tension between being wooed as media consumers and being invited to celebrate a foreign culture filtered through a particular political lens. In global content exchange, digitally driven open-market distribution of media products contrasts sharply with the kind of closed media environment from which contemporary China is now beginning to emerge. In this context, three issues are particularly noteworthy: (1) the gradually diminishing government control over domestic distribution; (2) the retention of quotas on Western media imports; and (3) the government steered export of Chinese media content deemed suitable as soft power vehicle. As I have argued elsewhere, too heavy a dose of political propaganda can make some Chinese cultural self-presentations unattractive (Chu, 2013; Austin and Pinkleton, 1999). Ill equipped to separate the cultural grain from the political chaff, Western media audiences tend to be suspicious of the package as a whole, illustrated by the negative reactions to the establishment of Confucius Institutes by the Chinese government in Western countries.

By far the largest contribution to the complexities characteristic of mass media content transmission is made by cultural difference (Zyani, 2011; Shuter, 2011; 1990). The greater the difference between the producing culture and the consuming culture, the more complex and difficult is the hermeneutic uptake. This observation, however, harbours two serious methodological pitfalls. First, there is the danger of celebrating the foreign culture to the point of a timeless *essentialism;* and secondly, from the standpoint of one's own culture there is the trap of an unacknowledged 'cultural imperialism' (Tomlinson, 1991; Zhang, 2001). The first sin has been committed by such unlikely bedfellows as sinologists and the CCP, the former attributing a degree of cultural specificity to all matters Chinese to make cross-cultural competence a near impossible goal reserved for a scholarly elite, the latter using Chinese cultural specificity to argue the 'exceptionality thesis' for political purposes (Chu, 2013). The opposite attitude, termed 'cultural imperialism' by John Tomlinson (Tomlinson, 1991), has long been argued to be avoided, especially in its forms of 'Orientalism' (Said, 1993), as well in the guise of 'media imperialism' (Zhang, 2011). Cultural imperialism, though, is not restricted to large-scale prejudice. It surfaces in a number of hermeneutic stumbling blocks, such as the assumption of cross-cultural similarities: 'As Western trappings permeate more and more

of the world, the illusion of similarity increases' (Barna, 1998: 175). Importantly, the entrapment by *faux amis* covers both verbal and nonverbal domains, as it shows itself in un-reflected stereotypes and the urge to evaluate too readily across cultures (Wierzbicka, 2010; 1991). Nor are such impediments to cross-cultural competence confined to individual media consumers. With reference to Rabinow and Sullivan (1979), Lindlof and Shatzer write, 'interpretive social science' presupposes 'the hermeneutic axiom that human beings act on the basis of collective (cultural) understandings that are continually negotiated through linguistic and other symbolic practices' (Lindlof and Shatzer, 1998: 170). While this assumption has been fruitfully applied within one and the same culture, no matter how heterogeneous, it requires serious modification as a research tool when we are dealing with media messages in cross-cultural contexts. The interpretive interaction of two distinct cultures cannot be assumed to occur in a 'virtual' community 'founded intentionally by people who share a set of similar interests' (Lindlof and Shatzer, 1998: 174). The two virtual communities 'remain ambiguous for the media ethnographer' not simply because of the lack of 'the conditions of face-to-face', but also as a result of the more fundamental condition of a lack of cultural knowledge (Lindlof and Shatzer, 1998: 175f.) Lindlof and Shatzer in the end rightly question 'the appropriateness of "community" as a conceptual device' in favour of an 'epistemological de-centering of inquiry' (Lindlof and Shatzer, 1998: 184; 186). Perhaps the signifier of a hybridising 'Fourth World' may be more appropriate (Pack, 2000). After all, the notion of a global community assumes a cross-cultural competence that cannot as yet be taken for granted.

Perhaps our 'de-centering' should begin with the idea that cross-cultural competence is called for whenever 'the cultural distance between the participants is significant enough to have an adverse effect on communicative success' (Zegarac, 2007: 41). To overcome this basic obstacle, Spencer-Oatley and Franklin emphasise the need for 'cultural adaptability', and 'intercultural interaction', notions particularly relevant to 'adaptation to unfamiliar cultures', in short, 'cross-cultural competence' (2009: 3; 257-261). Over time there is cause for optimism, as expressed for instance in Bart Vandenabeele's invitation to look at the 'incommensurability between languages and concepts' in a 'positive way' by accepting that 'the communication process is kept in motion by what the participants do not share'. Rejecting the idea that 'each community is locked up in its own image of the world', Vandenebeele is adamant that 'people learn from and about each other without sharing essences or universally valid definitions being needed, neither for things (artworks) nor for concepts (of beauty, art, and so on)' (Vandenebeele, 2004: 2f).

