

# Interactions: Studies in Communication & Culture

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*Interactions: Studies in Communication & Culture* recognizes the interdisciplinary nature of the fields of media, communication and cultural studies and we therefore encourage diverse themes, subjects, contexts and approaches; empirical, theoretical and historical. Our objective is to engage readers and contributors from different parts of the world in a critical debate on the myriad of interconnections and interactions between communication, culture and society.

It is our intention to encourage the development of the widest possible scholarly community, both in terms of geographical location and intellectual scope and we will publish leading articles from both established scholars and those at the beginning of their careers.

Particular interests include, but are not limited to, work related to Popular Culture, Media Audiences, Political Economy, Political Communication, Journalism Studies, Media Institutions and Practices, Media and Communication Policy, Community and Alternative Media, Global Media and Online and Social Media.

Prospective guest editors may approach the Editor with suggestions for themed issues or series.

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## Media and popular education: Views and policies on radio broadcasting in Republican China, 1920s–30s

**ABSTRACT**

*This article focuses on the views and policies about the use of radio broadcasting for popular modern education in Republican China in the 1920s and 1930s. The development of radio technology for broadcasting in China during the first half of the twentieth century has been often justified on the ground of its importance as a tool for mass education. After the establishment of the Nanjing government in 1927, and especially in the second half of the 1930s, efforts were made by the Nationalist Party to advance the use of broadcasting for modern education. This cultural agenda partially reflected an international trend, but it was mainly just one aspect of a more general understanding about which should be the proper role of the media in a modern society. Although in China the use of radio broadcasting as a tool of popular education was hindered by many factors, the assumption of a strong nexus among progress, mass education and media technology shaped both the public opinion's perception of the medium and the Chinese State radio policies.*

**KEYWORDS**

wireless radio  
knowledge  
popular education  
radio broadcasting  
policies  
Nationalist China  
radio culture  
Chinese broadcasters



## INTRODUCTION

Since the late nineteenth century, the public discourse on the media in China had widely reflected the nationalist elite's concerns regarding the need to train a 'new citizen'. At the core of this discourse, there was the persuasion that media were fundamental tools for educating Chinese people to shape their modern national sense of self. The expectations to widen and enrich the circulation of information and modern knowledge in order to make all the Chinese people aware of their roles as citizens of a nation legitimized the introduction of modern media technologies from a cultural and political perspective (Judge 1997; Wang 2012; Harrison 2000).

This article aims at investigating the implications of this assumption in the development of radio broadcasting in Republican China, offering a brief analysis of the developing discourse on the social role of the medium in the Chinese press.

In the 1920s and 1930s the role of radio broadcasting in society and the control of the new technology for the sake of public benefit were a topic of discussion in several countries, reflecting specific political and cultural backgrounds. In the United States, the core issue was the relationship between media and democracy, which in the end protected the interests of capitalism in the radio industry (McChesney 1995). Conversely, in China the priority was the recovery of Chinese sovereignty against the foreign colonial interests in the field. These nationalist concerns tended to advocate the emergence of a State-controlled broadcasting system (Krysko 2011; De Giorgi 2014).

Nevertheless, this research assumes that a strong belief in the nexus among social progress, mass education and communication technology shaped the Chinese perception of radio broadcasting's social significance. More than nationalism, this belief offered a powerful cultural legitimization to the intervention of the State as the guarantor of the medium's proper role. As a technological device whose use could change collective and individual behaviours and beliefs in a modern sense, radio's educational function acquired special relevance. This view was clearly articulated in comments about the social and cultural responsibility of broadcasters and listeners, supporting a greater intervention of the State in designing the path of development of the Chinese broadcasting system.

