

# Media Literacy Education in Mainland China: A Historical Overview

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**Abstract**—This study focuses on media literacy education in mainland China with a historical review, based on document analysis, and try clarifying the origins, conferences, higher education and press of media literacy education. We found that the development of media literacy education had to face difficulties and challenges. It could be listed as follows: basic principles of discipline should be clearly shown; low localization and lack of social support; uneven geographical distribution of educational resources; ignoring the role of family for media literacy education.

**Index Terms**—Media; media literacy; media education; media literacy education.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the information era, the mass media affecting people's lives increasingly. With the development of society and progress of science and technology, reading and writing skills has failed to meet the daily needs. The concept of the media is undergoing expansion. On the one hand, it includes the traditional mass media such as television, movies, newspapers, radio, magazines. On the other hand, it also includes new media and media platforms which brought about by new technologies, such as mobile phones, networks, blogs, podcasts and other digital media, and various forms of outdoor advertising.

UNESCO (2011) has published Community media-a good practice handbook, this document point out that one of the challenges observed was the high illiteracy rate of inmates and as a result literacy education has become a programme focus. However, if we got too much information, we would be involved in a indifferent and passive state (Severin, W. J. & Tankard, J. W., Jr., 2001). On one hand, the interactive features of the media could bring convenience to us. On the other hand, it also affects people's lifestyles and values. In the media ecology, how to deal with the changing world of media? How could we improve the media literacy? We have to face the challenges.

## II. CONCEPT AND ORIGIN OF MEDIA LITERACY

Media Literacy is an exotic in China. In Canada, Barry

Duncan, et al (1989) suggested a definition that "Media literacy is concerned with helping students develop an informed and critical understanding of the nature of mass media, the techniques used by them, and the impact of these techniques. More specifically, it is education that aims to increase the students' understanding and enjoyment of how the media work, how they produce meaning, how they are organized, and how they construct reality. Media literacy also aims to provide students with the ability to create media products."

In the United States, the most widely used definition of media literacy is "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms." This definition was a collaborative result of participants who attended the 1992 Aspen Media Literacy Leadership Institute. The Center for Media Literacy, however, notes a more expanded definition of media literacy that emphasizes citizenship and democracy in addition to skills: Media Literacy is a 21st century approach to education. It provides a framework to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages in a variety of forms--from print to video to the Internet. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy (Thoman and Jolls, 2005).

In the United States, Potter offers a detailed cognitive theory of media literacy, suggesting a process through which learners can become critical consumers of media. Potter (2004) presents media literacy as a "perspective from which we expose ourselves to the media and interpret the meaning of messages we encounter." Potter notes that knowledge structures are required that are built upon media and real world information as well as the seven primary skills of analysis, evaluation, grouping, induction, deduction, synthesis and abstracting. Potter writes that the strength of literacy skills depends on the breath and depth of knowledge structures. And five foundational knowledge structures were identified: media effects, media content, media industries, real world and self (Potter, 2004).

The origins of media education lie in English teaching; and it is possible to find instances of English teaching that address aspects of the media as far back as the 1930s (Leavis and Thompson, 1933). Actually, it was essentially the first serious discussion of media in regards to education, was essentially an elitist argument suggesting that English educators needed to take on the role of a "bastion of cultural values" (Masterman, 1980). The arguments set forward in this book had a powerful effect on the development of English teaching, and the adoption of an academic perspective of cultural resistance. This philosophy towards

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English education continued, and had a profound effect on America and Britain, and led to both countries long-standing aversion to the types of media educational practices long engaged in by other European countries. Leavis and Thompson put forward was in part due to the economic interests of professors whose career was based on the supremacy of "high culture" and the perpetuation of traditional class and power systems.

UNESCO has played an important role in supporting media and information literacy by promoting the development of national information and media literacy policies, including in education. Since the 1980s, the UNESCO has made positive efforts to promote the development of media literacy education. Grunwald Declaration on media education was issued unanimously by the representatives of 19 nations at UNESCO (1982)'s International Symposium on Media Education at Grunwald, Federal Republic of Germany. It is reproduced here since media teachers may well find it useful to quote or cite in preparing rationales, justifications or explanatory documents relating to media education. This declaration on media education argued that:

- 1) initiate and support comprehensive media education programs - from pre-school to university level, and in adult education - the purpose of which is to develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes which will encourage the growth of critical awareness and, consequently, of greater competence among the users of electronic and print media. Ideally, such programs should include the analysis of media products, the use of media as means of creative expression, and effective use of and participation in available media channels;
- 2) develop training courses for teachers and intermediaries both to increase their knowledge and understanding of the media and train them in appropriate teaching methods, which would take into account the already considerable but fragmented acquaintance with media already possessed by many students;
- 3) stimulate research and development activities for the benefit of media education, from such domains as psychology, sociology, and communication science;
- 4) support and strengthen the actions undertaken or envisaged by UNESCO and which aim at encouraging international co-operation in media education.

