

Mass Communication Theory : The Chinese Perspective

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Communication studies were first introduced to Taiwan in the mid-fifties, later to Hong Kong in the mid-sixties, and only recently to Mainland China in the early eighties. In Taiwan and in Hong Kong, the tradition has been unastonishingly American, as almost all the communication researchers have had their training in the United States. In Mainland China, where higher education was aborted for more than a decade in the Cultural Revolution and where sociological studies were interrupted for more than thirty years, the concept of "communication" as a field of academic interest has been fairly recent. While both Taiwan and Hong Kong communication scholars have embraced with enthusiasm communication theories learned from the United States, their Mainland counterparts, who have just found new life after the catastrophic Cultural Revolution, have only begun to approach Western communication theories. While most Taiwan and Hong Kong scholars have eagerly applied Western communication theories in their teaching and research, their Mainland counterparts are only beginning to criticize them as "bourgeoise" and advocate a cautious selective stand in their application.¹ In sum, while Taiwan and Hong Kong have made considerable achievements in communication research in the past decades, their Mainland counterparts have only begun to get themselves acquainted with the basic

concepts and approaches developed in the West.

Although it is true that communication research in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and recently Mainland China, have been heavily American-influenced, several distinctive approaches can be identified. First, there is the more traditional historical research focusing on the birth, development, and death of various media institutions, particularly newspapers. Second, there is the equally traditional attention to journalistic practices as exemplified in studies of writing, editing, and reporting skills. Third, there is the "imported" empirical approach to communication and journalism, which has characterized most of the studies from the 1960s onward. Fourth, there is the Marxist and Maoist examination of communication problems and journalistic practices.² While the first and the second approaches have cut across geographical and political boundaries to have been widely influential in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Mainland China, the fourth has so far been the mainstream in the Mainland only.³

In terms of the origin of these approaches, except for the first emphasis on historical research, which is predominantly a Chinese tradition, the rest three are conspicuously foreign. One recalls that modern newspapers were first brought into China by foreign missionaries in the 19th century⁴ and the teaching of journalistic practices in universities, rather than through apprenticeship, is a 100 per cent American tradition that dates back to the early 1920s in the Mainland, the 1950s in Taiwan, and the 1960s in Hong Kong.⁵ While the interest in an empirical

approach to communication studies is predominantly American, the Marxist approach is unabashedly Russian.

"Foreign" as communication research is, the presence and contribution of Chinese insights can hardly be negated. The present paper intends to take a brief look at four major aspects of this Chineseness in communication research. These are: interpersonal communication, communication and change, persuasive communication, and the Chinese ideograph as a unique communication medium.

Interpersonal Communication

Interpersonal communication is perhaps the most culture-bound aspect of communication theories, as it is indeed the culture itself. In Chinese Confucianist culture, authority is respected and harmony is cherished. The respect for authority calls for the observance of specific rituals in communication between elders and their juniors and between superiors and their subordinates. Choice of words and salutations can be very tedious and difficult so as to show respect and to maintain the hierarchy of social order. Respect for elders and superiors has also influenced the expression of opinions in public. To avoid offending the elders or superiors, dissenting opinions are most often than not withheld.

Among peers, harmony takes precedence over the respect for authority. To maintain harmony, conversations are not only carefully worded but also calculated for this purpose. Dissenting opinions are avoided as well. The respect for authority and the emphasis on harmony have

greatly impaired the expression of political opinions and done damage to social creativity. The slow evolution of a truly democratic system in China may be attributed to the existence of these two communication gaps, vertical as well as horizontal.

