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“After Bicycles, What?” was the fundamental developmental question posed to the Chinese by the Canadian communication scholar Dallas Smythe at the dawn of China’s reform era in the late 1970s. Smythe raised this question in the context of the Chinese search for an alternative to capitalist modernity, with the hope that China would avoid the capitalist path of development. Contrary to Smythe’s wish, the “capitalist roaders” took charge in China after Mao’s death in 1976 and launched a spectacular “digital revolution” in an attempt for China to not only catch-up with the West, but also to “leapfrog” into the digital age. As the center piece of the Chinese program of market reform and global integration, China’s “digital revolution” has been characterized by a well-recognized and seemingly paradoxical feature. On the one hand, information and communication technologies (ICTs) have been promoted and diffused widely, although unevenly, among the population. From the television set in the 1980s to the mobile phone in the 1990s, ICT products have replaced bicycles as the hottest commodities for the Chinese.

*Keywords: bicycles, Chinese development, technology, information and communication technologies*

Between December 1971 and January 1972, Dallas Smythe, a pioneer scholar in the political economy of communication, went to China to study ideology, technology, and the Chinese path of development. He decided to probe into the self-proclaimed Chinese socialists’ philosophy of technology because he “had a gut feeling . . . that this could be a problem for China” (Gubeck, 1994, p. 228). And, indeed, there was a problem. As he reported, while there was understanding of the political nature of technology and artifacts on the part of physical scientists and broadcasting officials, the political economists, philosophers, and political scientists he met in China’s academic and policy establishments did not agree with him about the socially-constructed nature of technology. Smythe discovered that these individuals regarded “technique and technology as autonomous and non-political,” and even worse, “they exhibited a rigidity which even resisted completely the possibility of a dialogue on the subject” (Smythe, 1994, p. 238).

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This probing into the Chinese philosophy of technology was not conducted in abstract, nor was it merely a matter of scholarly interest. Instead, Smythe was positing fundamental questions about China’s technological and economic policies and the viability of the Chinese search for an alternative to capitalist modernity. As he put it, ‘[i]t is not clear that the Chinese people have properly identified the political aspects of technique which in the next ten to 20 years will be crucial to the development of “socialist road” as distinct from the “capitalist road”’ (Smythe, 1994, p. 242). More specifically, Smythe saw an inconsistency in the Chinese rhetoric of building socialism on the one hand and the prevailing Chinese mindset to “catch up with” or “leap frog” ahead of capitalist technology on the other, because the latter “implies that socialist technique can be measured against the accomplishment of capitalist technique” (Smythe, 1994, p. 243). For Smythe, the success of Chinese socialism hinged on China’s ability to reject the blind importation of Western technologies, consumer goods and services and to prohibit the development of “capitalist consumption relations” in the country. For this to work, “proletariat politics,” that is, the social needs of the vast majority of the Chinese population as determined through popular participation in decision making, as Smythe had imagined what this Cultural Revolution terminology would have meant, would have to take command in the areas of technological innovation and economic production, especially over the question of whether “such-and-such an innovation in consumer goods and services serve the masses collectively or as individuals” (Smythe, 1994, p. 243). In Smythe’s view, western consumer goods are “a trap which capitalism presents to new socialist systems—a trap of which the masses of Chinese peasants, workers, and PLA soldiers should be aware” (1994, p. 241). Because “there is no socialist road in Western capitalist technological development,” Smythe wrote, “to adopt capitalist luxury goods such as private automobiles, family-sized washing machines, family-sized refrigerators, one-way TV, etc. for Chinese production would be to equip Chinese families with that many educational instruments leading to the capitalist cultural road” (1994, p. 231).

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Reflective of the critical perspective on international communication policy at the time, particularly a recognition of the need for developing countries to set up “cultural screens” to filter out Western capitalist cultural flows, Smythe even saw a positive impact in the cold-war era U.S. embargo and the Soviet withdrawal of technical assistance for China, as this “meant that the Chinese would have to depend on themselves for technical development.” He wrote:

As a result the Chinese Revolution firmly established the mass line process for socialist decision-making. Now China is entering the period when it will already have solved the pressing problems of producing enough food, clothing, housing, medical care for everyone. At this point, a gigantic step into Communism is possible. That step would be taken by the decision that the question “after bicycles, what?” should be answered in favour of public goods and services and against goods and services for individual, private use. The policy of “serve the people” can be pursued directly and most effectively by allocating creative talents of the people and resources into the production of things and services which all may enjoy and learn from—parks, museums, science, education, libraries, wild-life refuges, architecture and other arts (including two-way TV) of all kinds. (Smythe, 1994, p. 243)

Smythe wrote up his report, entitled “After Bicycles, What?,”,and submitted it to the Chinese government as a piece of friendly criticism and advice from a concerned ‘family’ member within the international socialist movement. Smythe never published his piece during his lifetime, because he felt “an implied obligation to keep my criticisms with the family” (Gubeck, 1994, p. 230).

The Chinese government never directly replied to Smythe. However, by launching a massive capitalistic reconstruction project and by unleashing rampant consumerism in China, the government’s response was clear, if indirect. Moreover, instead of merely importing Western technologies and consumer goods, China turned itself into the “workshop of the world” by making itself the leading recipient of foreign direct investment among the developing countries, becoming a major producer and exporter of not only low-end consumer goods, such as shoes and toys, but also consumer electronics and other high-end information age products. Today, China controls 55% of the world market in laptop computers, produces 30% of all flat-screen televisions and 20% of microprocessors. The transnationally integrated ICT sector, which has grown three times as fast as China’s overall gross domestic product (GDP) in the past two decades, is China’s largest export industry, accounting for one-third of China’s total exports in 2005 (“Mobile Phone Export…” 2006). Instead of offering a socialist alternative, China’s location as capitalism’s “most expanisionary growth zone”, linked with its embracing of information technology—“capitalism’s most dynamic industry”—positions China as central to the “two poles of growth” for transnational capitalism, as Dan Schiller has noted (2005).

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