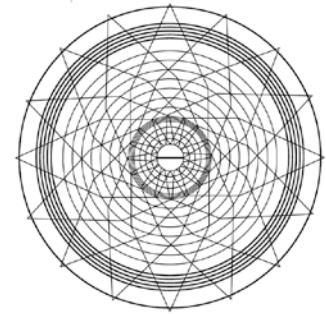


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*Wilbur Schramm and the Development
of Communication Study in China*



WILBUR SCHRAMM AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNICATION STUDY IN CHINA

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Abstract:

The following article describes the three roles of Wilbur Schramm, that influenced the process of establishment of a new academic field in China scholar structure - the communication study. The authors review the visit of Schramm in China in 1982 and discuss the impact of this tour for Chinese academic society. Schramm`s Chinese name "Xuan Weibo" has not only phonetic but also ideological meaning - "The Great Uncle of Dissemination." The following article answers the question - why did China choose Schramm for the role of "icebracker" for the establishment of communication studies in the country?

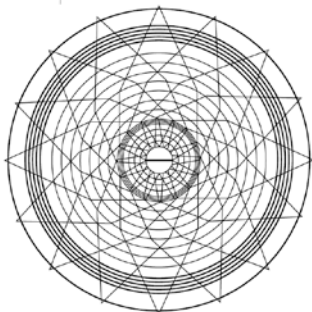
Keywords: communication history, theory of communication, China, "Chinese model", communication studies, Wilbur Schramm

The Role of Schramm: Founder, Internationalist, & Uncle

To start with, we should make a brief review of the three roles of Wilbur Schramm, specifically his roles as an institution builder, as an internationalist, and as the "Great Uncle."

Institution builder

Throughout his career as an institution builder, Schramm had followed a pattern. In Iowa, Illinois, and Stanford he had come to schools with journalism programs and "seeded" them with social science researchers from other fields: psychology, sociology, political science, economics.



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After the Second World War, he moved from Iowa to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where he was founding director of the Institute of Communications Research. When McCarthyite investigations forced the resignation of his mentor at Illinois, Schramm moved on to Stanford, where he was founding director of the Institute for Communication Research. He remained there until his mandatory retirement at age 65, when he moved to his final post as director of the Communication Institute of the East-West Center in Hawaii.

Internationalist

Schramm always approached communication as a feature of a social system, still embraced a liberal political philosophy, and always believed in the potential ameliorative capacities of media tools. Working in the development paradigm led Schramm progressively to a more internationalized view of the scholarly world. The initial project was to use media to facilitate the export of Western behavior, and apparently, he saw U.S. patterns as templates for communication and telecommunication systems elsewhere. Thus, in a report for UNESCO on the emerging system of satellite telecommunication, he pointed to the success of educational broadcasters in the U.S as a model for how international groups could direct satellite capacity to educational, scientific, and cultural uses. Schramm became convinced that development projects could be carried out by governments of any ideology: even communist regimes, like China. And in 1982 he visited China.

The “Great Uncle”

At that time Schramm had a Chinese name, which is the Chinese transliteration of his English name. Like all Chinese names, Schramm’s Chinese name has a meaning, literally, the “great uncle of dissemination.” In 2012, Chinese communication scholars and practitioners from around the country came to Guangzhou, where Schramm gave his very first lecture in China in 1982, in a gesture to commemorate the 30th anniversary of Schramm’s China tour. This is very rare in China.

In the grand narrative of Chinese communication study, Schramm’s missionary role to China has been characterized as “icebreaker,” or “combustion improver.”

Then why did China choose Schramm? In particular, why would Chinese scholars follow the lead of a Western scholar who defined China’s media system as “totalitarianism”?

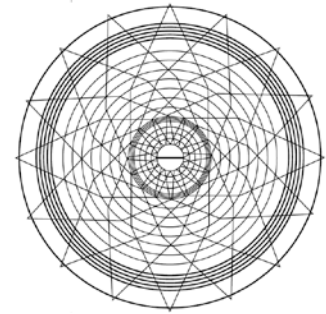
Before trying to answer these questions, we should transfer them in a more extensive sociopolitical context. The following context needs a brief review to describe the gap between communication, dissemination, and propaganda in terms of Chinese culture and academic tradition.