## FRAMING A NEW MEDIA TECHNOLOGY IN CHINESE SOCIETY: WIRELESS ENTREPRENEURS AND MODERN SCIENTIFIC EDUCATION

The introduction of knowledge on wireless radio communication technology in China dates to the early years of the twentieth century. Its use was initially studied and pursued for its relevance to naval communication and railway management. As early as 1905, the training of various experts in wireless technology was officially organized in Tianjin. Simultaneously, a first set of transmitters and receivers to be used for military communication was purchased by initiative of the Prime Minister, Yuan Shikai. Afterwards, the Ministry of Post and Communication established a Department of Electrical Communication which was tasked with managing the newly introduced wireless technology and the training of relevant technicians. Following the establishment of the Republic in 1912, the Ministry continued to sponsor the organization of training classes on radiotelegraphy, and, between 1913 and 1915, more than two hundred students were instructed (Chen 2008b: 1–11). Obviously, the new technology was perceived as a very specialized field of knowledge, which was,

essentially, connected to military affairs. The first Chinese law on radio, issued in 1915, dictated that wireless communications were to be a State monopoly and forbade citizens and businesses from entering the field.

Just a few years later, the development of broadcasting began to show the potentiality of the technology in mass communication. In the Chinese press, radio technology was generally associated with social and cultural progress. It would have helped to develop popular scientific and modern knowledge among broadcasters and listeners alike. Radio was the embodiment of modernity and science in everyday life. As one commentator emphatically wrote in 1922, 'The wireless, until one or two years ago so overspecialized and mysterious (*shenmide*), has suddenly become an object of daily use' (Gao Shang 1922a).

The press projected a vision of a new technology which, liberated from the exclusive control of scientists and engineers, was entering the world of ordinary people, who were called to play a role in its development and diffusion. The model for what we can define as the participative technological development of the media was, at the time, the United States. Here, according to several articles, wireless science and technologies had already become popular knowledge. For example, *Dongfang zazhi*, a magazine devoted to modern knowledge and science, reported several stories about radio technology and broadcasting in the United States, explaining how it was connected to modern society and scientific practice. In one long report, American students were described as being very fond of experiments with wireless technologies and of inventing their own receiving devices (Gao Shang 1922b). The magazine suggested that radio could be for everybody, and it was a sign of a democratic and progressive society.

Despite the virtual absence of suggestions that radio could be a profitable business in the press' introduction to the technology, foreign and Chinese commercial interests defied the prohibitions of the Chinese law, driving the development of broadcasting in main urban centres. Most of the pioneers were not professional broadcasters, but, rather, entrepreneurs tied to industry, newspapers or consumer trade and often operating under the umbrella of extraterritoriality.

The first radio broadcasting station, which was owned by an American businessman, opened in 1922 in Shanghai. It was closed after a few months of operation. However, just two years later, again in the International Concession in Shanghai, a new commercial radio station, owned by an American company that dealt with electrical equipment, and in cooperation with the Chinese daily *Shenbao* (a Shanghai-based newspaper), began to broadcast. Similar developments happened in the north-east, especially in Manchuria.

Recognizing these new developments, in 1924, the Ministry of Communication issued the 'Provisionary regulations concerning radio broadcasting receivers' ('Zhuangyong guangbo wuxiandian jieshouji zhanxing guiding'), authorizing Chinese private citizens and businesses to assemble and own radio equipment in order to transmit or listen to music and news, provided that they had been granted a licence by the government and had paid the requisite fee (Zhao 2004: 13).

In the late 1920s business began to flourish. The first Chinese-owned radio broadcasting station was established in Shanghai by the Xin Xin Department Store in 1927. Most of the broadcasting stations in urban China were commercial enterprises. This was also the case in Shanghai's foreign concessions, where radio broadcasting soon became an important feature of modern urban society (Benson 1995). The Ministry of Communication quickly



followed these developments, opening a radio broadcasting station in Beijing in 1926 (Zhao 2004: 3–11).

The entrepreneurs investing in commercial broadcasting were the most active in popularizing scientific and technical knowledge about wireless communications in China, not least because many earned profits not only from advertisement, but also from the selling of appliances and equipment for wireless receivers. These profit-based motivations were often concealed under the call to promote national progress and disseminate modern science; however, educating the public through scientific and technical information about wireless communication was a way to drive the growth of the consumer market.

