

External communication in China

By Guo Ke

External communication in China, now often termed as *duiwai chuanbo* 对外传播 in Chinese, refers to news reports and communicative activities that aim to enhance better understanding and promote favorable China images among global audiences via media channels such as radio, TV, newspapers, news agencies and websites, normally run by Chinese organizations inside China. These efforts are similar to the Voice of America (VOA) in the U.S. or BBC world services in Britain. Since the concept of external communication is so frequently related with China's nation images around the world, external communication has thus become an increasingly significant topic for China that has been desperate to project itself as a peaceful rising power to the rest of the world in the past three decades.

Historical Development

While external communication or *duiwai chuanbo* 对外传播 (*duiwai* means external, *chuanbo* means communication) is only a contemporary term popular in the past 30 years since the paramount Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997) embarked on its open and reform policy in China, the concept can trace its origin to more than one century ago when China was known as a sleeping giant by Napoleon and was forced by western powers to cede its territory like Hong Kong.

The concept was first initiated by Chinese intellectuals educated in the West in the late Qing Dynasty 清朝 (1644-1911, who, with a strong intention to make China one of the powers in the world, came to understand that the then passive and backward status quo of China had somewhat resulted from the huge imbalance of

information flows from the West and lack of sufficient information exchanges and communication from China to the West and the outside world as a whole.

Since most westerners did not understand Chinese, it was natural for these Chinese intellectuals to resort to foreign-language publications to introduce about China.

Dr Sun Yat-sen 孙中山 (1866 – 1925), often known as Father of Modern China and founder of the Kuomintang 国民党, paid special attention to starting news publications in and outside China during his political life.

But it should be admitted that external communication in China did not get into full swing until it became supported by the Kuomintang government in 1930 when foreign-language newspapers, radio stations and news agency were set up in China. The year of 1930 was thus heralded as the starting point for external communication in China.

Global communication has since witnessed three stages of development: (1) The startup stage was from 1930 to 1949 when the Kuomintang's Republic of China was forced to Taiwan and the Communist Party of China established the People's Republic of China in mainland China, during which external communication was still dominated by the Kuomintang government in parallel with the news-related activities of the Communist Party. But unfortunately, external communication in China did not see peaceful transition and continuity when political power was shifted. For instance, the Kuomintang government exploded the then largest radio station in Asia (Voice of China) in Nanjing on November 29, 1949 when it left the mainland for Taiwan. (2) The second stage was from 1949 to 1980 when the Communist Party

started to operate external communication in China, but everything in China then became so politically oriented that external communication or *duiwai chuanbo* 对外传播 was no exception. It was in this stage that external communication was in fact *duiwai xuanchuan* 对外宣传, in which *xuanchuan* 宣传 means propaganda. It should be noted, however, that the Chinese *xuanchuan* 宣传 does not contain any negative connotation even though it is very negative in the western perspective. This explains why China still actively promoted *duiwai xuanchuan* 对外宣传 during this stage, because they considered it a neutral or even positive term, equal or similar to external communication. The term itself thus incited numerous mixed responses about China, because China was then completely isolated from the outside world for political reasons. (3) The third stage started from 1981, earmarked by the birth of *China Daily*, the first English newspaper in mainland China after *North China Daily News* 字林西报, the longest and most influential foreign newspaper set up by the British on 1864 in Shanghai, ceased publication in 1951. The birth of semi-official *China Daily* was a landmark for external communication in China, because it started to deviate from the propaganda style of the party-organ *People's Daily* 人民日报, popular during the Cultural Revolution (1966—1977) in the second stage, and also strives to target English audiences with a Chinese perspective. Besides, the birth of *China Daily* also embarked on a wave of English-language media, such as CCTV-9 at the central level and *Shanghai Daily* and *Shenzhen Daily* at the local level, and more recently English websites in almost all the major cities in China, in addition to the expansion of existing China Radio International (CRI) and restoration of English

magazines that stopped publication in the second stage. It was in this third stage that most people in China also realized the negative connotation of the English word *propaganda* and started to employ a more neutral term *duiwai chuanbo*, or external communication or external publicity if literally translated from Chinese. At present, most scholars and media practitioners in China prefer to use external communication (even global communication or international communication) to play up the Chinese perspective of *duiwai chuanbo* 对外传播 in mainland China.

Characteristics

Since it originated from a unique historical background, external communication in China has thus enjoyed its own characteristics, as compared with its internal communication in Chinese.