It is true that the Chinese Communists have tried very hard in the past decades to deal with this Confucianist influence, their efforts are hardly successful. The encouragement of criticism and self-criticism in meetings and public gatherings did indeed contribute to the weakening of traditional Chinese social structure and thinking. However, the Confucianist values have been replaced by the Communist values, which give even greater emphasis on unity and respect for authority, incarnated in the Communist Party Central and the leadership cadres at various levels. As such, the two traditional communication gaps have continued to exert their impact on the Chinese society, explaining in part the very many failures of the Chinese Communist policies which have been formulated without an understanding of the actual feelings of the people.⁶

A deeper root for the concern with respect for authority and harmony can be found in the importance given to "face" by the Chinese.⁷ The concern with "having face" or "losing face" in the presence of outsiders has led to the exhibition of contradictory behaviors in public and in private. This explains in part why many a Western visitors to China during the Cultural Revolution was so much wrong in their observations of the social reality.

"Face" influences communication in at least four ways. First, it influences the choice of communication modes. To avoid losing face, for both the communicator and the receiver, a critical message is preferably communicated through writing than the spoken words in face-to-face situations. The reverse of this is that in face-to-face situations, messages tend to become less critical.⁸ Furthermore, one finds that among peoples the Chinese can be very cordial and friendly in speaking while extremely harsh and tough in writing. This is exactly the opposite of interpersonal communication behaviors commonly found in the West.⁹

Second, "face" also leads to the preference of indirect communication to direct communication on many occasions. If A and B are not quite familiar with each other and if A wants to invite B to dinner or if A wants to talk to B about something that involves interests of both parties, to avoid losing face, as invitation may be refused or proposed solution may be rejected, one almost always finds a "C" serving as the go-between. Since A and B are never in face-to-face situations when refusal takes place, harmony can be maintained and friendship between the two can be carried on a lot more easily.

Third, the concern with "face" has also resulted in "semantic meticulousness" in both social and political communication. The careful selection of words in talking to elders or superiors in social interactions is one example. In political communication, this can be found

in the many ritualistic speeches and in the unique phrases reserved for leaders. While things have changed considerably in Hong Kong and Taiwan, the phenomenon still prevails in Mainland China. For instance, "unemployed youth" is now being referred to as "youth awaiting employment" in the media and in social conversations.

Fourth, "face" also has to do with the superficial unity often found in the mass media. As discussion of conflicts in public may be interpreted as "losing face", dissenting views are usually suppressed or reserved for more private occasions and the "bright" side given display. In an important speech on the Chinese Communist press made on February 8, 1985, Party Secretary-General Hu Yaobang unequivocally said that eighty percent of media coverage should be given to the bright side and only twenty percent of it is permitted for the criticism or "the dark side of society."¹⁰

Communication and Change

The study of communication and change once dominated the attention of communication researchers in both the West and the East. Largely because of the failures and frustrations in applying this model in many developing countries, this paradigm has been mercilessly castigated as either theoretically myopic or culturally ethnocentric. In fact, it was declared "passing."¹¹ This criticism emerging in the late sixties and the early seventies has been intensified in the past decade as a result of the building-up of the controversy over the establishment of a new international

information order (NIO).

As the paradigm on communication and change has been criticized as ethnocentric, Western oriented, and as most failures and frustrations occurred in countries that have adopted this "Western model" of development, China was looked upon as a model instead. Yet, the irony is that post-Mao China is now firmly moving away from the path that was praised as model towards that has been castigated as "imperialistic." This is certainly not to deny the many valid criticisms of the communication change paradigm, but to call for a critical examination of this paradigm in the new light, lest the Third World fall into a perpetual cycle of following the path of the West. That is, to apply a paradigm when the West is promoting it and to discard it when the West is denouncing it. Examination of the Chinese experience with development has some insights to offer.¹²

Of the foremost importance in this reexamination is the redefinition of the Chinese experience with development in the light of post-Mao reforms introduced and enforced under Deng Xiaoping. While many scholars of the sixties and the early seventies generally regarded the Chinese development experience as "success" or "model," post-Mao policies have indicated just the opposite. What went wrong was that these scholars, while assigning an over-estimated role to communication, were either blind to or oblivious of the role played by "power." That is, past Chinese Communist communication strategies and tactics had all been fortified by political power concentrated in

the Chinese Communist Party. The use of force or the threat of the use of force, often violent and merciless, was largely responsible for the effectiveness of these strategies.¹³