An example of the convergence between commercial business interests and the affirmation of the social and educational functions of wireless technologies in China can be seen in one important early technical magazine dedicated to this field: *Wuxiandian wenda huikan* ('Collected questions and answers on the wireless') (Liu 2013). This magazine was published by the Yamei Wireless Ltd. Company, whose main business was the trade of radio communication technical components and spare parts in Shanghai. The company had been founded by the four Su brothers, and in 1929, it had established its own radio broadcasting station in Shanghai. Among the Su brothers, the most active in the popularization of wireless education was Su Zuguo, who became the editor of the magazine. As he told readers in the first issue, the goal of both the Yamei Wireless Ltd. Company and the Yamei Radio Broadcasting Station was the promotion of wireless knowledge (*wuxian xueshu*).

In the winter of 1929 we founded the Shanghai Radio Station and began to broadcast several high-quality programmes in order to satisfy the audience. At the same time, we established a time for questions about basic wireless knowledge, to the benefit of the listeners and of the researchers. Since the beginning, we have received almost two thousand letters and addressed more than seven thousand questions. This is enough to understand how, everywhere, there is a great interest in the wireless and a great attention towards this new science. Recently, in order to meet the requests of its listeners, the Yamei Company began to edit and print a timetable of the programmes of all radio broadcasting stations. Moreover, in order to fully accomplish its goals, it has reported and printed the text of the 'question time for the wireless', which has been edited by Su Zuguo. Since Zuguo does not have a thorough knowledge of the subject, in order to avoid misunderstandings or mistakes, we invite all readers to share their teachings.

(Su 1932: 1)

The magazine was very technical, since most of its pages were dedicated to explications of electrical diagrams, evaluations of electrical devices and instructions on how to assemble radio sets and solve problems. Its writers and readers/listeners conceived of themselves as a community of educated and modern persons who professionally or in their leisure time were dealing with the science of wireless technology, whose practice reflected an attitude towards life characterized by a propensity to experiment and practice. In this sense, learning to use wireless technology was part of that modern and everyday life-oriented education connected, in the eyes of urban elites and several modern intellectuals, to the development of a new society.

The discursive nexus between modern education and the use of wireless technology could also be seen in other popular magazines, which began to profit off of the flourishing commercial radio industry in Shanghai and other cities. This popular press was dedicated to radio entertainment and published programme timetables, but also commented on news about the emerging industry. In so doing, they reflected the same understanding of the medium as an innovative technology destined to shape Chinese society in a modern sense.

One example is *Diasheng ribao* ('The movie and radio news'). This newspaper was first published in Shanghai in 1932, and it is known as the first publication exclusively dedicated to cinema and film. Editors and contributors were entrepreneurs and professionals who wanted to actively promote their business, but also to play the role of modern educators.

The newspaper's founder and chief editor was Lin Zecang, a graduate in business administration from St. John University. Lin Zecang was fond of cinema and photography and had identified the popular press about the cinema industry and the star system as a good business. The section of the newspaper dedicated specifically to broadcast was edited by Lin Lübin, who published some works on children's education and radio broadcasting and one handbook about wireless technology in the 1930s. The section employed wireless experts and entrepreneurs, including Zhang Yuanxian, who had been the founder of a Society of Wireless Radio Amateurs, the chief director of a commercial radio broadcasting station in Shanghai and, later, the editor of other *xiaobao* (literally, 'small papers') dedicated to broadcast entertainment.

*Diansheng ribao*'s educational contents included simplified principles (*jianming xueli*) and practical knowledge (*shiyong changshi*) about wireless technology, but also news from radio broadcasting stations (*yintai xiaoxi*), information on natural science (*ziran kexue*), technical reviews (*pingshu xinji*) and introductions to new inventions (*jieshao faming*). The use of wireless technology was clearly connected to the diffusion of a scientific and modern attitude towards the world, since it implied not only a diffused technological know-how, but also the emergence of a community sharing similar modern values and discarding superstition and old-fashioned ideas. For example, in a letter published by *Diansheng ribao*, a certain Mr Han asked for the editors to comment on his theory about the risks of developing a physical dependence on radio waves. Mr Han asked if radio waves were as addictive as drugs (*you mazuixing*) and reported his hypothesis that radio waves could have an invisible influence on the human body and its physiology, in order 'to beg progressive, advanced, and educated people and fellows specialists to give me some instructions' (Anon. 1932). In response, the journalist commented that it was important that one listener dared to share his view in public, since,

on one hand, we hope that the ordinary people do not still keep any superstitious insights. However, any stupid thing said by an eminent professor is considered sacred, while, if an ordinary man without any special competencies says something, we discard it as an absurdity!

