

The History and Development of Media Economics Research in China

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ABSTRACT The growth of media economics scholarship globally has increased the need to understand its development both at international and national levels. This paper focuses on development of research in China. Applying a meta-research method, the paper reviews 1257 studies. It identifies three unique features of Chinese media economics research, and it concludes that despite of challenges, with unique country characteristics and great market potential, there is a foreseeable prosperous future in the field in the years to come.

KEY WORDS: media economics, literature, scholarship, history, China

The growth of media economics scholarship globally has increased the need to understand its development as a body of literature and the scope and themes of its various branches of inquiry both at international and national levels. This paper focuses on development of research in China, where dramatic changes in media structures and operations are raising significant new issues for inquiry and where a significant body of media economics literature has emerged.

Chinese media scholars and practitioners see the forthcoming 7th World Media Economics Conference—the primary conference for the media economic researchers worldwide—that will be held in Beijing in 2006 as evidence of the rising interest in the Chinese media economics scholarship domestically and internationally. For a country in which media sectors were operating totally outside the economic regime only 20 years ago, hosting such an event has special implications.

First, in the macro-level, it is an indication of an increasing liberalization in Chinese media market. For the policy makers, the purpose of the Chinese media was exclusively ideological propaganda in the old days; though now, with more economical forces influencing the media sectors, attention is shifting to how to construct a more rationalized and market-oriented media system. Second, in the micro-level, it is evident that media and communication organizations are now seeking more knowledge and experiences to improve their economic and management practices by increasing international discussion and learning. Third, for the academia, it implies that emerging issues will be put into the center of the study and, both opportunities and challenges will be brought to the field as there is an enlarging arena to conduct research.

The field of Chinese media economics research emerged only two decades ago, after the adoption of the policy of 'reforming and opening to the outside world', initiated by the late Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping. Despite a comparatively short history, the development of the field of inquiries is tremendous. According to statistics from a survey conducted in 2004 (Wu & Jin, 2004), there have been several thousand books/articles published since the emergence of the field, covering a variety of media economics topics ranging from policy development, market commercialization to company strategy and other managerial issues of media companies.

Nevertheless, research in the field is still confronted with challenges. For example, researchers studying media economics and management mainly came from the field of communication; it needs more efficient integration between the disciplines of communication, economics and management. Also, a better-constructed methodological and theoretical foundation is required in some studies, and there is a big demand to set up common frameworks with which studies can be conducted and scholars can communicate in the same base.

In view of these, this article seeks to explore the history and development of Chinese media economics research. By examining the past and the present status, it is hoped that general features of the field can be understood, challenges can be identified, and a further understanding for future development can be achieved.

The paper starts with a conceptual framework; therein, paradigms of media economics scholarship and general approaches for media economics research are presented. Next, the research method is illustrated, and findings from a meta-research of 1257 studies are shown. The development and status quo of Chinese media economics research are discussed in the following section, and general features and underlying challenges are identified. Finally, a conclusion is made in the last part of the paper.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF MEDIA ECONOMICS

One of the challenges of media economics research is developing conceptual or theoretical frameworks through which the phenomena can be studied. Thus, to begin with the examination of the field of inquiries in China, we need first to layout a conceptual framework with which a general understanding to media economics research can be generated and paradigms and approaches for study can be identified.

The media economics is the study of how economics and financial pressures affect media system, organization and enterprises. The area of inquiry has developed strongly in the past three decades, has more breadth and depth than many who are unfamiliar with its literature assume, and is based on a variety of economic theories and a wide range of analysis methods.

In a technical sense there is no such thing as media economics because it implies that the economic laws and theories for media are different than for other entities. Media economics is a specific application of economic laws and theories to media industries and firms, showing how economic, regulatory, and financial pressures direct and constrain activities and their influences on the dynamics of media markets. Research has been show that there are unique characteristics and properties about media, particularly as commercial products and services, which require different understanding than for other goods and services.

Economic forces affect all media but the means and significance of the forces differ due to the extent that market control, bureaucratic control, and other types of control influence choices (Gulyás, 2001). As a result, media economics analyses are not only applicable for understanding free and open markets, but provide insight into media activities in a variety of market conditions including those operating in closed systems or with significant regulation and state intervention.