The Gap: Communication, Dissemination, & Propaganda

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The early development of the field of communication” in China shows a sharp cultural gap. This is important as although Wilbur Schramm and his China tour is the central topic of this review, we cannot understand the significance of his activities without also taking into account of those struggles and debates in Chinese academia before and after his visit.

Communication

The gap between the Western perception of mass communication and the Chinese perception was — and remains — huge. The fact is that Chinese translation of the term “mass communication” means “mass dissemination.”

Dissemination

From “communication” to “dissemination,” the boundary drawn between the West and China was fixed. It is the boundary of great theoretical complexity, and certainly this is not a merely linguistic problem. It is, indeed, a cultural gap. But this symbolical gap has rarely been realized by both Chinese and Western scholarship. The English word “communication” emphasizes the activity of exchanging or sharing information, where the central power is usually not implied. That means in lay terms, that everyone can communicate with everyone else with or without the relationships of power. The Chinese word “chuan bo” or “dissemination,” on the other hand, centers on the ability/capacity to distribute information to a broader audience, where power is always assumed in the hand of the one who disseminates.

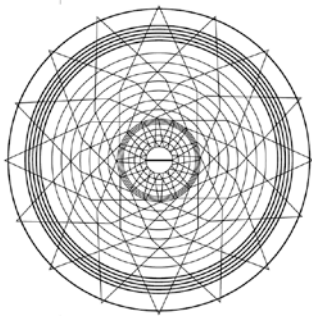
From this perspective, the Siamese twin of “dissemination” is “propaganda.”

Propaganda

In his book “The Invention of Communication,” Armand Mattelart describes the missionary work, disseminating the God’s words to the non-Catholic world, as a practice of propaganda. In the same spirit, some Chinese scholars called the field of mass communication the “propaganda study.” Li Bin, a communication scholar at Tsinghua University, claimed that mass communication is the “science of propaganda” per se. To be fair, we should take into consideration, that what Li Bin refers to as “propaganda” is not the same concept of propaganda seen by Western liberal eyes but something called “xuan-chuan” in Chinese. Xuan-chuan is a neutral term without any negative connotation, and it basically refers to three things: advertising, political propaganda, and public relations. The Chinese call those things “propaganda” because all of the three things do not communicate, as exchanging information, but disseminate information working on people’s minds.

The Tour: Marriage,” “Honeymoon,” & Frustration

In the following article we should allow the metaphorical portrayal of the relationship between Schramm and China. This relationship as it followed can be seen as a marriage.



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“Marriage”

And that marriage started with mutual attraction. The sign of it was something called the “Chinese model.” It is a truly mystified term in Chinese communication study, that frequently used – but no one knows what it is. It approximately refers to something about communication distinctive to either China or the Chinese or both. Among those who were fascinated by the “Chinese model,” Schramm was the biggest fan of this concept. For Schramm, China had its own unique routes in communication that were so different from its Western counterpart. As early as 1976, immediately after the end of the Cultural Revolution, Schramm stated that China had provided the world with a unique case of successfully using communication for its rapid economic development. What interested Schramm most then was the question whether other Third World countries could duplicate such success in communication development, which he claimed in the United States. In an article entitled “China’s Experience with Development Communication,” Schramm referred to China’s invaluable experience in development communication as the “Chinese development model.” Schramm linked this “model” directly to Mao’s approach, specifically Mao’s people’s approach. Schramm pointed out that without a blueprint for the development of the new China, Mao had successfully transformed a “poor and blank” country into a modern nation, using persuasive and coercive communication as the tools to mobilize the masses. While Schramm valorized the role of Maoism in the nation’s development, he didn’t see it as purely ideological; Schramm regarded it as “modified by long-held Chinese cultural codes and values.” It is worth noting that Schramm pointed to the cultural ties between Mao and Confucius regarding prioritizing ideology over technical expertise.

In the early 1980s, China’s higher education system enjoyed an essential rebound after the Cultural Revolution. The big challenge for the recovery was merely the lack of a pool of instructors. Hoping that instructional television would solve the puzzle, China was experimenting with educational television and extending the new communication technology beyond a few experimental classrooms to more and more schools in its national education system. Coincidentally, instructional TV, the “new medium” at the time, just became the newest area of interest of Wilbur Schramm. One year before he came to China, Schramm and his colleagues conducted a research study in American Samoa on the effect of using educational television. The Samoan experience proved to be bittersweet: while they found that educational television did help bring the government closer to the local people, the educational tool ultimately became “a means of adult Entertainment.” But such work had brought Schramm widespread fame.