(Anon. 1932)

This was not educative in a scientific sense.

The idea that the diffusion of the radio as a mass medium, presuming popular education on technology and science, could defeat superstition and spread modern knowledge nourished business, but also echoed nationalist



concerns. As one commentator explained in 1933, the dissemination of the necessary knowledge about wireless to the masses would have been a fundamental progress for the country:

'Popularization of the wireless' means 'diffusion of wireless among the popular masses'. [...] if Chinese people could assemble them by themselves, the problem of not having national products will definitively be solved. [...] But the only factor which could make Chinese people assemble their own radio set is for every Chinese to acquire knowledge of wireless technology and science. When he has the knowledge, he will be encouraged to assemble a set by himself, and so we can have nationally produced radio technology. It is very simple.

(Anon. 1933)

This nationalist vision of a Chinese-made modern technological society driven by the diffusion of scientific knowledge of wireless technology was actually far distant from reality. According to the Ministry of Communication of the Republic of China, in 1936 there were only 200,000 receiving sets registered by the postal administration in China (Chu 1937). However, despite this low rate of penetration, at least in cities, radio had imposed itself as a feature of modern collective and private life, not least because the community of listeners was greater than it seemed. In fact, the diffusion of tube radios had made it possible for all to benefit from listening to radio programmes, provided that they had the money to buy a set or to attend popular places, such as shops and restaurants. The connection between a modern scientific outlook and radio technology did not fade away. Rather, it nourished a growing criticism of the state of radio broadcasting in China. This criticism was focused particularly on the content of the broadcasts, which were considered to mirror the failure of the medium in modernizing Chinese society, a fault mainly due to the relevance of commercial broadcasting.

### RADIO FOR MASS EDUCATION: LEGITIMIZING THE STATE'S PRIMACY

The scientific allure of the medium had been strategically used by wireless radio entrepreneurs to legitimize and promote the new technology in Chinese society as an important contribution to the diffusion of modern education among the public. In the early 1930s, however, this assumption was undermined by the increasing perception that commercial interests were transforming broadcasting into an industry primarily of entertainment, betraying radio's important mission.

Commercial stations, which were not always owned by professional broadcasters, were the most numerous and appreciated by listeners and advertisers (Benson 1995). At the outbreak of the War of Resistance against Japan in 1937, there were 78 radio broadcasting stations operating in China, 55 of which were commercial or privately owned and mainly addressed at local audience (Zhao 2004: 44). The only radio broadcasting station at the national level was the Central China Radio Broadcasting Station (CCRBS) of the Nationalist Party in Nanjing, which was founded in 1929. In 1932 the CCRBS had been provided powerful Telefunken transmitting equipment, which allowed it to broadcast as far as Japan (Wang and Shi 1987). This reflected the Nationalist government's will to strengthen the use of the new technology in its political propaganda and mass education (De Giorgi 2014).

In the same period the issue of the social value of radio technology as a modern educational tool gained a renovated urgency.

Following western examples, and especially the experiences and programmes of the BBC in this field (Hendy 2013), the use of the media as film and radio was considered as an important tool for overcoming the difficulties in promoting universal education. Attention to these developments was especially high among progressive educators and intellectuals, such as the American-educated Tao Xingzhi, who had advocated the use of audio-visual technology for modern education in rural areas since the 1920s. A new field of educational activities, defined as *dianhua jiaoyu* (education by the way of electric devices) emerged in the attempt to develop Chinese capacities to use and produce audio-visual material and resources for modern education.