An opposing view can be found in an analysis of the discrepancies between Polynesian collective social experiences and Western individualism by David Corson, who argues for the inevitable incompatibility of certain cultural realities (Corson, 1995). Against such fundamental incommensurability, Christine Fox defends the idea of authentic communication, which can be achieved with patience and sincerity. In her arguments she

draws on Said's and Spivak's colonialist critiques (Said, 1978; 1983; 1993; Spivak, 1999). She also takes issue with 'the postmodern idea of the untranslatability of different experiences' (Fox, 1997: 86). Instead, Fox champions the idea of cross-cultural 'effectiveness' (Kim and Gudykunst, 1988), the minimisation of 'distorted communication' (Habermas, 1979), Gadamer's exploration of interpretation of the culturally distant text (Fox, 1997: 95; Gadamer, 1960), and a series of cultural 'filters' by which a gradual interpretive rapprochement is possible. For Fox, such mechanisms are significant beyond mere technical effectiveness; they need to be grounded in a communicative ethics. After all, she argues, cultural 'incompatibility is not determined so much by cultural differences, or different discourse norms that reflect those differences, as by differences in the relative positions of power and dominance of one culture over another' (Fox, 1997: 100f). Fox's ethical intent aside, what her argument conceals are cross-cultural differences that are not reducible to interpretive insensitivity or 'cultural imperialism'. As the following case studies illustrate, a major obstacle to communication can be simply a lack of acquaintance with seminal cultural differences (Shuter, 1990).

Case Studies

1. *Media coverage of Chinese Events (Tibetan riots; Wechuan earthquake; Olympic Games; all in 2008)* (Ke Guo, 2012)

Ke Guo addresses selected Western media coverage of three major events in China, the Tibetan riots, the Wechuan earthquake, and the Olympic Games in Beijing. He highlights the 'unprecedented tension' that erupted between Chinese scholars and foreign correspondents, as well as between the Chinese public and the 'western world as a whole'. Given the differences in the political systems, it was perhaps only to be expected that 'these lurking differences' would explode in a clash of representations. Nevertheless, the 'huge gap' in perception scandalised Chinese authorities, scholars, and the general public. Guo interprets this shock as arising from the differences in expectations. 'To a Chinese mind', says Guo (rather than to the Chinese authorities), 'media are supposed to contribute to social stability and to promote cultural exchanges' and avoid 'too much critical or negative' commentary, while to the Western observer this amounts to 'attempts to control and suffocate different viewpoints'. Whereas, admittedly, the Chinese government 'attempted to hide the "dark side" from foreign correspondents', the latter 'failed to produce complete and accurate reports, maybe due to their lack of accessibility to reliable news sources in Tibet'. Guo also concedes that 'scholars in China' and 'members of the elite in Chinese society' responded with too much emotion and 'perceptions' that were too 'defensive'. In light of 'the huge historical and cultural gaps' between them, Western criticism of China was not surprising. Nevertheless, 'overall misperceptions or stereotypes in the critiques in Western mass media sometimes cause

worries in China' (Guo, 2012: 83f.).

2. Globalized Chinese Cinema

Zhang Yimou's early films were received enthusiastically by Western audiences. At the same time, most of them were vilified by the State Administration for Radio, Film and Television for embarrassing China abroad, 'washing dirty linen' in front of foreigners, and for their sex scenes and display of China's backwardness. In the West, enthusiasm for Zhang Yimou's art amongst film buffs and academics soon spread around the globe as his films reaped awards at international festivals. The fifth-generation filmmaker was feted for his cinema of 'visual purity'. In contrast, his recent film *The Flowers of War* was greeted in the West with no such accolades. For all its Hollywood glamour, major stars and a budget to match, the film was dumped in a review in *The Guardian* for its 'crude mix of commercial vulgarity and political propaganda'. A strange reversal of reception had taken place. Now that China had legitimated her local talent with official status and the award of the directorship of the artistic management of the Olympic Games in 2008, the West turned a cold shoulder. How should we read this? With reference to two recent studies, I want to trace the trajectory of this puzzling phenomenon.