A number of studies in recent decades have reviewed the development of the field and its literature and identified broader patterns and themes related to its breath, depth, and contributions (Albarran, 1998; Picard, 2004; Picard, 2005). Three major paradigms have emerged during the development of the discipline: a *theoretical paradigm*, an *applied paradigm*, and a *critical paradigm* (see Table 1). The theoretical and applied paradigms are often intertwined in the scholarship, but the critical paradigm tends to stand aside from the others. The paradigms are developed from undertaking media economics research based on different academic foundations and from focusing on different subjects and issues (Picard, 2004 and 2005).

The *theoretical paradigm* emerged from the work of economists who have tried to explain choices and decisions and other economic factors affecting producers and consumers of communications goods and services. This paradigm is primarily based on neo-classical economics

Table 1. Fields of Inquiry in Communications Economics

Level of Analysis	Theoretical and Applied Paradigms		Critical Paradigm
	Microeconomics	Macroeconomics	Meta
Academic Foundations	business economics and management	economics and political economy	communications, media studies and political economy
Foci of Analysis	communication firms and consumers	communication industries, government policies, general economy	communications systems, culture, government policies
Issues Studied	financial flow, cost structures, return issues, and decision making	competition, consumption, efficiencies, and externalities	social, political, and cultural effects of communications systems and policies

Source: Picard, 2004 and 2005

and uses that paradigm to explain the forces that constrain and compel actions involving communications systems and media.

The *applied paradigm* emerged from business economics and management departments at universities and from researchers for media industry associations. It is now the most common paradigm found when media economics study is located in university communications departments. This applied paradigm has often explored the structure of media industries and their markets, with an emphasis on understanding trends and changes. It has often had a response orientation, designed to help lead to the development of strategies or policies for firms or government to use in controlling or responding to the changes in the economy and consumer behavior.

The *critical paradigm* emerged from the work of political economists and social critics, primarily within communications studies, concerned about issues of welfare economics. These scholars have a strong cultural and social orientation that led to a focus on issues such as concentration and monopoly in communications, cultural effects issues, work and workers, and how society is being altered by shifts from the industrial to information economy.

Despite differences in traditions, common approaches are evident in media economics scholarship (Picard, 2004 and 2005) and they can be grouped together as industry and market studies, company studies, and effect studies (Table 2).

The list of approaches and methods of analysis is increasing as interest in media economics and the sophistication of the analysis growth. In addition, market conditions vary in different countries, which bring more diversity and complexity to the scholarship in the field. To gain a comprehensive picture of the contemporary media economics research, it is meaningful to not only understand the general development of the field, but go deeper to the specific country market, compare and contrast between different media systems, industries and their problems and issues.

Table 2. Common Approaches to Studying Media Economics

Industry & Market Studies	Company Studies	Effects Studies
Industrial organization	Business strategy	Dependency
demand	company organization and culture	financial commitment
forecasting	cost structures	quality and diversity
consumer spending	financing and investment	globalization and trade balances
niche	financial performance	consumer and social welfare
concentration	productivity	
relative constancy	diversification	
communications policy		

Source: Picard, 2004 and 2005

It is believed that studies in a particular country market are valuable in providing insights of media economics research developed in a certain media environment, and finding out country-specific characteristics determined by different media policies, economic conditions and cultural traditions. Moreover, examining a country market can also be valuable in giving implications to the development of media economics research in other countries and markets.

This study focuses on the market of China. Taking a conceptual framework provided by Picard (2004, 2005) as presented above, the next sections will review the existing studies of media economics in China. Applying a meta-research method (Roger, 1981), these studies will be analyzed, synthesized and discussed in order to compose a general picture of the field.

METHOD

The meta-research method is “the study on research and an analysis of analysis”; it can be defined as “the synthesis of primary research results into more general conclusions” (Roger, 1981, p.3). A prepositional inventory of the meta-research suggests that the synthesis of general conclusions from research can provide valuable information to compose a comprehensive picture as a whole (Roger, 1981). Thus, here the meta-research method is used to categorize the discrete elements of the research, and compare and analyze the general status of the field.

The search for literatures relating to Chinese media economics relies in the first place on the media database ‘*Communications Abstracts*’, the online communications database ‘*Communications & Mass Media Index*’, and the business administration databases ‘*Academic Search Elite*’ and ‘*JSTOR*’. The library and other online searching engines are also sources to acquire articles and books. The survey was conducted by searching under key words ‘*media*’, ‘*communications*’, ‘*economics*’, ‘*research*’ and ‘*China*’.