The Nationalist government was quite receptive of this trend and, beginning in the early 1930s, planned to promote the use of wireless technology for education, ordering that, at least in urban areas, all schools and governmental offices be supplied with radio receivers for educational activities. From 1935 on, in eighteen provinces, more than 1000 receiving sets were set up in local schools and, in some rural areas, new institutes for long-distance radio education were established in the Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces. In the mid-1930s, the Ministry of Education began to draw up detailed plans to establish specialized offices to organize educational activities using films and broadcasting at local administrative level (Kishi et al. 2006).

The key institution to do research, to train human resources and to produce educational material for audio-visual teaching in Republican China was Jinling University in Nanjing, which was one of the most important private educational institutions established by western missionaries at the end of the nineteenth century. Jinling University could benefit from academic exchanges and cooperation, especially with American universities. The newly established Department of Physics, directed by Wei Xueren, began to organize study groups and commissions to facilitate the use and production of audio-visual teaching materials, and in 1936, through an agreement with the Ministry of Education, it began to train specialized audio-visual personnel for mass education in Nanjing (Lu et al. 2013).

Nevertheless, in spite of these new prospects, a widespread concern about the failure of radio technology in modernizing Chinese society was expressed by commentators in the specialized press. The core argument was that, while broadcasting was expected to contribute to saving the country (*jiuguo*), it was actually contributing to its decline (*wangguo*). Critics identified two main reasons: first, the predominance of entertainment programmes, and, second, the quality of these programmes, which were mainly based on traditional folk genres such as storytelling (*shuoshu* or *shuochang*) on one side and westernized modern popular culture on the other (Benson 1995; De Giorgi 2001).

Discontent about radio broadcast mostly reflected Chinese progressive intellectuals' concern about the state of modern Chinese culture, if not their anxiety of being marginalized by the emergence of this commercial media industry quite distant from their vision. They believed that social change would have been driven by a new culture inspired by the scientific and rational values of the West and spread by modern media. But they regretfully had to admit that instead of promoting modernity, media and radio in first place, preserved or even amplified the superstitions and the old values of the past, leaving China behind the rest of the world. The great radio success of traditional storytelling and romantic songs was the evidence of this trend.



This idea was well expressed by the writer Lu Xun who, in his short essay 'Ougan' ('Sudden feelings'), took radio broadcasting programmes as an example of the failure of science and technology's promise of modernity in China:

At the side of the *majiang* tables, lights substituted the candles. During Buddhist rituals in temples, magnesium lamps flash on lamas. What radio stations broadcast all day long is not always *Li Mao huantaizi* [The Car for Crown Prince Conspiracy], *Yu Tai Chun* [The Story of Courtesan Yu Taichun], *Xiexie maomao yu* [Thank You Gentle Rain]? [...] Every new system, new knowledge, new word that arrives in China just falls into a black colour vat, suddenly is obscured by complete ignorance, and becomes an instrument to fuel private interests. Science is just one of these. There is no medicine which could save China.

(Lu Xun [1934] 1982: 480)

The perception of a strong contradiction between the technological modernity of the medium and the backwardness of the message seemed especially evident in Shanghai, which was the most important centre for broadcasting in China due to its flourishing modern urban culture (Lee 1999; Yeh 2008). Here, in 1934, the educator Yu Ziyi quantified that, in one ordinary day, entertainment programmes such as traditional storytelling were broadcast almost six times as frequently as non-entertainment programmes (Yu 1934).

The discourse developed by critics dismissed the value of traditional cultural production for the modernization of China. According to some commentators, radio's intrinsic modernity could not reach compromises with the culture of the past that had no educational relevance:

[...] we must know that this epoch is running towards the future, and the people must also run towards progress. So, these past things have no value; we need to throw them away. Moreover, at the moment, in our country, the educational level of an ordinary person is not universal; there is still the chance to instil new ideas. How can they propagate again these old things as storytelling?