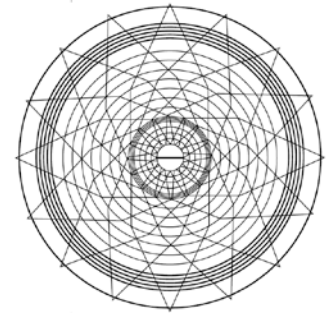
“Honeymoon”

However, China’s invitation was sent initially to Yu Yelu, who was a student of Schramm, earning his MA in communication at Stanford and teaching in the

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Journalism Department at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Yu proposed that he would like to come with Schramm. It turned into reality in the spring of 1982.

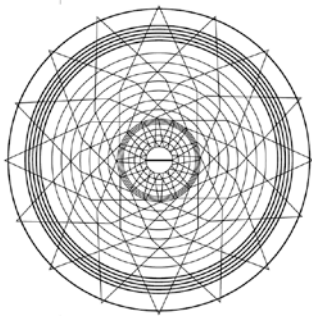
Schramm was greeted with unexpected reverence by the Chinese. About 300 people from all over the country, mainly teachers from primary and middle schools and practitioners of educational institutions, attended Schramm's seven-day seminar on scholarly communication on their first stop in Guangzhou. Then in Beijing, Schramm met Vice Premier Bo Yibo at the Great Hall, the same place where the US Vice President George W. Bush met President Li Xiannian a few days later. Excited after his conversation with the American scholar, the Vice Premier called the editor of the People's Daily in the middle of the night after Schramm left, asking him to tell Schramm his views on the origins of Chinese communication. Amazed by the political leader's burning enthusiasm about communication, Schramm believed the field would soon be fully developed in China.

On the front stage, the excitement about Schramm's lecture was pervasive. One of the reasons was that the "Chinese model" turned out to be the "main course" on the "menu" of Schramm's seminars. It appealed to Chinese scholars because it fit well in the larger frame of nationalist sentiment dominant in the social science realm of China. Schramm's interpretation of the "Chinese model" as Mao's approach also found its Chinese followers. In the discussion at the Journalism Institute of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, one scholar brought up the "Mass Line" of the Chinese Communist Party. The Chinese scholar asked Schramm if he would agree that this concept was the same as what Schramm referred to as "feedback," and Schramm said "yes."

One question stimulated heated but inconclusive discussion in the same roundtable. According to the book "Four Theories of the Press", China's communication system falls into the "authoritarianism" category. A Chinese scholar asked Schramm if he would change his "Authoritarian Model" in which all communication systems of Socialist countries, including the Soviet and China, were under the big umbrella of "authoritarianism." Schramm told the participants that he would not use the term "authoritarianism" to refer China if he could rewrite the book. But he said he had no idea what the substitute term would be.

Frustration

In contrast to the front stage optimism regarding Schramm's China tour, on the backstage such confidence was tinged with uncertainties and anxieties. The overriding concern involved whether the academic orientation of communication study should be considered "capitalist" or "socialist." This question may sound utterly absurd today but certainly did not sound absurd immediately after the Cultural Revolution, when all studies of social sciences in China had to be dichotomized and labeled as either "capitalist" or "socialist."



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Although the academic climate was becoming open in the 1980s, the lingering of such mindset by no means is overstated. In Shanghai, Schramm gave a lecture at Fudan University, with only graduate students and faculty allowed to attend for fear of the information “poisoning” the undergraduates.

Even Schramm’s enthusiasm about the development of the field in China yielded to more sobering considerations. He is reported to have mused, while looking at the ruins of the Great Wall on his second visit to mainland China, saying that “How could the Chinese resist the force of modern communication with bricks as they did for the Huns?” Meanwhile, Schramm was bitterly disappointed about the lagging development of communication study in China.