In terms of the goals set out by the Chinese Communist leaders, one indeed can hardly dispute with the effectiveness in achieving these goals. Yet, one important thing has been missed. That is, these communication strategies were utilized in the achieving of counter-productive economic or social policies. Thus, the more effective these measures, the more destructive they were. Consequences of these measures, always important in the consideration of political, social, and economic policies, was left out. Ironically, had China's communication strategies been less effectively executed, China would be in much better economic shape, as many Chinese leaders and intellectuals have now reflected.

In assessing China's development experience, communication scholars have failed in still another area. While communication is a social and cultural process, these scholars have failed to observe the relationship between communication and development in its cultural and social context. For instance, Confucianism had oftentimes been criticized as being conservative, thus standing in the way of China's modernization. Instead, Communism has been hailed as change-oriented, contributing to modernization and change.¹⁴ This thesis has again been refuted by the better economic performance in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and South Korea, where Confucianism has prevailed and Communism outlawed.¹⁵ Perhaps, a most telling case can be made of

David McClelland's comparative analysis of need for achievement in school textbooks used in Taiwan and Mainland China. Once can hardly question the linkage between need for achievement and development. Yet, one must also clearly define this "need for achievement" in cultural and social context. McClelland, however, failed to observe this tenet. What he coded as "achievement" in the Mainland China textbooks was in fact obstacles to economic development as they were then narrowly defined as "political fulfillment" rather than "economic fulfillment" found in the Taiwan textbooks. The latter was not defined and was not coded for analysis.¹⁶

The recent controversy over the establishment of a new international information order and the critical examination of development experience in Third World countries have called for a close, and often hostile, look at the impact of external factors upon development. These critical theorists assert that underdevelopment in these countries is a direct result of exploitation by Western powers, which have worked hard to perpetuate their pre-colonial influence through the export of media and communication.¹⁷ These scholars also cited China's Cultural Revolution policies as a model. Yet, as time has demonstrated once again China is really the anti-thesis. The Cultural Revolution policies, which were indeed self-reliant, resulted in economic and cultural sterility. It was only when these policies were replaced by open-door policies in the early 1980s did China begin to enliven up culturally and economically. The lesson is obvious. While external factors

do affect the speed of development, internal factors, the organization and administration of national resources, for the achievement of this goal, matter as well. Furthermore, this lesson also points to the necessity to critically examine theories developed in the West before application in either teaching or research.

Persuasive Communication

Persuasion has long been the core of communication research interest as it is not only the early focus of communication research efforts but also the key to the success of diffusion and adoption of new ideas or technological innovations. As the social process, communication is as old as mankind itself. The Chinese history is rich in its documentation of such persuasive activities and has many insights for thought.

The Spring-Autumn and Warring States Periods (770 to 221 B.C.) of the Zhou Dynasty, because of the weakening of the central Zhou emperor's power, were characterized by wars among the lords and a flourishing of ideas and philosophies which claimed ability to strengthen the lords' military and political power. The half millenium saw the emergence of professional lobbyists who travelled from state to state to proselytize their secrets of national strategies in achieving military hegemony. Among these lobbyists, the most noted were Su Qin and Zhang Yi. Su Qin masterminded the "vertical alliance" to check the powerful Qin warlord's military aggression against the weaker states, while Zhang

Yi impregnated the weaker states with the "horizontal link" (detente) to pay homage to the powerful Qin warlord. Examination of the historical documents and records indicate that the principles of persuasion utilized by these lobbyists coincide with those discovered and synthesized by Carl I. Hovland, Irving L. Janis and Harold H. Kelley through experimental studies.¹⁸

