



# On the three waves of China's communication studies: A commemoration of the 30th anniversary of Schramm's visit to China & China's communication studies in post-Schramm times



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## ABSTRACT

Some scholars call the visit to China by Wilbur Schramm (1907–1987), the “forefather” of American communication studies, an “ice-breaking trip” for China's communication studies and some call it a “combustion improver”. This paper maintains that China's communication studies have experienced three main waves: the first was “turbulent but hidden” because communication studies had reached China through different channels before Schramm's visit; the second began with Schramm's visit to China in 1982, which contributed to breaking the “ice” of the “hidden wave” (the so-called “ice-breaking trip”) since after this visit more foreign scholars visited China with their works and papers, creating a “rolling wave” in China's communication circle; and now the third wave is lapping at the shore insofar as many overseas Chinese communication scholars including some from Taiwan and Hong Kong have come to the mainland and are beginning to conduct China's communication studies from multiple perspectives. On the occasion of the 30th anniversary of Schramm's visit, we need to gain a better understanding of the problems and the direction of China's communication studies. This paper attempts to do just this and also provides a historical overview of relevant literature. The author is more than willing to answer any questions colleagues may wish to ask.

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## 1. Introduction

From a historical point of view, we can see that China's communication studies have experienced three waves involving different “players”. The first ran from the 1950s to 1982 and its three most famous “players” were professor Beiwei ZHENG, Longdong ZHANG and Yunzhao CHEN, who had studied abroad in their early years or had visited the USA and then settled down in China. The second ran from 1982 to 1997 and falls into two distinct periods. The first, from 1982 to 1989, in which there was a “high tide” of communication studies in the wake of Wilbur Schramm's visit to China. The “players” in that period were Schramm and a group of leading scholars from the Research Institute of Journalism (in 1997, its name changed into Institute of Journalism and Communication), the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) and colleges from throughout China. The second period ran from 1989 to 1997, a “flat tide” period during which other foreign scholars began to visit China and their works were translated and introduced to the Chinese mainland as textbooks. At the end of this period the question

of the localization of communication generated a “tail tide”. The third wave runs from the end of the 20th century to the present day. In 1997, when both communication and journalism were classified as level-one disciplines in China's higher education reform, another wave of communication studies formed and most of the “players” settled down abroad and became lifetime professors in the USA and other western countries (some are students of the first wave “players”), but are now moving back to the Chinese mainland.

Today, when commemorating Schramm's visit to China, some people talk about an “ice-breaking trip” for China's communication studies and some talk about a “combustion improver”. Both of these definitions reflect Schramm's influence on China's communication studies but they do it from different angles. The author of this paper believes that Schramm played a triple role: Schramm of the time, Schramm of the world and a localized Schramm in China. In China's communication studies development process Schramm was on the “high tide” of the second wave and his visit to China broke the “ice” covering the “turbulent but hidden” first wave. After this, communication studies, driven by a group of leading scholars from the Research Institute of Journalism, CASS and some colleges in China, formed a “rolling wave” that lasted for nearly 30 years. And now the third wave is lapping at the shore. This paper aims to look at how China's communication studies have been influenced by the

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West with Schramm as the representative of the second wave and to look into the future of China's communication studies at a time when the third wave is lapping at the shore.

## 2. The first wave – “Turbulent but hidden”: China's communication studies in pre-Schramm times

According to the Sinologist Thomas A. Metzger, “Cultural spread is a double-track road, and its effectiveness depends both on the effectiveness of the concepts it tries to input and the extensiveness of the inner impetus that promotes this input” (Metzger, 1995). When communication studies were first introduced to China, the effectiveness of the thoughts and theories in this field in the USA was consistent with the widespread call for inner impetus in communication studies in China. Now, there is sufficient evidence to prove that before Schramm's visit to China in 1982, concepts such as communication and mass communication, had already been introduced to China by some Chinese and foreign scholars who thus created a hidden wave in the unfavorable social and political environment of that time.

The time lag in which communication studies arrived in different areas of the Greater China region was less than 10 years but it led to marked differences in the destiny of communication studies. As Professor Li ZHU wrote in 2000, “Forty years have passed since communication studies first arrived in Taiwan in the late 1950s and early 1960s. . . Their development in Taiwan has not been smooth. The first 20 years was a foundation-laying period and the following 10 years a decade of development. But it didn't enjoy prosperity until this decade. Everything is closely related to the political, economic and social changes of Taiwan” (Liu & Yu, 2000). “Communication studies arrived in Hong Kong ten years after Taiwan. In the 1950s, except for scattered comments in working papers, Hong Kong didn't have systematic articles on communication until the mid 1960s when The Chinese University of Hong Kong was founded” (ibid.). “1949 can be regarded as a watershed year for communication studies in the Chinese mainland. Before 1949 China suffered from warfare among warlords, Japanese aggression and civil wars. Sociology and psychology had barely been introduced, let alone communication studies. In fact, newspaper circles didn't understand the concept of communication studies at all except the learning of paper running with newspaper history as its core research topic. After 1949, journalism was still dominant with editing and interviewing techniques and publication methods the main research topics. This was the case in mainland China as well as in Taiwan and Hong Kong” (ibid.).