However, the findings are very limited by using these preliminary sources, which implies that most research of Chinese media economics is not included in the international databases yet. Therefore, the Chinese domestic communications and management journals and academic publications are collected to retrieve more information. Secondary data from a survey conducted by Wu & Jin (2004) serve as the major source for this study, as their survey contains a comprehensive list of abstracts of media economics studies published in China from 1949-2004.

A total of 1530 journal articles, conference papers, working papers and books/book chapters are identified as potentially relevant to the research issue. After further analysis, 1257 studies are determined to be highly relevant to media economics. Due to the extensive number, some cases only available in the abstract forms, yet the major information of their study and data for the purpose of meta-analysis are included. 273 studies are excluded from the final list because there is not enough information for further study or they are rather documentary reports than academic works.

To conduct the meta-research, these 1257 studies are coded with four variables: *time*, *study area or topic*, *research paradigm* and *study approach*. The '*time*' variable is marked by year. The '*study areas or topic*' variable is labeled by different media industries and research topics, such as newspaper industry, broadcasting industry, book and magazine industry, general media, emerging media, media advertising, etc. The '*research paradigm*' variable is measured by three aforementioned paradigms, namely, theoretical paradigm, applied paradigm and critical paradigm; and an 'others' category is set to refer to any additional paradigms which are not included in the major three. The '*study approach*' variable is valued by the three common approaches: industry and market studies, company studies and effect studies. An 'others' category is set as well to investigate whether there are any different common Chinese approaches.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Applying this method, a general picture of the history and development of Chinese media economics research is obtained, and information of different elements of study are acquired.

History and Development of the Field

In China, the earliest appearance of the term '*economics*' in media studies could be traced back to the 1950s, where several articles were found referring to economics issues, such as production and distribution of motion pictures (Zheng & Zhao, 1957) and commercial incomes of motion pictures (Chen, 1957; Gao, 1957). However, no more media economics-related studies were found in the two decades immediately following the 1950s. The absence of research was probably the result of

political turbulences during the 1960s and 1970s, and a tightly controlled 'planned economy' system adopted of the time. Media only served as tools for propaganda, and economic forces had no impact on media performance.

It was not until the end of the 1970s and the beginning of 1980s when the field of study emerged as a result of the 'reforming and opening door' policy and the commercialization of mass media industries. Commercial advertising was introduced in China in 1979, and for the first time TV stations began to cash in on advertising and sponsorship. Consequently, media companies became party corporations. In responding to these changes, studies came to the field to argue and examine issues such as the legitimacy of marketing and advertising in a social communist country (Fu, 1982; Zhang & Zhao, 1985; Liang, 1987), commercial interests of media products (Chen, 1986, Ren, 1987; Chen & Zeng, 1987), reform and transformation of communist media systems (Fang, 1986; Wu, 1986; Sang, 1987), etc.

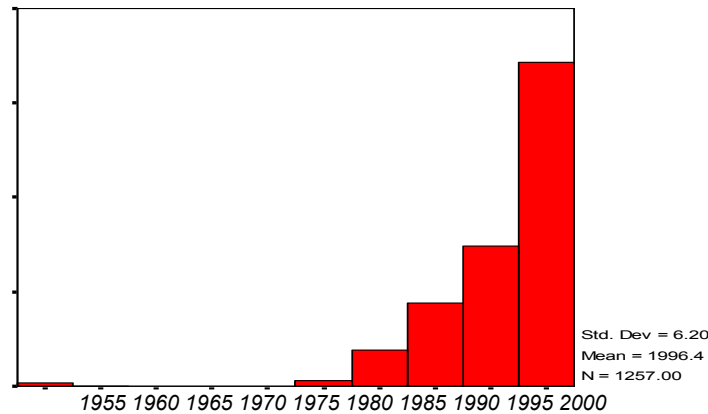
Research on media economics developed rapidly during the 1990s. With the political reform and economic transition, media sectors started to be considered as important components of the entire socialist market economy. An increasing number of researches were conducted to explore, for example, ways of managing media enterprises as economic entities and methods of transforming to a socialist market media system (Li, 1994; Song, 1997; Tu, 1997). Issues such as consolidation and industrialization of newspaper industries were also frequently discussed by media scholars (Yang, 1994; Cheng, 1995; He, 1995).