In addition, UNESCO (1989) published *World Communications Report*, which was introduced the international trend and condition of media literacy education in Asia, the Pacific, Europe, and Latin America's. And it aimed to encourage the free flow of information at both national and international level; to promote a wider and more balanced dissemination of information, without any obstacle to freedom of expression; and to strengthen the communication capacities of the developing countries, in particular through the International Programme for the Development of Communication. Since the 1990s, with the spread of computer and Internet, media literacy education could be enriched and developed greatly.

### III. A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF MEDIA LITERACY EDUCATION IN MAINLAND CHINA

#### A. The origin of Media Literacy Education

Media literacy education started lately in mainland China. In 1994, Shangzhou Xia who is the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences introduced media education into China for the first time (Xia, 1994). And in 1997, Wei Bu traced the evolution of the concept of "media education" in western countries, and analyzed the significance of media education, content and implementation and method (Bu, 1997). After that Wei Bu continued to explore the media education, she set up the "medium class" in the channel named "Youth Corner" in China Youth Internet. This is an effective way to introduce media knowledge to young people. In this case, young people have asked many questions through this platform. For example, Could we believe the news? What is journalist doing as usual? And how does the advertisement work? These FAQ promotes young people to learn more about the media. In 2000, Shanghai Municipal Commission of the China Communist Youth League investigated youngsters in Shanghai through qualitative and quantitative study, and reported that rational understanding of media for young people was more limited, and they were lack of understanding for media ethics relatively, comparing with other age groups.

#### B. The International Conferences about Media Literacy Education

China has held International Conference on Media Literacy Education in 2004 and 2009, and invited John Pungente, David Buckingham, Cary Bazalgette, Wei Bu and other scholars to attend the conferences. The theme of the conference in 2004 is media literacy education in the information society; the scholars discussed how to build a theory of media literacy education for the Chinese situation, promoting the development of media literacy education. And how could we avoid the negative effect of media on young people? In addition, they talked about the how to protect the traditional culture which was eroded by the media. In 2009, the theme of the conference is media literacy and civic development. The scholars talked about the development of people-oriented citizens through macro views. And the topics they discussed have changed from the identification of media information into involved in the media personally, comparing with the conference in 2004. Also, China Education Daily reported that the local practices about media literacy education in mainland China. Additionally, the 3rd International Conference on Media Literacy Education in China will hold in Gansu in August, 2012. In order to promote the development of media literacy education, it would give more effective suggestions.

#### C. Media Literacy Education in Higher Education and Press

Media literacy education has also been the initial development at the universities. After the Media Literacy Education Research Center formally established in Communication University of China in 2002, media literacy education became more popular in China in 2004. In this

year, Communication University of China has set up master's degree in media literacy education, and published an album of media literacy education through the journal named media studies. "News • Media • Media literacy" which was the first book of media literacy education for college students was published by the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences Press in September 2004. In September, Shanghai Jiaotong University set an optional course which was about media literacy for all the undergraduates. In total, more than 700 non-communication majors participated in the courses. A journal called "journalists" at Fudan University opened up a "Media Literacy Education" column for the interaction and discussion, and media literacy group which was the first media literacy professional website in mainland China. at Fudan University was established

In June 2006, media literacy research center was established in Fudan University. Audio-Visual Education which is sponsored by the Northwest Normal University also set up a column named media literacy education. Media literacy courses Research Center of Northeast Normal University and Zhejiang Institute of Media and Media Literacy Institute were established in April 2007. The former was involved in media literacy research, has developed a textbook named experimental course on media education in primary schools. The latter did some research and training work of China Radio and Television Association. And then Media Literacy research report was published in 2008. In March 2009, the research institute of Higher Education in Communication University of China, provided training for 30 teachers from 15 primary schools in Chaoyang District, Beijing. It means media literacy education was involved in the teacher education system officially.

#### IV. THE PROBLEM IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF MEDIA LITERACY EDUCATION

Although relevant domestic institutions and researchers have made beneficial exploration in media literacy education practice throughout the current situation of media literacy education research, there still are a lot of problems compared with developed countries and area. And we need to study and draw lessons from the advanced experience and research achievements to explore theoretical research and practice in media literacy education.

##### A. Basic Principles of Discipline Should be Clearly Shown

In 1992, The International Association for Media and Communication Research held an academic conference in Brazil, and began to take media literacy education as an independent discipline issues. However, as a new research project crossing the fields of mass communication and education, the media literacy education have not formed the basic theory system. The scholars in different countries, regions and academic fields have different opinions about the basic concept, purpose, content, methods, and other basic problems of media literacy education. It needs to be further clear in dealing with the relationship among the related disciplines such as education, communications and sociology. China is still at the initial stage of media literacy

education.

When introduced new concepts from foreign countries, it is difficult to unify them since 1994. And it mainly presents the differences in understanding and expression. Taking International Council for Educational Media (ICEM) for example, Song Xiaowei, who works in the Institute of Journalism and communication of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, called it "Guo Ji Jiao Yu Mei Jie Li Shi Hui" in Chinese, named "learn to interpret mass media—the overview of media literacy education in abroad" in his paper. The website of media science college in Northeast Normal University translated it as "Guo Ji Jiao Yu Mei Ti Xie Hui" in Chinese. The website of library in Open University translated it as "Jiao Yu Mei Ti Guo Ji Wei Yuan Hui". The website of the resources of educational technology in China called it "Guo Ji Jiao Yu Mei Ti Li Shi Hui".