Westerners have often construed the Chinese as a-humorous. This is indeed a gross mistake. The Chinese Historical Records (Shi Ji) by Sima Qian has had a volume on "Humorous Ministers" who were eloquent orators skilled in the use of "ambivalent speeches" to persuade their lords from implementing policies detrimental to national security or welfare. For instance, Lord Zhuang of Cu state ordered his courtiers to mourn the death of his beloved horse with the same honor to be bestowed upon a deceased Dalfu (a high ranking minister). Although opposed to this absurdity, the courtiers dared not speak out. Instead of stepping out to oppose the arrangement, You Meng, one of the courtiers, proposed that an emperor's honor be bestowed upon the deceased horse. Not only was a direct confrontation avoided, You Meng was successful in bringing to light the absurdity of Lord Zhuang's decision.¹⁹

Avoiding direct confrontation with existing beliefs has long been the advice given by communication scholars. They have suggested "channelling" instead. This theorem can again be found in Chinese records. The great Chinese Confucian philosopher Mencius advocated on the one hand

that warmongers be dealt with by capital punishment and travelled from state to state to persuade the lords to devote more efforts to the welfare of the people on the other hand. One strategy he used most often was to use the same logic of the lords so as to trap them into following his reasoning. Psychologically, he was prepared as well. He concluded that when trying to convince a lord, one ought to disregard the lord's pomp and airs so as not to be awed and distracted by them.²⁰ One again recalls the findings of communication researchers about the relative status or position or esteem of communicators in influencing others.

Mo Zi, founder of the Mohist school of thought during the Warring States Period (475 to 221 B.C.) and a great peace movement activist, was also a powerful persuader. Mo Zi and his disciples would travel long distances to see the lords or their generals to stop them from attacking other states. In addition to basing his arguments on sound logic, Mo Zi was backed up by defense deployments of the weapons he and his disciples had invented. In other words, Mo Zi's strategy was persuasion or negotiation for peace on the basis of strength. As the lords found that there was no chance of winning the war, the only logical alternative left was to rescind their decisions.²¹ Mo Zi's deterrent strategies through strength stand out against those advocated by today's peace movement activists.

The Chinese ideographic system of writing is perhaps the most misunderstood aspect of Chinese communication, by both Westerners and Chinese. To these people, the Chinese ideographic scripts or characters are a-scientific or even counter-scientific since they do not use the phonetic symbols. They are regarded as hard to learn, to master, to be computerized, and as the number one obstacle in China's industrial and technological advancement. In short, the Chinese ideographs hinder modernization, they ought to be replaced by the more "advanced" phonetic system of writing.²²

While Chinese themselves also hold such views, they are largely influenced by Western thinking which is based on the assumption that the attributes associated with the phonetic scripts are better and more advanced. By way of logic, the Chinese ideographs are thus backward. Nothing can be more wrong than this and it can be regarded as a classic example of the ideological domination of Western thinking over indigenous cultures.

One frequent criticism of the Chinese ideographs is that they are so difficult to learn because there are so many of them and each contains so many strokes which are hard to memorize. In comparison, the English alphabet has only 26 letters. This is a grossly mistaken assumption; one only has to consider that learning of the English language. A Chinese dictionary contains tens of thousands of words and idioms, so does an English dictionary. The difficulty is matched in their respective differences in the nuances

of meaning created in spelling changes and in the variations of the number of strokes.

Being ideographic, the Chinese writing system indeed has some advantages over the phonetic counterparts. For one thing, they are easy to comprehend. As English words have suffixes or prefixes to help communicate meanings, the Chinese characters are made of components or radical roots that also help with the communication of meanings. If Romanized, the Chinese writing system will lose this advantage altogether. The Romanized Chinese writing system can only convey the sounds, but not the meanings any more. Furthermore, the Chinese ideographic system, as are other alphabetic languages, is self-generating. The Romanized Chinese system is not. It will become a dead language.