(Shi Chan 1933)

Other commentators emphasized how, at their best, the old artistic genres being broadcast by radio were insignificant types of entertainment that damaged the prospects of improving Chinese people's educational level. One reader, discussing the relation between broadcasting and education, summarized this widely shared opinion as follows:

Entertainment is a kind of spice which cannot be lacking in people's lives, and a noble entertainment is sufficient to make a person animated by high spirits and to improve his state of mind. But entertainment is just one kind of radio broadcast, and considering that the usefulness of wireless radio is just to offer entertainment, this means that its value is not really understood. I am especially interested in reflecting on this point. The enterprises most advocated as great, in whichever field, are necessarily able to increase the benefits for the people and to raise their knowledge and capacities. Only then can they have a value that can be trumpeted. If we have a look at our domestic broadcasting, we cannot say that programmes are not lively, nor can we say that

radio fans' interest is not free and uninhibited. But if we try to analyze the content of the programmes, most are market reports and entertainment, and those educational programmes which are strictly connected to the national progress are very, very few. I think that in our country, education is not universal, and knowledge is not flourishing, to the point that it cannot be compared to any other country in the world, and our defeats and weaknesses are mainly due to these factors. Thus, making education universal and promoting culture are important plans that we cannot delay. Wireless radio broadcasting is the most popular and efficient tool for this. Educational radio can develop the intellect of the people and raise their cultural level. What is beneficial to the society and the nation necessarily cannot be meagre, and as it concerns educational programmes, the range of choice can be quite great. Just to quote the most evident: There are speeches of personalities, ordinary lectures, talks about everyday knowledge, lessons of language, introductions to science, professional advice and educative news. If they are eclectic, they will be more effective, since, in this way, together with entertainment, the audience will receive every day an influential and invisible knowledge. Then, radio broadcasting will be as good as a teacher. How can the educational and the wireless circles not agree again on this point?

(Qi 1932)

In the flow of critical voices in the press, it is not easy to distinguish the specific interests of commercial radio broadcasters willing to defend their business on one side and of modern educators and intellectuals eager to carve a role for themselves in the new cultural industry on the other side. Complaints were addressed to the whole state of things by representatives of either camp, though there were contesting views about the main sources of this failure. If radio broadcasting did not play the role of 'teacher' for the masses, who is to blame? Were the culprits the profit-seeking broadcasters or the audiences themselves, who were so fond of old-style storytelling and romantic stories and who were in search of some measure of solace in their complicated modern lives (Benson 1995)? Or was the reason for the broadcasters' abdication of their role as educators to be found in the way in which the radio broadcasting system was organized?

Entertainers and broadcasters were explicitly asked to demonstrate a higher sense of responsibility and loyalty towards society as a sign of their modernity and their respect for the social value of the medium. But, also, listeners were called upon to change their attitudes towards radio and to not limit their interests to the search for solace and fun. In particular, they were asked to understand that the radio was a vehicle for progress and not just a new and fashionable pastime.

In the specialized magazine he directed, radio entrepreneur Su Zuguo argued that the problem could only be solved by making radio activities less dependent on advertisement and improving the educational level of the population:

Since wireless broadcasting has developed, in every environment, there has been an increasing attention to the programmes. Ordinary listeners think that entertainment programmes are not enough, and they feel bored and lonely. But idealist intellectuals think that entertainment programmes are too many, increasing the chances of leading



the country to perish. Those who manage broadcasting stations are reluctant to increase the number of educational programmes or to use radio to help mass education. But the financial support of broadcasting activities comes in great part from advertisement, and the fact that what advertisers require is that the psychology of listeners prevails, just to carry the propaganda's effectiveness to its utmost, is a problem for which not only broadcasters should be blamed [...]. If we want to improve radio programmes, this is a problem of popular education, and it is not only a problem of broadcasting stations. At any rate, at least, I hope that professional broadcasters, at least to a certain extent, gradually increase the number of scientific programmes. If this is not sufficient to help education, it can cut insipient entertainment, and the situation can improve.

(Su 1934: 252)

Several others identified the public as the main responsible of the failure of Chinese radio as a modernizing tool, pointing out that the audience needed to be educated first. For example listeners had to learn to keep volumes low to prevent disturbing the neighbours and to protect women and children from unsuitable programmes (Wu 1932). Moreover they had to give up the bad habit of continuously asking for changes to the song schedule in public places (Fei Fei 1933). In other words, the fault was not of broadcasters, but of the undisciplined and uneducated consumers whose mentality and behaviour was still backwards. Radio was just the mirror of Chinese society.

