



Class, Communication, China: A Thought Piece

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In considering issues of class and studies of Chinese communication, we face three contradictions:

First, over the course of the past three decades, the expanded media system of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has become increasingly stratified to reflect the reality of growing structural inequality in Chinese society. Yet the media content and the subjects tackled in communication studies have, generally speaking, become less sensitive to issues of class. Many are blatantly anti-class.

Second, the burgeoning journalism and communication field in Chinese universities has absorbed students from all social classes, and the curriculum is still supposed to be guided by "Marxism and Leninism." Yet journalism and communication schools are a stronghold for the imagination of a "classless" discipline, detached from Chinese history and current social reality.

Third, the real source for China's success in the world economy, including the recent rise of its communication industry, is its enormous labor power in production processes. Yet communication scholars have, so far, paid too much attention to consumption by the middle and upper classes at the expense of gaining a basic understanding about the (old and new) working class, not to mention the underclass.

What, then, is class — in China, and for communication studies? For this occasion, there is no need to reiterate the basic sociological traditions to conceptualize class, be they Marxist, Weberian, or individual-level stratification studies. Nor is it necessary to argue, in China today, whether class is a power structure, a dynamic process, or a set of organized relationships. Which one of these pre-existing notions of class fits China the most? This is the wrong question. It took me some time, in the process of writing my last book (Qiu, 2009), to gradually come to this realization, which is fundamental to my thinking about how to go forward and fill the gaps in understanding class and communication in China.

It is the wrong question in that it tries to squeeze class into a pre-existing conceptual box while excluding other ways of understanding. This mode of raising questions comes more from territorial disputes in the ivory tower and from 20th-century party politics than it does from a genuine need to grasp the rapidly transforming social reality, which is characterized by the three contradictions identified above. This attempt to "pin class down," so to speak, is built on a condescending misconception about the

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simplicity of the issues. It is particularly useless for an interdisciplinary field like communication studies, as our subject matter is a society as large, diverse, and complex as China.

What, then, is the right way to ask questions about class and communication, in China and the world? In a recent issue of *New Left Review*, Wright (2009) proposes an integral approach to analyze class from all three classic sociological perspectives (Marxist, Weberian, and mainstream stratification research). As a sociologist who has been involved in the turf wars of class analysis since the 1970s, he finds the old divisions to be counterproductive; hence, his proposal to emerge from the old modes using a multilevel framework that synthesizes useful elements of all three existing approaches. That is, in my opinion, generally where we should go to bring class back into Chinese communication studies. That is, we should move to be more integrative and inclusive, and to enrich the substance of class analysis in light of changing social reality, a task for which communication researchers can make special contributions.

So, what are the right questions? Here is my tentative list:

- Q1. *Who — which individuals or organizations — represents class power in Chinese media and communication systems?*
- Q2. *What are the differential contents, produced by representatives of which class, circulated via what media channels?*
- Q3. *How are patterns of communication-based class formation processes expressed spatially and temporally?*
- Q4. *What are the consequences in terms of the consolidation of existing class power and/or genuine social change?*

Q1 is about the subjects or communicators. Q2 is about the substance and means of communication. Q4 is about impact. These are self-explanatory questions that need no belaboring, although their answers can be less straightforward, especially for those who still try to pin class down into one concrete "thing." Consider, for example, the Chinese "bureaucratic entrepreneurs" (Hsing, 1997) or workers in the new forms of "immaterial labor" (Lazarrato, 1996) and "playbor" (Kücklich, 2005). They are communicators. But which conventional class category are they in?

It is Q3 that needs some explication, for it also speaks to the integrative approach to a new class analysis of the 21st century, an approach centered on issues of communication. In part due to the domination of class-based party politics around the world in the last century, patterns of class formation (and erosion) have been very closely associated, on the one hand, with objective indicators like socioeconomic status, employment conditions, and union membership, and on the other, with subjective indicators like class consciousness, collective identity, and partisanship. For sure, these notions are still indispensable for understanding. But they are insufficient, especially in China, where *communication-based class formation* needs to be stressed, because long before the emergence of party politics in Republican China, communication — through the written text and printing press, through the teaching of

Confucianism at school, and in other spheres of public information exchange — has served as a pillar of the ancient Chinese social class system, justifying, reproducing, and perpetuating elite domination of the intellectual bureaucrats (士大夫) over peasants, craftsmen, and merchants (农工商). The best example here is the imperial examination (科举考试) system that lasted for about 1,300 years, through which structural social inequality was maintained through a particular codified mode of communication centered on the Confucian classics.

In China today, a similar system — the college entrance examination system, a cornerstone of the modern journalism and communication discipline — is still at work to extract the “elite” from the “grassroots” and reproduce class in a typical Weberian manner. Meanwhile, given the predominance of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), conventional patterns of class formation through party politics or trade union activities are marginalized or even suppressed altogether. The official campaign for “harmonious society” and “pro-stability” measures add to the dense camouflage that hides fundamental class problems. The CCP knows too well how to put class politics out of sight — but only in the traditional politico-economic sense of the last century.