After getting into the new millennium, China's WTO accession has doubtlessly accelerated the development of media economics research. A great number of studies has been done to investigate how media sectors take the opportunities and face the challenges led by the WTO accession (Zhang, 2001; Ni, 2002; Dai, 2003). In recent years, China's media market has been increasingly deregulated. Private companies are emerging and foreign capitals are entering. Meanwhile, to improve the competitive advantages, big media groups are forming through M&A and allies. The deregulation of media market and consolidation of media groups, together with the emergence of new electronic distribution technologies have brought a new surge of media economics research in China (C.f. Long, 2000; Huang, 2000, Zhou, 2003).

Number, Area and Topic

In examining the *number* of media economics studies along the time, an exponential increase can be found since the emergence of the field (See Figure 1). Some 178 articles appeared in the 1980s, and the number trebled to 519 in the 1990s. In the four years since 2000, 560 studies were conducted. This significant increase indicates greater interests on the part of scholars and also, a surge in demand for research economic issues raised by the media industries.

Figure 1. Number of Media Economics Studies over the Time



Regarding the *study area and topic*, book industry, broadcasting industry and newspaper industry are found to be the major areas for study (Figure 2). General media topics, such as nature and commodity feature of news (Ren, 1987; Wei, 1993; Wang, 2001), conflicting interests of media companies (Sang, 1987; Wang, 1990; Zhao & Huang, 1996) are also discussed. Surprisingly, music industry seems to be a field that is inefficiently explored.

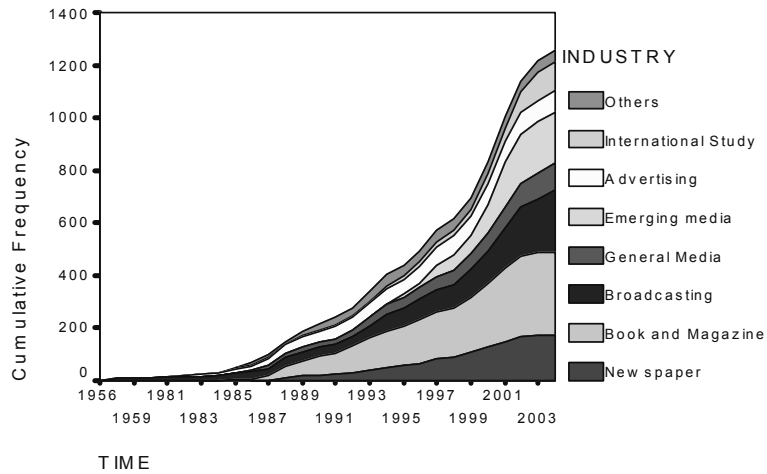
Emerging media, such as electronic media and mobile media issues came to the field in the 1990s. Research on such topic is booming within recent years (C.f. Wang, 2001; Shao, 2001; Zhu & Xi, 2002). In contrast, the growing pace of media advertising studies slackened after the 1990s, although advertising was one of the earliest topics studied by scholars in the 1980s (Fu, 1982; Chen, 1985).

International studies have developed especially after the second half of 1990s. Various western media economics books have been translated into Chinese (E.g. Hoskins, Mcfadyen & Finn, 1998; Shy, 2001; Picard, 2002), and foreign media industries and companies have been studied by many Chinese scholars (C.f. Wu, 1994; Hu, 2002; Mo, 2002). The development of international studies has created more opportunities for Chinese academicians and media practitioners to extend cooperation and exchanges on the international arena.