In 1930s China, the assumption that technology should be first of all a vehicle of social and cultural progress was certainly consistent with the vision of modernity promoted by the Nationalist Party in power (Kirby 2000; Bodenhorn 2002). The complaints about the failure of Chinese radio in contributing to the building of a modern society offered a powerful legitimization to the Nationalist State to act as not only a regulator of radio broadcasting activities from a legal and administrative perspective, but also the responsible party in defining or even imposing the proper use of the radio in collective and private life (De Giorgi 2014). This was especially evident in 1934, after the New Life Movement, which aimed at moralizing and disciplining Chinese society, was launched by the Party.

Afterwards, the Nationalist Party's radio policies seemed to address the several problems of Chinese radio that had been pointed out by commentators, and especially its failure in being a tool of mass education.

The guiding role of the Party and the State was embodied by the China Central Radio Affairs Management Office, which was placed in charge of controlling and guiding all broadcasting activities in the country in 1936. This office was subordinated to an Advisory Committee for the Broadcasting Activities of the Nationalist Party Central Executive Committee, whose members were selected from several party and State bureaucracies, included the Ministry of Education. Both offices were responsible for editing political and educational materials for broadcasting, to be distributed to local and commercial stations.

In 1936, the National Guiding Methods for Programme Broadcasting of Radio Stations (*Zhidao quanguo guangbo diantai bosong jiemu banfa*) were also issued, compelling all Chinese broadcasting stations to abide by a set of rules requiring them to feature propaganda, education and lectures for at least 40 per cent of their broadcast time. Immoral, superstitious or politically

extremist content was forbidden, and censorship was specifically addressed to curb those musical and folk genres whose content was considered backward and indecent (De Giorgi 2005). In 1937, more detailed indications, called the Criteria for Educational Programmes (*Jiaoyu jiemu cailiao biao zhun*), gave a precise definition of the kinds of content that were reputed to be acceptable. Entertainment programmes could include national and military music, heroic songs, folk operas (provided that the content and language were morally correct), and some kinds of storytelling. However, several traditional or western-style musical or theatre performances, which had been often broadcast by in commercial radio stations up to that moment, were confined to certain hours of the day. Controlling the quantity and the quality of radio broadcasting entertainment programmes reflected a will to discipline individual, familial and social leisure time in order to engineer a new and modern society.

The Nationalist Party or the State-controlled radio stations were proposed as the models for the educational mission of broadcasting. The CCBRS's activities were increasingly professionalized, while the contribution of intellectuals and academics to educational broadcast became greater (Wang and Shi 1987). Another example was offered by the radio station of the Ministry of Communication, which operated in Shanghai. Unlike most commercial and privately owned radio broadcasting stations, which limited their educational contents to the amounts required by law, the Ministry of Communication's radio were clearly oriented to emphasize the medium's modern educational mission. From 7.30 a.m. to 10.30 p.m. the station transmitted just a series of lessons on different topics, interspersed with western and national music. Speakers lectured the audience on 'national learning' (*guoxue*), conversations in Mandarin (*guoyu huihua*), science (*kexue*), hygiene (*weisheng*), agricultural prices and political affairs. After lunch, the radio taught the English language, hygiene, communications and telegraphy. In the late afternoon, special programmes for women, children and teachers were broadcast; these were dedicated to household management, history, civic education and the mastery of the English language. Only in the evening were programmes composed essentially of music and storytelling. According to a press commentator, the goal was making the radio a kind of 'ether university' (Xu 1937), as the experiment that was developed in the same years by the Great China University, a private academic institution supported by Nationalist Party aimed at mass education (Chan and Dirlik 1991: 150).