The first investigation is Ting Wang's 'Understanding Local Reception of Globalized Cultural Products in the Context of the International Cultural Economy' (Wang, 2009: 299-318). In her paper, Wang looks at the reception of two of Zhang Yimou's movies, *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers*, both in China and 'from the perspective of the global cultural economy'. Produced with a budget of US $31 million, the biggest ever for a Chinese production, *Hero* was an immediate blockbuster in China as in the West, ushering in a 'new vitality and creativity among Chinese filmmakers'. *Hero* marked the moment when China's culture was finally 'fighting back', challenging Hollywood for film-cultural supremacy on its home turf. In part, Wang argues, the success of *Hero* amongst Chinese audiences was due to a carefully managed, US$2million 'ambitious, orchestrated marketing plan to make it a must-see film', yet *Hero* still attracted its fair share of criticism in China as 'a superficial crowd-pleaser without substance'. In terms of cross-cultural consumption, it is instructive to learn that Zhang Yimou, in an interview with the *New York Times,* explained that he had made a special effort to make his film accessible to Western audiences. Zhang Yimou also addressed the film's reception by Chinese and Western critics by pointing to their very different horizons of expectations, the Chinese preference of film content and ideology over style, in contrast with a Western emphasis on 'form and mood'. The filmmaker also compromised in other areas, by shortening the US version by 18 minutes to quicken the pace for commercial success and by producing a 'happy ending' back-up which, however, was not used in the end. Zhang Yimou furthermore yielded to the cross-cultural demand of 'narrative transparency' in *House of Flying Daggers'.* Instead of making his film 'bear the burden of ideology', as

he explained in a speech in Beijing, he wanted to avoid 'injecting into it philosophies and too much social consciousness', but rather to figure out 'how to make a film more pleasing to watch'. According to Wang, at the heart of the cross-cultural success of the two films is 'the changing taste of Chinese mass audience' and the 'dilution' of 'cultural specificity'. While Wang regrets the 'spectacle-centred mega-productions', this may be precisely the price to pay for a cross-cultural hermeneutic based on *hybridity* and the evolution of cross-cultural competence.

The second analysis I draw on is Pi-Chun Chang's 'Globalized Chinese Cinema and Localized Western Theory' (Chang, 2009: 10-20). Chang insists that the 'Chineseness' of Chinese cinema, demanded by local audiences and praised in the West, is in large measure a misconception, which misses the point that Chinese cinema is never a merely local product but finds itself always already 'shaped by constant international flows of social and economic capital', as well as interacting 'with the global'. Chang challenges Chinese intellectuals who have used Orientalist, post-colonialist, and postmodern theories in attacking Fifth-Generation cinema for distorting Chinese culture. Again, the work of Zhang Yimou is rightly placed at the centre of the argument, because his career 'is synonymous with the internationalization of Chinese cinema' and because his films have sparked major controversies 'with regard to cross-cultural interaction and representation'. Far from having surrendered 'Third World cinema to the Orientalist gaze', writes Chang, Zhang Yimou has made a significant contribution to the transcendence of any essentialist 'China/West binarism'. In the face of 'sino-chauvinism', Zhang Yimou has significantly contributed to 'the liberation of the self from an oppressive tradition' as the still 'unfulfilled task of Chinese modernity'. Cross-cultural competence is thus fostered in two senses, as part of mass media consumption and production.

Conclusion
By way of conclusion, I align the main threads of the paper in support of my arguments concerning cross-cultural competence. The focus on national audience research has been indicated to be only marginally useful, as is the emphasis on intercultural negotiation within one and the same national boundaries. The hurdles of complexity of cross-cultural media messages have been shown to have their roots not only in geographical distance but also in technological, economic, political and specifically cultural features of digital communication. Deep cultural differences remain a stumbling block to universal interpretation, not to be overcome by a process of a global imperialist homogenisation, nor by an insistence on the essential uniqueness of a culture. What is likely to occur is the evolution of a global cross-cultural media competence that hovers in a third space between cultural essentialism and cultural imperialism, avoiding the insistence on cultural specificity to the point of hermetic readings by scholarly elites on the one hand

and, on the other, the reduction of cultural difference to a bland global de-cultured Western baseline.

Furthermore, the gradual transformation of cross-cultural competence into intercultural competence involving social interaction between cultures, then, will most likely be the result of *hybridization,* understood as a toning down of cultural difference to the extent that meaning negotiation can occur on a mass scale. Whether hybridity will be achieved in the form of cultural 'convergence' (Kincaid, 1987; Hallin and Mancini, 2012), 'adaptation' (Kim, 2001), 'cultural pluralism' (Gupta, 1998), or 'critical transculturalism' (Kraidy, 2005) will have to remain a moot point. Perhaps in spite of all best critical efforts, media hybridity will remain threatened by an imbalance of 'cultural and economic power' (Wang, 2008: 61). In the case of China's attempts at becoming a serious cultural player in the global media space, the two case studies I have selected suggest that China is confronting cultural imperialism with its own forms of *self-hybridization.*

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