Research Paradigms and Study Approaches

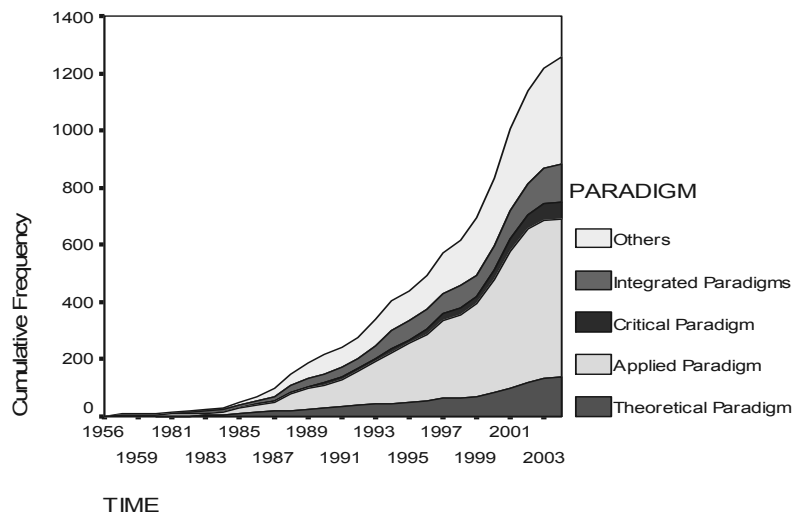
In terms of *research paradigm*, the applied paradigm is most frequently adopted, with which scholars have explored the strategies and development trend of broadcasting industry (Lu, 1999; Long, 2000), and future advertisement trend (Yang, 1988; Xu, 1993), and etc. The theoretical paradigm is also used, for example, in explaining the media phenomenon with economic theories (Luo, 2002; Zhou, 2003) and media

Figure 2. Distribution of Different Study Areas or Topics along the Time



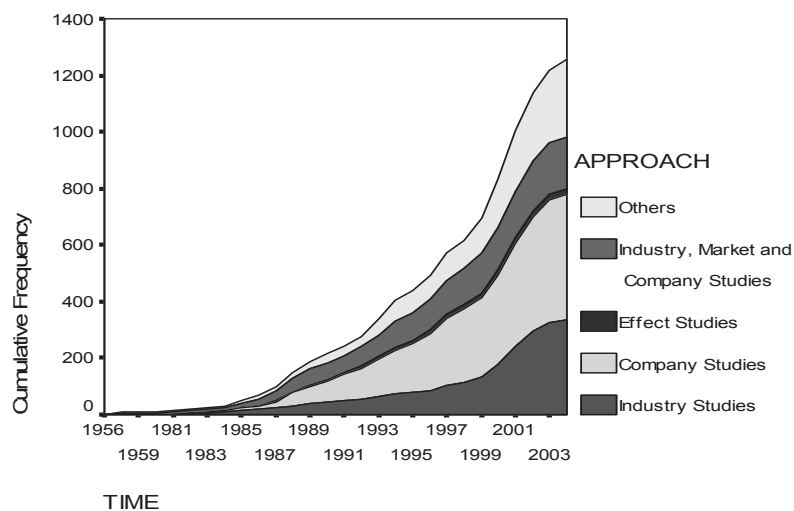
investment (Zhao & Zhou, 2003; Wu & Zhang, 2003). The applied paradigm and theoretical paradigm are often intertwined (see from the 'Integrated Paradigms' in Figure 3) to study, for instance, media market and capitalization (Song, 1997; Hu, 2003; Zhao & Zhou, 2003) and the development strategy of the TV broadcasting companies (Bao, 1994; Lu, 1999; Long, 2000). However, critical paradigm is much less used in comparison with the other two.

Figure 3. Distribution of Different Research Paradigms



As to the *study approach*, most researches conduct company studies to examine, for example, the marketing issues of magazine companies (Xu, 1995; Fang & Yao, 1998) and the industrialization of newspaper companies (Song, 1997; Dong et al, 2002). Industry and market studies are made to investigate issues such as the development and economic policy of publishing industry (Tan, 1994; Wu et al, 1994), and media industry management (Wang, 2000; Zhou, 2003). It is also common to conduct studies at both industry & market level and the company level, as shown in the category of *'Industry, Market and Company Studies'* in Figure 4 (C.f. Zheng, 2002; Hu, 2003; Zhao & Meng, 2003). Yet, the effect studies are seldom applied, and only a few appears to discuss, for instance, the effect of advertising on consumer's behavior (Zhang, 2001) and the social effect of academic journal (Ma, 1993).

Figure 4. Distribution of Different Study Approaches



Studies that do not fit into the paradigms and approaches identified in the Picard model were included in the 'others' category. Some common Chinese patterns are shown among these studies. The first pattern is to apply theories of socialist market economy to examine the transition of Chinese media system from the planned-economy to the market-economy (C.f. He, 1995; Zhou & Ye, 1999; Cao, 2001). The second is to adopt ideological theories to examine media practices (C.f. Liu, 1989; Gao, 1994); therein, media's function of social propaganda is prioritized. These two common patterns are actually determined by the unique social and economic characteristics of the country.