Nevertheless, a fundamental premise for the accomplishment of this mission was a change of attitude of the audience:

First, the shops which own radio receiving sets can make listeners to pay attention to the lectures about national products, the market reports and news broadcast by this station, and notes from the lectures can be pinned up to the wall, used as advertisements for the shops. And, as innovative advertisement posters hung at the door, they will certainly attract the customers, who will gather to have a look, and this will excite their interest in purchasing (*goumai xinli*). This station broadcasts experts' teachings on Mandarin, improve themselves and increase their knowledge, and in the end, it will contribute to the development of business. Secondly, in the families where there is one receiving set, listening to the programmes of this station can help family education. There are programmes dedicated to women's education, children's



education, popular lectures (*tongsu yanjiang*), household management notions, selected readings and travel stories and so on. They all will help the young and the old in the family comprehend useful knowledge. At the same time, children can be ordered to take notices from these programmes and to re-read to the other family members in order to train their writing and oral skills, and this will not only increase children's education, but also family leisure!

(Xu 1937: 258)

This idealized image of listeners using radio for their self-improvement, and not for their solace, reflected Chinese intellectuals' and government's expectations about the modernizing role that radio had to play. But it also suggested their awareness that the reality was quite different. Radio technology alone had not changed Chinese society and culture for the better, and to educate China through radio had proved to be a more complex, if not elusive, goal. Radio's educational function could not be simply acknowledged or taken for granted. It had to be constructed, taught, or, at last, imposed to the reluctant society by a stronger and interventionist State.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The discourse about the social role of radio communication technology and broadcasting in 1920s China was deeply influenced by the promise of social and cultural progress, which seemed to be ingrained in the technological modernity of the medium. The use of the radio, either as a broadcaster or as a listener, was expected to require not only scientific knowledge, but also a progressive attitude. Radio could not be anything other than educational, capable of shaping community values and social practices.

This association between radio technology and modern education was emphasized by most of the intellectuals, experts and entrepreneurs who supported the development of radio technology in China. Nevertheless, compared to this dream of modernity, the actual development of wireless radio in 1930s China was disappointing in the eyes of many intellectuals. In their eyes, radio failed to change society for the better. At its worst, it even emphasized the most backwards elements in Chinese culture. It was a mirror of China's failures to advance, of the impossibility of Chinese society to become modern.

Blaming broadcasters and the listeners alike, these complaints were matched by the Nationalist Party's policies focused on making radio an instrument for education as a strategic resource to pursue the State's political and ideological goals.

Since, in those years, limitations in financial support and human resources made the establishment of a monopolistic, State-controlled radio broadcasting system impossible, the Nationalist Party's government resorted primarily to administrative measures and censorship to define the character of proper modern broadcasting as educative. In particular, the Party controlled programme content and time schedules, supported professionalization in the field of educational radio and expected to shape listeners' attitudes and habits.

The modernizing function attributed to radio technology, which had been at the core of the discourse about the social value of radio developed by broadcasters and intellectuals since its introduction, legitimized this role of the State, which increasingly was seen as the only actor capable of making

the radio bean instrument for modern mass education. The resulting vision of a nation made acquainted to modernity through the radio put under the State aegis was destined to drive the Chinese government's broadcasting policies all along the twentieth century.

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WEI LEI

China Radio International

## Beyond propaganda: The role of radio in modernizing China in the socialist era, 1949–76

#### ABSTRACT

When socialist China was founded in 1949, led by the Chinese Communist Party and with Mao Zedong as the leader, radio was the most technologically viable medium with little presence of television. As propaganda is the dominant conception mobilized to interpret the role of media in Mao-era China (1949–76), radio is no exception. However, we still do not fully understand how radio worked and the degree to which programming shaped both public and individual life during this era. Addressing these questions is crucial if we are to explore the involvement of radio in modernizing Mao-era China beyond propaganda. Drawing largely upon Chinese material available pertinent to radio in Mao-era China, this article starts by examining the circumstances in which a state-owned radio system was constructed. It then moves on to scrutinize the materiality and forms of listening exercised in Chinese everyday lived reality. It investigates: several radio genres that were prominent during the Maoist era; and; the multiple dimensions that guided radio's production of a socialist subject. Taking the historical context and specific radio practices into account, this article aims to address issues – both theoretical and empirical – to localize the relationship between radio and modernization in socialist China.

#### KEYWORDS

radio  
Mao-era China  
modernization  
obligation  
collectivization  
nationalization