Like elsewhere in the world, external communication in China has a strong political orientation and produces media contents mainly in an effort to influence global audiences in favor of China's national interests and their ultimate targets are to promote better understanding between China and world, although communicative styles may vary in different stages. Besides, almost all external communicative activities are sponsored by the government. This is particularly true when faced with a major news event like the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

In terms of media categories as well as media contents, external communication is diversified or comprehensive. In China, media organizations for external communication not only include radio stations (China Radio International) and newspapers (*China Daily* and *Shanghai Daily*), but also TV stations (CCTV-9 in

Beijing and ICS in Shanghai) and numerous magazines as well as websites such as Xinhuanet and Eastday, both at the central and local levels, normally in cooperation with traditional media organizations. In addition to daily news reports, these media organizations offer all kinds of media contents such as entertainments, tourism background and educational information as well as services of all kinds, in an effort to better cater to the needs of their global audiences. This is a very different approach for external communication in China, as compared with its propaganda style in the past.

External communication in China also employs different foreign languages besides Chinese. For instance, China Radio International (CRI) now broadcasts in 43 languages and four dialects. Of course, the major foreign language used for external communication is English, so far as media categories and contents are concerned. The English dominance of media is especially true in big metropolitans like Beijing and Shanghai that provide global audiences with a good choice of local and international media in English. However, in inland and mountainous areas, English media are still scarcely available.

Unlike the Voice of America in the U.S. that is made available only for global audiences, but not Americans inside the U.S., external communication in China is not only available for foreign audiences but also Chinese audiences in and out of China as well. Given the size of the Chinese population, it is no surprise to find out that the number of Chinese audience remarkably surpasses that of foreign audiences according to surveys conducted by CCTV-9 and *China Daily* in 2001--2002. The surveys also

offered a reasonable explanation for the large size of Chinese audience: they want to resort to English media available to them as English textbooks to learn English, rather than to consume media contents.

To some degree, the overwhelming enthusiasm of Chinese audience to learn English has even constituted a major reason to have diluted the effectiveness of China's efforts of external communication in the world according to the above two surveys. Despite the government's strong support for external communication, China's English media did not receive positive responses from foreign audiences all the time. However, it should be noted that the not-so-positive survey results for external communication in China is sometimes more ideological and cultural than journalistic, because foreign audiences, particularly from western countries, have inborn distrust towards media owned and operated by government, even when Chinese journalists sometimes practice good journalistic professionalism for external communication. Besides, except for English-speaking journalists who often serve as English-language polishers, most working staff in English media organizations are Chinese journalists and editors who reside in a Chinese environment. Although their English writings are communicative enough, they may still encounter cultural obstacles that, on some occasions, may confuse and even create misunderstanding for global audiences. Other reasons can also be cited, but it remains true so far that external communication in China has not been as effective as expected.

China Images

Despite the fact that external communication aims to create favorable nation

images for China, China images as a nation have not really been portrayed by these media for external communication inside China. Rather the projection of China images in the world has been heavily influenced by writings about China by Western authors and/or news coverage in the Western media, which tend to play up or ignore different elements of real China, inevitably from a Western perspective that may seem critically negative and unfriendly to most Chinese.

As a result, China images have changed dramatically in the Western landscape: from a mysterious and magnificent nation in the era of Marco Polo (1254 --1324), to a weak and uncultivated giant in most missionary writings in the late Qing Dynasty (1644—1911), a warring state from 1920 – 1949, an ideologically isolated, poor and red country after 1949 and “demonized” nation images after 1976 when China demonstrated a more diversified society in its massive shift from controlled economy and market economy. Since then, China images in western media have always been accompanied with such key words as democracy, human rights and freedom of press, leading to a climax during the torch relay demonstrations in 2008 when China hosted the Beijing Olympics.

While some China images may be based on Western biases and lack of sufficient knowledge about China, it is true that discussions on China images have helped China become more global or open up to the world and contribute to its social improvements in the past three decades, particularly after China successfully hosted the 2008 Beijing Olympiad.

Therefore, external communication, though perceived not so effective in building

China's nation images, is still considered an important part of China's global interaction with the rest of the world.

Challenge

So far, external communication is still regarded as a unique form of communication in China, which is reasonable and necessary due to China's historical, linguistic and ideological isolation in the past and differences between external communication (mostly in English) and internal communication in China. Its uniqueness is best illustrated by the media practice and rule of *neiwai youbie* 内外有别, which means "differ external (external communication) from internal (Chinese communication)." As a result, China has established two kinds of media systems for the two forms of communication systems, with their respective target audiences, funding channels, personnel recruitment and even journalistic styles and guidelines.

However, as China gets more global and mature in its market economy, particularly after the 2008 Olympiad, it becomes more difficult to differentiate external communication and internal communication in Chinese, thus challenging the long practice of *neiwai youbie* "differ external communication from internal Chinese communication."

This means China will have to merge two sets of communication systems in the future. In a long run, it is predicted that external communication may gradually be merged as part of Chinese communication as a whole, but it still remains a question as to when and how it will take place.

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