

Yanru Chen, **Innovations in Communication Theories: The Man Is the Message**, Singapore: Springer, 2021, 204 pp., \$109.99 (hardcover).

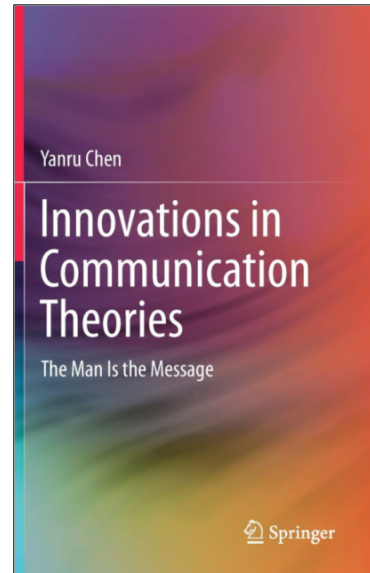
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The burgeoning rise of digital media has enabled every individual to be an integral part of mass communication, as everyone can produce and spread messages online (Dominick, 2008). This phenomenon of democratization has allowed freedom of speech, but has triggered concerns surrounding verbal abuse, attacks, and satire, which are deteriorating the spiritual world of society as a whole.

Against this backdrop, the publication of Yanru Chen’s book, ***Innovations in Communication Theories: The Man Is the Message***, accommodates readers with an inspiring effect akin to “a crystal stream flowing through the heart” (p. 204), just as the author herself wishes. Based on her decades of teaching and research experience, Chen conveys her innovative ideas on the effects of mass communication, placing special emphasis on the effects of faith communication and literary communication. Holding that communication is heart touching, the author emphasizes the central role of humans in the process of communicative activities. Her proposition that “the man is the message” makes an essential contribution to existing communication effect theories by shifting research focus to the rarely explored audience of the media.

The book consists of 15 chapters, among which the first two share Chen’s teaching concepts and methodology in guiding graduates of communication. Teaching, as a communicative activity, is a process of exchange from heart to heart, allowing the truth to declare and confirm itself through the teacher (p. 25). For this reason, chapter 1 encourages communication students to explore the secret of the truth, which is the way to win the human heart (p. 8). Chapter 2 addresses the importance of constructing and acquiring knowledge by placing equal emphasis on both thinking and empirical research.

The following two chapters involve the building of Chinese people’s faith, a cutting-edge topic for Chinese communication scholars. Chapter 3 first interprets the relationship between communication research and Chinese people’s faith construction by coining three basic components of any rightful belief, namely identity, strength, and mission, and subsequently analyzes how researchers can optimize communication effects by particularly focusing on the man involved in the construction of belief. On this basis, chapter 4 initiates a 3M model (message-model-might) to investigate the process and effects of building beliefs. To demonstrate how the model functions in the process of faith communication, Chen resorts to a case study on



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the character relationships in the Chinese novel *Song of Youth* to reveal how the heroin gradually acquired her belief in communism. In so doing, she further explains her argument that "only through the influence of personality and the touching of the human heart can communication achieve optimal effects" (p. 53).

Chapter 5, based on the situations in China, proposes four types of social functions of the Chinese media, including enlightenment, encouragement, education, and entertainment, which function as the mediator between ideal life and reality. It suggests that the media keep the balance between objectively reporting reality and presenting positive images of society, realizing the best communication effects.

Chapter 6 raises the proposal that "the man is the message" and illustrates its contribution to communication effect theories. By critically probing into the neglect of the "man" factor in the Western proposition that "the medium is the message," Chen reinforces the central role of men's thoughts, moods, words, and deeds in achieving the effect of communication with considerable empirical evidence from Chinese media practices, including the promotion of role models, professional work in propaganda and education, and the human factor in literature and art. The author finally examines famous leaders in Chinese history, such as the late Premier Zhou En-Lai and Madame Soong Ching Ling, as role models to strengthen the powerful effect that men can create in their ubiquitous communication.

