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Communication Priorities In China

By

Timothy Yu
I left my fatherland when I was eighteen, and returned to China recently after having spent nearly forty years outside. This homecoming of mine reminds me of a poem written by a famous Chinese poet, Tu Fu of Tang Dynasty, which reads: “I left my hometown and returned to visit it while old; I still speak the dialect that the people understand, yet I am different as my grey hair would tell. Shouldn’t I let them know who I am? They would ask: Where do you come from stranger?”

My experience was similar so far as the first part of the poem goes. Yet people do recognise me and can even address me properly. Those who had TV sets at home or in their dormitories had seen me through a nationwide TV newscast. And those who had no TV sets had learned from the ‘haves’ about my visit.

The point I want to make is that TV does make a difference now; different from the experiences of the poet Tu Fu, some one thousand years ago. I do not want to impose this personal episode on you. I mention it only to tell you something about the growth of mass media in China, as a ground for further discussion on the topic of communication priorities.

China now has approximately 8 million TV sets. The number is increasing rapidly, for almost every family has placed a TV set on top of its priority list of purchases. As an illustration of this, let me tell you about my friend who lives in a small city of about 100,000 people. He is a factory worker; yet he is so popular that he could borrow a car from a very high-ranking official, to come to the station to meet me. My friend has skills to repair colour television sets, and happened to be the only one in that city who could do so. The report about the television situation in China published in the Spring issue of the Asian Messenger, presents a good picture of this medium in China.

The pretty girl on the cover of Asian Messenger is one of the television announcers in China. Some people give credit to Asian Messenger saying that this is the first time that a Chinese announcer's face is being shown to the world. She happened to be the most popular announcer, although she is the most junior in the station.

Newspapers

The general characteristics of newspaper industry in China are: they have few pages, yet are larger in their circulation compared with the papers we are used to reading. The standard size is still four pages. Only the People's Daily which is a party organ and the newly-established English language newspaper, the China Daily, which celebrated its first anniversary in June, have eight pages. The circulation of People's Daily is now 5.5 million. Even the provincial newspapers like the Chiang Daily enjoys a circulation of 350,000 copies. However, they are still limited in their size. How this limitation affects the functions of a newspaper to provide necessary knowledge of today's world is perhaps a very interesting subject for the communication researchers to pay attention to. I have asked many of the editors I met on this trip the same question. Most of them have not even thought about it, because they think four pages are good enough to provide the necessary information for their readers. But when I went deeper into the subject and talked about knowledge gaps, they began to realise the seriousness of not being able to provide enough knowledge for their people, and the serious effects of that situation.
There are two other things I would like to mention. Those who don’t read the Chinese language may not be able to make these observations. The first is the growth of newspapers that tend to play the role of ‘a window to today’s world’, and give more interpretations and analyses; not through its news pages but rather through supplements. This type of newspaper enjoys a phenomenal growth.

_Wan Wei Gao_, a daily in Shanghai, is a good example. Last year, this newspaper had a circulation of only 750,000 copies. But suddenly, in a year’s time the circulation has jumped to 1.5 million. I met the editor and asked why? He gave his reasons — which I will submit later together with other observations.

The rapid growth of the circulation of some newspapers is due to the role they play as a wider window to today’s world. The second is the phenomenal growth of evening newspapers. Evening newspapers are, by tradition, generally regarded as more entertainment-oriented than news reporting-oriented in China.

Now people pay four cents (equivalent to US two cents) a copy for an evening newspaper, and spend the evening reading it over a cup of hot tea. While most of the evening newspapers in the Western world are either cutting down their circulation or closing up (the circulation of evening newspapers in Hongkong and elsewhere in Asian countries are dropping drastically), the evening newspapers in China have had an entirely different experience. They are enjoying a great leap forward.

An evening newspaper published in Canton (the capital city of Guandong province) called _Yanchen Evening_ (4 pages) has a circulation of 1.2 million this year. Last year, its circulation was only 700,000. This evening newspaper enjoys a nation-wide readership. It is available two days later in Beijing.

Another evening newspaper published only four months ago in Shanghai is called _Shin Ming Wan Bao_. It has reached a circulation of 700,000. If it could have enough paper supply — I was told by the Editor — it could have reached the million mark.