Between 1949 and 1982, communication studies were introduced to the mainland mainly by Beiwei ZHENG,<sup>1</sup> Longdong

<sup>1</sup> From 1943 to 1947, Schramm was the director of the School of Journalism at the University of Iowa and the founder of the first PhD course on mass communication. From 2007 to 2008, during my visit financed by the Ford Fund to the Annenberg School for Communication, Upenn, I paid a special visit to Professor Beiwei ZHENG who lived in New Jersey. Professor ZHENG claimed that he had known Schramm when he was a student (ZHENG had forgotten many details because he had suffered from amnesia since a minor stroke in 1996). When he graduated in 1952, ZHENG was invited to return to China by Professor Zhong WANG of Fudan University to serve the country. He worked in the Department of Foreign Languages for a short period of time and then worked in the Department of Journalism. During this period he thought about holding an international meeting on communication studies. According to ZHENG, at that time mass communication was strange to students but very popular among them. What's more, the social environment was not so open then. In the early 1980s he went to Honolulu where Schramm's Western and Eastern Research Center on Communication was located. However, in 1983, in the context of the “clear up psychological pollution” process, communication studies were criticized as a “denial of the class struggle”. The international conference on communication studies that was to be held in Fudan University had to be cancelled although the invitations had already been sent out. “The wind blew and the meeting was canceled. . . at a time when the leftists dominated”. For instance, “When I asked

ZHANG<sup>2</sup> and Yunzhao CHEN.<sup>3</sup> The early literature introducing communication studies to China included articles published in 1956 and 1957 by Tongshun LIU and Beiwei ZHENG in *XinwenxueY-icong* (Translated Journalism), a school journal sponsored by the Journalism Department of Fudan University. In their articles they introduced the concept of “mass communication” which, however, was literally translated into Chinese as “the transportation of the thoughts of the mass”. Since 1960 the Journalism Department of the Renmin University of China has compiled six volumes of *Journalism Materials on Criticizing the Bourgeoisie*. When translating a paper from William Eileen's *Research on Mass Communication*, Longdong ZHANG translated “mass communication” as “communication for the public”, a version he insisted on using in his translations of papers on communication studies in 1979. In July 1978, in the first issue of *Foreign Journalism Materials* sponsored by the Journalism Department of Fudan University, Beiwei ZHENG published two articles: “General Introduction to Mass Communication Means” and “Journalism of American Bourgeoisie”. In November of the same year the second issue of *Foreign Journalism Materials* published Yunzhao CHEN's translation of *Study on Mass Communication* by Edwin Emery, an American scholar in this field. In June 1981, the oral defense of the “Study on American Communication Theories” (by Yan'an JU, an MA graduate at the Journalism Department of Fudan University) – the first MA dissertation on communication studies – was heard. In January 1982, a nationwide audience study and research was conducted by Chongshan CHEN from CASS. The results were summarized by Liu (2007) to show the enterprise of Chinese scholars and their interest in communication studies.

In 1982, before Schramm visited China, apart from the above-mentioned introduction of communication studies, exchanges between Chinese and foreign journalists and scholars in the early period also revolved around communication studies. For example, in 1981, receiving reporters from Australia, a visit organized by the China Association of Journalists, Qi LI – a scholar at the Institute of Journalism (CASS) – and his wife talked about communication studies.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, a visit by some foreign scholars of communication studies to China also promoted the development of this field in China. As mentioned by Anxiang MING, the first foreign scholar

for approval, Zhong WANG approved, but the secretary-general of the university (XU Zhen) objected. So the meeting was canceled”. In ZHENG's words, he went to the USA in 1986–1987 and in 14 days he went through all procedures to obtain American citizenship (since his two daughters were born in America and he himself had a regular job there). Since then, he had been a translator of legal documents on immigrants for the New York High Court. Although he never touched communication studies again, he was regarded as one of the founders and a “missed opportunity” for China's communication studies.

<sup>2</sup> A key research project of the Research Institute of Journalism, CASS – “Professional DV Interviews on the 30-year Communication Research in China” (hereinafter referred to as “Project DV”, led by Fei JIANG, established in 2007, the first summary in 2012). As early as 2007, the project team planned their first group of interviewees, including Longdong ZHANG. But as the team leader JIANG Fei visited the USA in September that year, the work was suspended. Later Associate Professor Hailong LIU of Renmin University, one member of the project team contacted Longdong ZHANG and planned to interview him after he recovered. Unfortunately, he never left the hospital and passed away there.

<sup>3</sup> In 2009 during the author's visit to the City University of Hong Kong as part of the young scholar visiting project, he went to Zhuhai City to visit Yunzhao CHEN. CHEN gave the author a photo album with pictures she had taken when she visited Schramm's Western and Eastern Research Center on Communication in the University of Hawaii. She pointed out a picture of her and a fishing boat with nine cormorants and said she was the tenth cormorant, carrying the Western communication studies to China in her mouth. Because of eye problems, CHEN had difficulty reading and writing for a long time and she retired at a very young age. Since then she has no longer paid attention to communication studies, as she put it. Professor Jianhua ZHU of the City University of Hong Kong was a brilliant student of CHEN. Therefore, from the perspective of introduction and inheritance, CHEN cannot be counted as a “missed opportunity” of China's communication studies although she retired early.

<sup>4</sup> cf. interview with Qi LI in the “DV Project”.

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