Chapter 7 targets the problems caused by the seemingly roaring mass cultural products covering advertisements, films, TV dramas, bestsellers, popular songs, etc., which are vividly and sarcastically reflected in the title of this chapter: "Impoverished Abundance" (p. 91). Underneath the superficial abundance of cultural products in Chinese markets, Chen sees the worrying poverty of people's spiritual lives. After uncovering the underlying reasons pertinent to the new communication technologies, she takes the example of adapting the Chinese classic *Red Crag* into a TV drama to illustrate how cultural products can help solve the problem of spiritual poverty.

The subsequent two chapters focus on an effect of literary communication that is rarely explored in academia. Chapter 8 depicts the life-changing effect of books by invoking readers' memories of their favorite books, and recommends the applicable methods of surveys, case studies, and focus group interviews to inquire into the audience of literary works. The next chapter continues to elaborate on the shocking positive effect that good literary works impinge on the construction of spiritual civilization in China. For example, people who have read Luyao's novel *Ordinary World* would never deny the spiritual strength they gain from it in the face of difficulties (p. 126).

The following two chapters deal with topics that have not received due scholarly attention. Via cases of details and contradictory content in movies, TV dramas, and bestsellers, chapters 10 and 11 respectively discuss the mismatch between intended and actual communication effects, as well as communication effects of details in media. Specifically, the film *Five Golden Flowers* (p. 133) shows the mismatching and the lasting effects of details in communication that emerge in the affectionate eye look described in a blog article (p. 156). Both examples in the book will inspire researchers to notice these overlooked issues.

Chapter 12 explores the secrets of theoretical thinking in communication by suggesting how to read theoretical books and make theoretical innovations. The author highlights the significance of "paying attention

to the unexpected” and figuring out the associations and distinctions between different variables of occurrences in search for innovation (p. 160).

Chapter 13 considers the limitations of various empirical research methods without denying their importance. To put it differently, it argues that some of the touching effects of communication cannot be explained by any existing relevant theories, nor can they be verified empirically, which echoes Chen’s proposition that communication is a process of exchange from heart to heart.

The final two chapters expand on the discussions of theories and methods beyond the discipline of communication. Chapter 14 indicates that it is fatalistic that social science theories invariably go through the Hegelian process of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. The author thus maintains that understanding the theoretical state of trivialized diversity is helpful to trigger theoretical innovation in China’s social sciences. Chapter 15, drawing on the selective nature of nearly a dozen existing theories of frame analysis, explicates the “ideology-policy-fact and fact-policy-ideology” (p. 197) formula of Chinese news production and consumption processes. To conclude, the author calls for constructing novel theories with Chinese characteristics that can also be applied to the international practice of media.

Compared to many other analytical communication studies, this lengthy publication takes a more synthetic approach to touch the heart and soul of people, and, thus, is more humanistic. The most prominent merit that I would like to highlight is the author’s initiative to challenge tradition and authority. Chen not only challenges the popular Western proposition “the medium is the message,” but also is courageous enough to identify the limitations of different empirical methods. Furthermore, she declares that many truisms cannot be tested empirically and insists that equal emphasis should be placed on empirical research. Since communication studies in China only began a few decades ago, most Chinese scholars introduce and follow Western communication theories, making sparse innovations of their own. In contrast, the author endeavors to make a theoretical breakthrough by constituting an original supplement to the empirical studies of communication.

The second contribution of this monograph lies in the presentation of numerous empirical cases in Chinese media practice. With its publication, international peers in communication studies can better understand the sociocultural conditions in China and enhance in-depth multidirectional exchanges at a global level. However, despite the undeniable theoretical and practical values, there are two shortcomings that warrant mentioning. For example, if the chapters with the same categories of topics could be rearranged together, the reading sequence would be more logical and favorable. Also, the Q & A section at the end of each chapter would be more credible provided that the sources of the questions were listed.

As is evidenced by the previously mentioned academic values, the book is worth recommending to students and scholars showing a keen interest in communication and other relevant disciplines. It can also function as a guidebook for the masses who are devoted to participating in online interactions. More importantly, by targeting social problems relevant to social media, it encourages deep thinking and helps build a higher level of spiritual civilization in the chaos of today’s information explosion era.

Reference

Dominick, J. R. (2008). *The dynamics of mass communication: Media in the digital age* (10th ed.). New York, NY: Tata McGraw-Hill Education.