Still another one is the _Peking Evening_, an evening newspaper published in Beijing. This newspaper now enjoys a circulation twice as high as the _People’s Daily_. It is widely read. You may wonder why? The only explanation is that people now want to know more; to express themselves more. Any newspaper that can give them news, opinions and interpretation more than the _People’s Daily_ or much more than the other party-owned papers can, is welcome.

These few papers, I have referred to are edited and operated by people who are comparatively more broad-minded; they are people who have suffered and have been persecuted during the Cultural Revolution.

Before my visit to China, I thought the Cultural Revolution was more of a propaganda exercise than reality. After the trip, and after my personal talk with many close relatives and friends, I was able to understand its implications. All newspapers have not done a good job in reporting the actual situation regarding the Cultural Revolution.

__Radio__

In China, when you tune your radio set to certain local programmes — on shortwave as well as on medium wave — in the neighbourhood of those local frequencies, you always get many other broadcasts. Some of the broadcasts are international; others are from Hongkong. There is no attempt by government to prevent people from tuning in to the kind of programme they prefer.

In Canton, local citizens prefer Hongkong programmes which are commercial radio programmes, to their local ones, and they just tune on their sets and listen in their cars and in their homes to Hongkong without any fear. The most popular broadcasts in terms of international radio programmes is _The Voice of America_ (VOA), which people said has been so far very fair and accurate in its news reports. These are very important words. Chinese people like to read, to listen to foreign radio programmes, and they want news reports to be fair and accurate.

VOA English programmes are still the most popular ones. They are even more popular than the ‘learning of English’ programmes provided by local stations. It is said that ABC (Australian Broadcasting Company), Japanese and Russian radio stations are beaming programmes to China, but they are less popular; much less popular than the Voice of America. Again there are a number of Chinese language religious programmes being broadcast from
outside, and many said they listen to them particularly in the evenings. Local programmes, that is, programmes produced in Chinese stations have a lot of music, conventional as well as contemporary. One of the phenomena I observed is this: they air lots of contemporary songs composed by musicians in Taiwan. I have a tape which contains 16 songs and is sung by a pretty Chinese girl, Miss Chu. This surprises me, because everything that has a Taiwanese touch is taboo in China. But this is an exception.

Perhaps we could find a reason in the contents of the songs in the cassette: the basic theme of these songs is Love. Love for one's country, fatherland, love of love. They are very light in their approach, appealing more to feelings and emotions. This is, to me, a liberation from the rigid 1970's atmosphere which required everything proletarian in music and when the arts were asked to serve the party.

Communication Trends

There are only three departments of journalism in China, and in each the enrolment is approximately two hundred. China now has only 600 students studying journalism. When you compare this figure with the manpower demand in China, it is almost insignificant. However, the graduates from these three departments are playing a very important role in running today's newspapers in China. The first journalism department is located in Canton University. It existed long before the Cultural Revolution. It stopped operation during the Cultural Revolution but was restored in 1978. Thus it has only a four-year history of existence in its present form.

The second department is in Shanghai at Futan University, which is perhaps the most progressive of the three departments. It has a very good faculty, some of the members have already gone to the United States for further training, and some of the students are in training in the United States.

The third one is in Beijing with the People's University. Its main interest is in theoretical developments according to Marxist, Leninist and Maoist thought; although a big debate is now taking place as to whether newspapers should only become the tools of the class struggle, or be something more than that. The big debate is now going on. This is a very good omen. A few universities in the southern part of China are seriously considering the starting of departments of journalism or communications. One perhaps

will be established in two years time at the University of Amoy, in Fukien province.

All three departments of journalism referred to by me have Masters programmes. This year is the first graduation year for the students of these departments.

Publications

The last item I want to mention are publications in the field of journalism. I have brought with me only two publications on journalism. One is the New News Front, which is now in the third year of publication. It carries historical studies and stories of the experiences of Western journalists. However, there is a special column on events in other parts of the world. Communication studies have been referred to though very briefly, in this magazine. Subscriptions are available now for outsiders and it is very inexpensive — US$1 per year. The other is the newly published News — University. The interesting thing about this new publication is it carries accounts by veteran journalists. It also carries articles on theories of communication. There is one on human communication and communication studies. This is, to the best of my knowledge, the first article that ever appeared in any publication in China on the study of communication — by a lady whom I met in Shanghai. She is also a member of the faculty of the Futan University. She went to the East-West Centre and studied there for six months. She has come back and brought along her knowledge in modern communication studies.