Yet, if we know how to identify and interpret *communication-based class formation* processes, the footprints of class politics are almost everywhere, spatially and temporally. By this I mean what Castells (2009) points out as a global trend — the management of communication networks becoming the center of power configuration in the new century — is happening to class politics in China. Class power has become *communication-based* with a particular spin under the institutional dominance of the CCP over the country’s political economy in general, and specifically, over its mediascape. As a result, China’s new class-making processes are much more palpable if we take a communication perspective which goes above and beyond the traditional political, economic, and cultural perspectives. As discussed in *Working-Class Network Society*, these class-making processes tend to express themselves through spatial formations of communities and factories (which can be analyzed as communicative texts), and through the temporal formations of critical media events (Qiu, 2009). The spatial and temporal dimensions are anything but a linear progression toward a predetermined end. Rather, they are uneven processes that may lead to unpredicted ends.

Consider skyscrapers in Beijing as a spatial articulation of “the new rich in China” (Goodman, 2008), along with the basements for rent (地下室出租) in the same city that reflect the living and working conditions of the new working class. Consider the concentration of golf courses and massage parlors in the Pearl River Delta, along with the highly congested migrant enclaves known as “urban villages” (城中村) and the vast factory zones in the region. Consider, also, the upsurge of worker unrest in the aftermath of the global economic crisis, exemplified by the stories of He Jinxi (何金喜), Liu Hanhuang (刘汉黄), Sun Danyong

(孙丹勇). The human tragedies that struck these members of the new working class in the spring and summer of 2009 have done more to raise class consciousness than the economic crisis itself.¹

Examining the spatial and temporal dimensions of class also allows us to gain a better sense of the basic, existential needs of the people and their communities. In so doing, we can see much more clearly the connections between China and the world in terms of class dynamics. Yes, the Chinese elite upper class has begun to join the world's ruling class. But more importantly, we see the global centrality of Chinese labor, a centrality that applies for the broadly defined communication industry, as well, from hardware manufacture to service and content provision. This is, using Arrighi's term (2007), an "industrious revolution" in the transnational communication market, built on the back of assembly-line workers, call center attendants, online game "gold farmers," text message authors, and so on. It is on the basis of this communication-centered "industrious revolution" that a bold, new model of an East Asian development path, one characterized by social inclusion, respect for labor, and sustainable environmental policy, can be imagined.

So, what is to be done? Following Zhao's (2009) convincing proposal of the five Rs (re-root, re-embed, re-define, re-engage, and re-claim), I'd like to call for a re-introduction of class back into Chinese communication studies. This class is no longer a textbook concept. It has been re-rooted in the current era of industrialization and urbanization after the uprooting of the old socialist working class and much of the rural labor force. It has been re-embedded and re-defined, given the bureaucrat-entrepreneurization of the CCP and the rise of "immaterial labor" that includes many media workers, too. It has been re-engaged and re-claimed, not by communication scholars so far, but by the representatives of the different social classes, using local events and national memories, as well as global media symbols, from Louis Vuitton to Che Guevara. As communication researchers, we have to catch up, probably by doing the following:

1. Have more cross-disciplinary exchange, not just with other social science disciplines, but also with work in the humanities and performing arts that focuses on issues of class.
2. Monitor the communication landscape, including informal communication, online and offline, that occurs beyond the official mediascape.
3. Shift attention back to the production processes in the broadly defined communication

¹ He Jinxi is a jewelry factory worker who killed two human resource managers and then himself in March 2009, leaving behind his seven-months-pregnant wife. Liu Hanhuang lost his right hand in a work injury. Having been denied legal compensation, he used his left hand to stab three Taiwanese supervisors, killing two, in June 2009. Sun Danyong is a worker in Foxconn, aka "iPod city," as it is the world's largest subcontractor making iPods and iPhones for Apple. In July 2009, Sun committed suicide because he was abused by the company after the loss of an iPhone prototype. All these incidents led to widespread discussions and mobilizations online, in the blogosphere, BBS forums, and QQ discussion groups, and offline, among labor NGOs and activist networks throughout the country. Only a portion of these activities has been covered by domestic and international media.

industry, away from the past obsession with consumption patterns.

4. Focus on the communication of needs (or existential issues), rather than wants.
5. Pay special attention to new forms of labor (e.g., online game "gold farmers," SMS authors, "playbor").

Finally, a most noteworthy moment in the next five years, as has been predicted by demographer Yu Jingzhong, is that 2012 will be a historic turning point for labor supply in China. Until then, China will have an increasing supply of young labor, aged 18 to 35, which is essential to the continual expansion of the country's export-oriented economy. Yet after 2012, this labor supply will start to dwindle, by approximately 70 million workers, until 2022 (Bao, 2006). Although the loosened one-child policy may help to mitigate the problem of labor shortage, the effect will only be marginal. This will cause a fundamental re-configuration of class power in the PRC, and subsequently, a new communication order for the country and the world, probably following a real Great Depression of the 21st century, to which the global economic crisis of 2008 will only have been a precursor.

Getting prepared for this coming era of crisis, theoretically and methodologically, should be on the very top of our list of reasons to understand class and communication in China.

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