##### B. Low Localization and Lack of Social Support

Media literacy education started lately in mainland China, so it is still in the primary stage. The current study is focused on translation, introduction, trace and references of foreign literature, and on the summary descriptions of contents and methods in media literacy education. The overall impression has been stayed on the introduction level of related theory, little localization in educational theories and modes of media literacy, lack of analysis of the present status of education in mainland China. And there is many qualitative research and less quantitative study in the research field, so it is lack of practicability, applicability, and criticism. "In the first stage, the material is insufficient..., in the second stage, the system is insufficient..., and in the third stage, the culture is inadequate..." (Liang Qichao, 1992).

With the improvement of the development of media technology and the education system, the problems of material and system can be solved. However, the key is how to strengthen the culture fundamentally? How could we integrate media literacy education and Chinese culture, and cultivate the correct perception of the media information, the ability of construction and deconstruction.

Moreover, the process of the discipline's theory and method is not developed, because the objective of research is not clear. Some schools offer courses related to media literacy, but they are marginalized for some reasons, resulting in predicament. The popular value orientation is still instrumental rationalism. In this case, it is reflected in: emphasis on "technical level", while ignoring the "media ethics and moral level. And then, it is resulted in internal development disorders of media literacy education.

Many countries and regions have set up official educational organizations to carry out the media literacy education. There are also some non-governmental organizations. China is still in a single model of school education for it. Therefore, media literacy education is lack of social participation. Schools, families and communities function have not been developed effectively.

##### C. Uneven Geographical Distribution of Educational Resources

The number of domestic research group is limited, mainly distributed in both Beijing and Shanghai. In terms of

curriculum, there are only a few cities to establish media literacy education classes such as Beijing, Shanghai. The curriculum begins in primary and secondary schools and universities. In contrast, the undeveloped area in mainland China does not set up this course.

Why does it happen? The factors should be educational investment, and lack of awareness of improving media literacy. Media literacy education research has just started, so research achievements are limited. And it has not caused wide public concern. Based on the investigation made by the website of media literacy research, the rate of the respondents who do not know about the concepts of media literacy is 56%. Because of the limitation of the network, the actual rate should be much higher. Although the concept of media literacy has been introduced to China for over 18 years, the number of people who is knowledgeable of this field is very limited.

#### D. Ignoring the Role of Family for Media Literacy Education

Just as Michael Sadler said, the things outside the schools matter even more than the things inside the schools, and govern and interpret the things inside. Media literacy education is a systematic project. Both school education and family education play the important roles to maintain continuity and consistency through an international perspective. However, the fact is lack of media literacy education, which the parents should educate their children. Firstly, the family education ignored the important role of media literacy education. Secondly, media literacy of parents is limited, and thus it is beyond their grasp. Wei Bu pointed out that parents and children should improve network literacy together, and it is the most effective way to promote the parents to guide the children to use the Internet. Parents play a dual role in the media literacy education, one as the subject to give children education and another as the object to accept social education. In the process of education, parents also should continue to accept the media literacy education in order to keep pace with the times.

Therefore, parents' media literacy would impact on the child's media literacy significantly. Even if the parents agree to carry out media literacy education, parents may be canceled the educational content at any time in order to pass the entrance exam. In this case, family education, as a very important part of media literacy education, will lose its function.

Additionally, Immanuel Wallerstein (1976) pointed out the Dependency theory, most obviously its concepts of "core" and "periphery". Although the theory is related to international relationship, the theme is social justice. In our society, on no account can we ignore the group of periphery; media literacy education is not an exception. We should give more attention to disabilities in order to improve their media literacy. In China, One Plus One is a Beijing-based media project using an Internet-based platform to provide a voice for people with disability, and on November 3, 2010, Internet Society of China and China Foundation for Disabled Persons awarded One Plus One a prize-Excellent institution of Information Accessibility. But the number of the project like One Plus One is limited.

#### V. SUMMERY

Media literacy education in mainland China has caused wide public concern. Just as Chen Changfeng who the is Professor the School of Journalism and Communication in Tsinghua University said, according to the practical experience of countries in the world of media literacy education, the awareness of media literacy education is important, but it is quite difficult to introduce it to the formal schooling system. Because the establishment of an independent discipline, the training of teachers, curriculum system settings, the establishment of the examination and evaluation system, and the cultivation of social cognition, require a long development process.

We need to continue to learn the advanced experience of foreign countries in the process, both internationalization and localization, media literacy as one of the basic elements of lifelong learning, and actively respond to the many problems facing, exploring media literacy education in China stage model of development.

In this process, we need to continue to study the international experience, focus on internationalization and localization, and take media literacy as one of the basic elements of lifelong learning. And then we could explore the media literacy education model of development in mainland China.

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