Priorities

I should now say something about priorities in communications in China. My visit to China was arranged two years ago. China invited me officially to be there to conduct a couple of seminars, to talk about communication as a field of study, the field of educational communication, particularly the application of communication theories to their educational programmes.

In China now, because of the Cultural Revolution, there is a big gap in ages and qualifications of teaching staff. Most of the teachers are in their 60's and 70's. The younger ones are in their twenties and thirties. There is a complete lack of qualified teachers for training. So this tremendous short-
age of qualified teachers has become a very serious problem in China. How China could solve this problem has been her major concern lately. They have already started a television college or open university, which has an enrolment of 40 million at the moment, which is quite impressive.

China also has a Radio Agricultural College which has an enrolment this year of half-a-million. Again a phenomenal figure. But these two colleges or universities are run by a very small organisation which has less than 100 staff. And programmes are broadcast through the central television and sound broadcasting stations during the period when regular programmes are not "on the air".

TV colleges are only catering to the needs of those who cannot get into University. These figures may be of some use to you in order to find out how difficult it is for young people to get into universities. Last year there were more than 10 million young graduates from high schools applying for places in the universities. Of these only 300,000 were admitted. There is a tremendous demand for university education. In order to be able to meet this demand, they allow students to sit an entrance examination for enrolment into the TV colleges. Not everybody is enrolled; only those who pass the examinations. Even to study at TV colleges is a kind of privilege for young people in China.

So this is the first area they are very concerned about. I went there because of this tremendous responsibility they cast on me during my trip there. But I did not feel qualified to do that. So I went to see my teacher, Dr Wilbur Schramm, who just had his third retirement and is still working happily at the East-West Centre. Since he is one of the forerunners in the teaching of communications, and did an excellent study on educational communication, I asked him whether he could go along with me. We went together and this was the first time that communications as a field of study was officially recognised in China.

The first priority that China places on its communications programme is educational communication. To be specific, the question they would like to have an answer for is: "How can the mass media be more effectively used to not only help educate those who have no opportunity to enter universities, but also to help those who are already in universities?" They would also like to know how much media can be effectively utilised to train 800 million farmers and their children; to teach them how to read, write and count, and to provide them with necessary knowledge of modern living.

So we have told them and shared with them our experiences of India — particularly the SITE project. They have tremendous interest in that.

Again in this area of priority, one teacher's college is seriously considering setting up a research centre in educational communication — the people there do not know how to do it.

The second area which we should pay some attention to is training in communication. As I mentioned earlier, a new department in communication studies will be established on the campus of the University of Amoy, most probably next year. And in this area they need our blessings, our help and assistance. A number of other universities which I have just mentioned are seriously considering starting their departments of journalism, and they are ready to introduce into their curriculum courses in the field of communication. This is another area which I think should have priority in China.

The third area is providing of teaching and reading materials for departments of journalism and communication, for students of TV colleges and Radio colleges, and especially for the teachers universities' faculty members and their students. They do not have too many books in this field in the Chinese language, and the vast majority of them don't read English. This is a fact which we must recognise. So, merely sending volumes of English textbooks and reading material won't help. What should be done, and perhaps the outside world could help to do, is to translate some of the textbooks and materials into Chinese language. They are willing to publish them, pay the costs, royalties, etc., as long as such materials can be made available — which I think is very important, in addition to training in communications.

The fourth point I like to mention is the training of teachers to teach other teachers, or training of senior teachers to teach other junior teachers in communication. This has already been done on a very small scale by the East-West Centre which has started a new programme for Chinese communications. Chinese communications studies have only a short history; they originated in the West, developed very swiftly and very intensively, particularly in the United States, beginning in the 1930s, and in recent
years, have moved eastwards, as scholars returned from studying in the United States to introduce into Asia the concepts, theories and the methodologies of the new social sciences.

However, the basic approach to communication studies has been Western rather than Asian. This is understandable in view of the training of the scholars and the history of communication research. This is rather odd in view of 5000 years of the history of China, which has contributed so richly towards thought and to the development of the technology of printed communications.

So while Chinese scholars inside China are willing to accept, to approach and to learn from the Western world their communication theories and methodologies, they also feel that they should not delay in exploring their own resources of experience and knowledge that have contributed so much to the needs of China. That is one area China is trying to develop very rapidly.

Unfortunately, so far China does not have the modern methodology or trained manpower to do it. But that is a crucial area.