The Impact: Choice, Sentiment, and Symbolism

“Would it have totally changed the map of Chinese communication study of today, if it had been Herbert Schiller not Wilbur Schramm first visiting thus introducing communication as a field to China?” In 2007, Liu Hai-Long raised this intriguing question in discussing why the Chinese chose Schramm and the empirical school, not Herbert Schiller and the critical school.

Choice

Herbert Schiller planned to visit China about the same time as Schramm did but for some reason he abandoned it. But according to Dan Schiller, the son of Herbert Schiller and professor at the University of Illinois, Herbert Schiller did make one visit to China in the 1980s, while he was attending a conference. Moreover, Herbert Schiller’s work had been systematically introduced to China before Schramm’s tour. His best-known book, “Mind Managers,” was translated and published in China. Some Chinese scholars argue that Schiller was even more popular than Schramm in China when the field was just emerging. Nevertheless, in most articles and books about Chinese communication history, Herbert Schiller is invisible, while Schramm is repeatedly mentioned. This brings up many questions. Why did China choose Schramm? Why did Chinese communication scholars embrace the paradigm of the empirical school of communication research even though they had envisioned a paradigm that was much closer to critical scholarship?

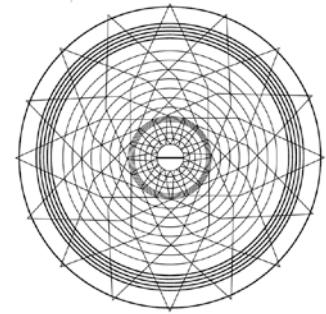
Sentiment

To hunt for clues, we may look into the sociopolitical atmosphere during the late Chinese 1970s and early 1980s. In 1976, anti-Cultural Revolution sentiment was widespread. In academia, such feeling further morphed into general anti-leftist sentiment. Chinese scholars have noted that the leftists in Chinese journalism study regarded journalism as well as newspapers as the tool of class struggle. This is indeed one of the central propositions of Marx’s sense of the news media. However, it was exaggerated and misread by the Chinese leftists during and slightly after the Cultural

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Revolution, which contributed to an irrational and covert antipathy against applying Marxism to any field of social sciences. Presumably, political economy topped that invisible “blacklist.” Given his alignment with the critical political economy, Herbert Schiller’s scholarship was doomed to be lost at this very “rebellious” period, as the Chinese academia was desperate to depoliticize itself. In 2006, Zhao Yuezhi, a well-known Chinese communication scholar, pointed out that the Chinese scholars had had a strong aversion to the politics-and-ideology oriented studies in the 1980s. In contrast, branded as a new “science,” Schramm’s work appealed to the Chinese in many ways.

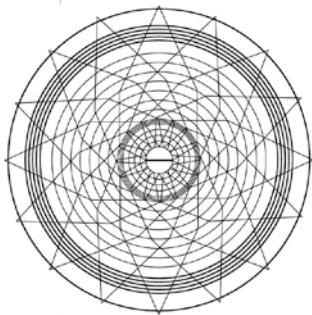
For example, early Chinese communication research exclusively focused on journalism and mass media, and Schramm’s mass communication theory matched that academic scope perfectly. In his lecture at the Journalism Institute, Schramm told the audience that mass communication was developed from journalism study and “a broader concept of journalism study.” This was profoundly misleading in that the Chinese, for a long time, perceived of communication study as “mass communication,” which they thought was just another new term, perhaps a new angle for “journalism study.” The utility was another selling point of Schramm’s work. Macroscopically, Schramm advocated modernization through communication, which echoed the Chinese Communist Party’s “Four Modernizations” goal wholeheartedly.

Symbolism

It seems almost self-evident that Schramm as well as the “Schramm School,” as one Chinese scholar called it, had a tremendous impact on the formation of communication study in China. However, several qualifications should be made here, arguing that this effect was somewhat short-lived and that the value of Schramm’s China tour was more symbolic than practical.

The immediate impact of Schramm’s visit was dramatic. The first National Communication Conference was held later in 1982 in the heat of Schramm’s seminars. Based on the roundtable discussion with Schramm at the Journalism Institute, the first Chinese book under the name of “Communication” was published in the next year. Despite its title, this book is really about mass communication. From the 1980s through the 1990s, Chinese scholars used the term “mass communication” interchangeably with “communication study.” Schramm’s books have been influential in China, a kind of indicator of “use value” and long-term effect, but those books are used, largely, for promoting media literacy rather than for establishing a “school.”

