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Book Review

John Alekna. *Seeking News, Making China: Information, Technology, and the Emergence of Mass Society*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2024. 374p.

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John Alekna's remarkable book, *Seeking News, Making China*, examines the development of Chinese mass society through the lens of communication technologies from 1919 to 1968. By placing news at the center of his study, Alekna introduces the term "newsscape" to describe a communication ecosystem characterized by the dynamic interplay of social, technological, geographical, and infrastructural contexts surrounding news. This concept foregrounds everyday experiences and behaviors, traversing political regimes while taking into account the diverse vocabularies that the Chinese people used to refer to the transmission of information. Within this framework, the book offers fresh perspectives on how modern China and its mass society have evolved together with the transformation of broadcasting infrastructure and the practice of news.

The book speaks directly to a growing body of scholarship on communications technology and modern Chinese society. Since the 1990s, many studies have been written about the introduction of new printing technology, the expansion of the modern press (e.g. newspapers and magazines), and the creation of the new readership in modern China. A notable example of this scholarship is Christopher Reed's *Gutenberg in Shanghai: Chinese Print Capitalism, 1876-1937* (2004). Like some other more recent studies, Alekna's book shifts its gaze to other communications technologies that also created a new audience in 20th-century China. In this regard, radio played a significant role. It helped propagate the national language and reached large audiences via dialects.

By focusing on radio, Alekna's book also explores another important topic— that is, the soundscape of modern China. Radios and the sound of radio introduced a new sensory experience to many Chinese. Modernity wasn't something abstract; rather, it was a lived experience. What mattered, therefore, was not simply the contents of broadcast programs, but also the technology and the soundscape it created. Finally, like Thomas Mullaney's recent books on the Chinese typewriter, Alekna's study shows how the Chinese remade a

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technology – not so much the hardware in this case, but mainly its place and function in society. The book consists of eight chapters.

Chapter One focuses on the newsscape prior to the arrival of radio broadcasting. Using the May 1919 protests as a case study, it shows how the flow of information was not an unmediated process but rather involved the intermediality of information. The complex process included the coding and decoding of telegraphs, the levels of public illiteracy, information shared among friends and family, and the movements of student “speech troupes” in streets, teahouses, parks, railways, and village markets.

Chapter Two investigates the advent of radio during the early 1920s, highlighting the struggles among anti-imperialist revolutionaries, militarist governments, and semicolonial interests in Shanghai to control, promote, and utilize this new technology. These conflicts enabled radio amateurs to acquire illegally imported parts to build their own sets and provided small independent stations with opportunities to survive.

Chapter Three discusses the establishment of broadcast network in Manchuria, the earliest government radio system in China, in the 1920s. As a key component of the regional government’s modernization plan, radio served as both a military tool and a symbol of scientific, political, and industrial development. With four modern radio stations in major cities, the government held a monopoly on broadcasting rights and listening fees. These stations became a crucial part of the infrastructure of a modern newsscape. They broadcast contents promoting the views of the government and engaged in “radio wars” against Soviet propaganda during the Sino-Soviet conflict in 1929. Chapter Four shifts the focus to the newsscape revolution during the Nanjing Decade (1927-1937) under the Nationalist government. It was a period marked by the establishment of a nationwide radio information network. Radio-listening stations were set up and county-level radio monitors were trained. The endeavor sowed the seeds of a mass society that connected villages more closely to national and international events.

Chapters Five and Six examine the newsscape in three rival regions—the Japan-occupied areas, the Nationalist region, and the Communist base—during the Sino-Japanese War in the 1930s-40s. Chapter Five explores how the Japanese and collaborationist governments strengthened the broadcasting network by constructing large-scale infrastructures and local medium-wave stations in Manchuria, North China, and Central China while working closely with NHK in Tokyo. Meanwhile, the Nationalists tried to relaunch radio broadcasting in a challenging condition deep in the inland provinces, aiming to reach the Chinese population, Japanese soldiers, and international community. Chapter Six focuses on the gendering of the Communist Party’s newsscape, emphasizing the significant role women played in radio broadcasting. The chapter also discusses the communists’ reliance on the Nationalist broadcast system during the Sino-Japanese War. Similarly, they also made use of Japanese-manufactured equipment, Japanese-built broadcasting stations, and the co-option of Japanese technicians in the ensuing civil war.

Chapter Seven investigates the formation of a socialist media infrastructure, including both wired and wireless broadcasting, in communist China in the 1950s. By purchasing American exports and developing a domestic electronics manufacturing industry, China created a radio-monitoring network and turned radio into a far-reaching tool for propaganda and control. Broadcasters not only transcribed and transmitted information from central sources but also generated their own news by collecting stories from county or commune members. During the Great Leap Forward, local broadcasting stations emerged as key information entities in counties by organizing agricultural and labor movements and by praising exemplary work units and criticizing the ones that fell behind.

Chapter Eight explores the newsscape during the Cultural Revolution, highlighting how wired broadcasting stations became main targets for seizure by rebels. In this context, Alekna explains the dialectical nature of the technopolitical process: the proliferation of news and communication technologies, driven by high politics, empowered small groups to

mount a political takeover while simultaneously contributing to widespread social breakdown. The book concludes by discussing the role the desire for information has played in the emergence of a mass society from below. The spaces created by radio were mutually constituted by the state and the public, and this technopolitical dynamics helped produce diverse forms of mass society.

Alekna organizes the eight chapters in chronological order and skillfully traces the connections between the newscapes across different regimes and time periods. *Seeking News, Making China* is a compelling read. It is filled with exciting ideas and insights. The narrative is accompanied by well-chosen images. The book addresses issues beyond East Asian history and deserves a wide readership.