The Chinese ideographic writing system has one more advantage. That is, it is far richer in meaning. Any English book, when translated into Chinese, takes up only about 2/3 to 4/5 of the original volume. The Chinese ideographic writing system also saves about an equal amount of space than if Romanizations are used. This saving has tremendous implications for communication. One only has to imagine the paper, the ink, the printing time and labor saved in the production process and the cost saved in the transportation of the finished products.

As for computerization, the Chinese scientists, most of them trained in the West, have in the past decade begun to turn away from the logic used in computerizing the alphabetic languages to that used in constructing the

Chinese ideographic characters. This shift has proven to be scientifically prudent and practically rewarding. Chinese computer scientists have already been predicting that inputting the Chinese characters may one day involve about the equal time, if not less, used in inputting alphabetic languages.²³ In fact, such inputting system has already been developed and used in both Taiwan and Mainland China and is also being popularized for adoption.

The above discussion of the advantages of the Chinese ideographic writing system is by no means a negation of the advantages associated with alphabetic languages. What it does intend to say is that one must not use the attributes of foreign inventions to negate the values of indigenous innovations unless the latter have been thoroughly examined. Certainly, discussion of the advantages of indigenous innovations should also be accompanied with discussion of their disadvantages so that improvement can be made. The Chinese ideographic system itself has undergone many changes through the two millenia. They have become simpler and more standardized. While simplification of the Chinese ideographs seems to be the natural cause of development, such process has been evolutionary rather than revolutionary. The latter approach has been adopted by the Chinese Communists and is exemplified in the nation-wide efforts to simplify the characters and to Romanize the characters eventually. The post-Mao Chinese leadership has also called for a halt to further simplification, which has in the past created inconveniences as well as conveniences, and to an indefinite

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postponement of the implementation of Romanizing the Chinese characters. The Chinese experience in language reform can also be regarded as a classic example in which political power is used to interfere with cultural processes. The attempts are not only wasteful, but can be disastrous as well. Were further simplification and Romanization of the Chinese ideographs implemented successfully, the Chinese generations to come would be cut off from their ancestral roots, and the transmission of cultural heritages from generation to generation would be impaired greatly, and the ideological domination by the Chinese Communists would be complete. Unless one favors such a state, one cannot but oppose to the enforced simplification and Romanization of the Chinese ideographs in favor of a continuous objective and scientific examination of the existing system for improvement.

Conclusions and Discussion

The American approach to communication research, characterized by the emphasis on empirical methods, has made contributions to routine media operation on both the organizational and the institutional levels. The European approach to communication research, distinctive in its Marxist orientations, has alerted societal attention to the consequences of communication. The Chinese approach to communication, and the Asian as well, because of its traditional humanistic concerns, may in the long run contribute to the neutralization of media's impacts on modern societies and cultures.

On an epistemological level, examination of indigenous concepts of communication may contribute to the refreshed understanding of current social and cultural phenomena as their deep roots are being unearthed for scrutiny and thought. Efforts for the Sinicization of social and behavioral research in China has only been organized until very recently.²⁴ Such a call, however, by no means suggests that one ought to assume an ethnocentric stand in conducting research. Nor does it advocate a disregard for the contributions of Western theories. What it does advocate is a refocus of present research conceptualization to give more consideration of the Chineseness of social phenomena and human behaviors. In fact, only those well versed in Western communication theories and methodological methods are academically qualified to explore in this wilderness and are able to differentiate intelligently and intellectually what ought to be Sinicized and what ought not to be.

Exploration for communication theories and concepts unique of the Chinese society and culture has just begun. Its achievements are yet to be assessed as only a handful researchers are engaged in the endeavor. The Chinese civilization and the Asian civilization are both characterized by their long histories. An exploration into the past will find rich insights for theory construction and development. It is in this sense such exploration will prove rewarding and will contribute to theoretical and methodological breakthroughs. As most Asian communication researchers are bilingual and bicultural, they occupy a unique position to make such contributions.

NOTES

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