In the long run, the field that the Chinese had developed was not the one Schramm envisaged. For Schramm, communication study was always characterized by interdisciplinarity. But the field formed in China centered on journalism. An early empirical study of scholarly work in communication showed that 95 percent of the articles published in a sample of Chinese academic journals between 1981 and 1996



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were on journalism or related topics. Chinese scholar Liu names such journalism-oriented scholarship “dysplastic empiricism.” The reason for that “dysplasia,” as Liu puts it, was due to the Chinese scholars “overlooking methodology with heavy emphasis on theoretical constructs.” And this is not the style of Schramm’s empirical work.

Schramm did create a symbolic moment in the history of Chinese communication study. Nevertheless, a crucial distinction has to be made here: Schramm’s China tour signaled the coming of a new era of journalism study in China, not a new field called “communication” as many presumed.

What the Chinese scholars had learned immediately from Schramm was to use mass communication concepts and theories to shape their previous partisan-centered-and-oriented journalism research. Communication as a much more extensive field intertwining with many other disciplines remained unthinkable in China, and the formation of the area took much longer time than many had expected.

Conclusion

Schramm’s visit has become an important symbolic marker of the development of communication research in China. But the meaning of that visit remains a matter of contest. The choice of Schramm and the radical departure from the “Great Uncle’s” interdisciplinary paradigm of communication study demonstrate Chinese academia that cannot be defined by Western terms. This does not suggest a total rejection of Western liberalism by Chinese intellectuals either. The next heat wave of Habermas and his public sphere theory in China, again, shows the tendency, potential, and intention of Chinese communication scholarship to mobilize Western approaches to solve China’s problems without converting to Western liberalism. And that is something Schramm did not anticipate.

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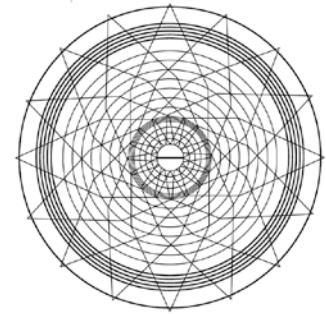
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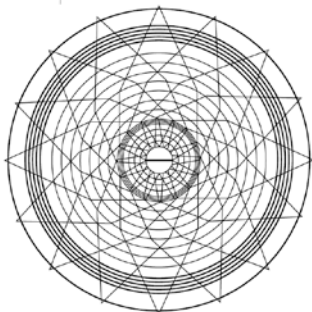
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УИЛБУР ШРАММ И СТАНОВЛЕНИЕ НАУКИ О КОММУНИКАЦИИ В КИТАЕ

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Аннотация:

В статье описываются три роли Уилбура Шрамма, повлиявшие на процесс становления новой академической области в структуре китайской науки – исследований сферы коммуникации. Авторы рассматривают визит Шрамма в Китай в 1982 году и обсуждают значение этого события для китайского академического сообщества.

В Китае Шрамма называют "Сюань Вейбо", что имеет не только фонетическое, но и идеологическое значение - "Великий Дядюшка Распространения". В статье авторы приводят аргументы в пользу своей версии ответа на вопрос, до сих пор актуальный для китайской науки о коммуникациях: Почему Китай выбрал Шрамма на роль "ледокола" в становлении исследования коммуникации в стране?

Ключевые слова: история коммуникации, теория коммуникации, Китай, Китайская модель, Уилбур Шрамм

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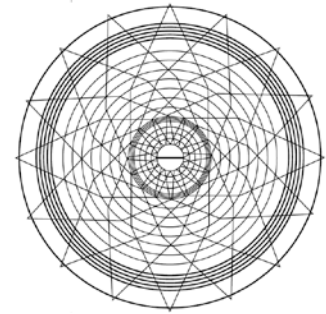
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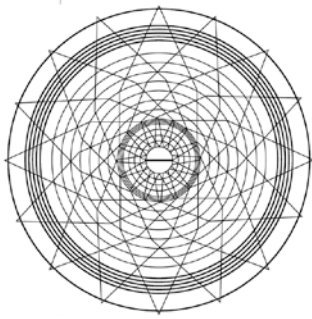
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