DISCUSSION

Concluding from the findings presented above, a significant progress of media economics research can be seen in China. The field has been developing tremendously since it emerged in the early 1980s. Over 20 years, the exponentially growing numbers of studies are a convincing indication of this vigorous progress.

Reviewing the literatures, we can find a great variety of media areas and topics studied by scholars in the past two decades; and the field of inquiries is continually showing its robustness and diversity, attracting increasing attention from academicians and practitioners. Major media industries, such as book industry, newspaper industry and broadcasting industry have been intensively examined. Studies of media advertising had helped to construct the early landscape of the field; yet more recently, the emerging media has become one of the forefront areas to explore. In the 1980s, commercialization of media products was among the central topics, and research had been extended to a wider breadth in the 1990s with the consolidation of media groups, industrialization and reconstruction of media sectors becoming the centers for discussion. In the new millennium, a large amount of studies are clustered among issues such as organizational internal study, industry and market reconstruction and changes in competitions.

From the theoretical standpoint, a variety of research paradigms and study approaches are found in the literature. The applied paradigm and the company approach are adopted most often in the research; and the theoretical paradigm and industry & market approach are also generally applied; whereas the critical paradigm and effect approach are used much infrequently. The overlap and integration of several different paradigms and approaches are also evident in many studies. In addition, Chinese media scholars have contributed to the field with two China-specific patterns: one applying theories of socialist market economy to study the unique media practices in an economically transitional market, and the other using the ideological theories to analyze the media phenomenon and economic activities in a communist society.

Comparing and contrasting media economics research in China with that in the west, we can find many similarities. For example, issues of internationalization, appearance of new media, changes in market, changes in technology and changes in media organizations are of common interests. Also, major research paradigms and study approaches used in the west can be seen in China. However, different media systems and market conditions still make distinct impacts on media economics research. There are some unique Chinese features that may distinguish the Chinese media economics research from the others.

First, the sophistication and complexity of media economics issues in China need to be studied with a well-integrated framework constructed by the knowledge of the socialist market economy, the understanding of a state-controlled media system and the grasp of economic nature of media

products and organizations. China is undergoing a transitional period from the planned-economy to the socialist market economy; and most media organizations are still state-owned. The trend of privatization rising from other sectors is increasingly influencing the media industry and the whole society, and economic forces do affect media; however, constrained by the current situation, this effect needs to be understood in the context of a specific Chinese society and a unique socio-media environment.

Second, media economics research in China is grounded heavily in the communications discipline with less solid foundation in the economics and management studies. The original Chinese communications discipline grew from the subjects of arts and social science; and in the past, it was deeply rooted in the socialist ideology and political science. The socialist tradition exerts an impact on media economics research in China. Many studies in the field tend to examine and explain economic activities under a normative ideological framework with less attention paid to the economics and management theories.

Third, studies of media economics in China are strongly influenced by the Marxist cultural tradition, with emphasis laid on practice rather than theory. From the methodological perspective, the methods from which studies are conducted are usually not explicitly illustrated. The survey of existing literatures shows that scholars seldom refer to, for example, how their conceptual framework was set and through which way their data were collected or how their empirical works were conducted.

Drawing from these special features, challenges facing Chinese media economics research can be seen. One of the major challenges is the construction of a theoretical and methodological framework, through which studies can be conducted and scholars can communicate on the same level. This framework needs to compass different disciplines, such as communications, economics and management. It also needs to integrate knowledge of the society, market and complex economic forces. Furthermore, as a way of problem-solving, methodology issues need to be addressed and put into the centre of discussion in order to achieve genuine scientific findings and understanding.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, media economics research in China is developing. In the past two decades, significant progresses have been achieved through the efforts made by scholars and practitioners, and the field of inquires has shown itself to be research-abundant, and central to understanding media activities. Now, the field is still confronted with many challenges; however, as an old Chinese saying goes, “challenges emerge concurrently with opportunities”.

The opportunities for future development could be seen from a continually changing media environment in China, which will provide more demands for research, as the need for media economics scholarship is growing simultaneously with the growth and changes in media and communications practices. The opportunities can also be seen from the current development of media economics education in China. Courses introducing media economics are offered in both communications and management schools, and media economics has been set up as a study discipline at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

With these together with many other potentials and opportunities, it is believed that there will be a foreseeable prosperous future in the field in the years to come, and media economics will grow to be a more important discipline for improving media practices and constructing a more effective media system in the country.

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