

# The Appeal of Marshall McLuhan in Contemporary China

## L'APPEL DE MARSHALL MCLUHAN DANS LA CHINE CONTEMPORAINE

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**Abstract:** While his name has been largely forgotten in the Western world, Marshall McLuhan and his thoughts are becoming more and more appealing to academics in China. The main causes can be found in six aspects: 1) a new appreciation of the value of Marshall McLuhan's writing on the effects media has on society due to the dramatic impact the rapidly growing popularity of the Internet in China has had on Chinese people and Chinese society; 2) 457 million Chinese Internet users embracing the sense of belonging to "Global Village", where they can "extend their central nervous systems"; 3) having experienced so many great changes, Chinese being readily convinced by Marshall McLuhan's consistent theories that media can change the traditions including the world; 4) Marshall McLuhan's highly theoretical style of writing provides an opportunity for Chinese academics to extend their research and to expand their own thoughts as well; 5) the significant enlightenment that Marshall McLuhan's two famous concepts of "Hot Medium" and "Cold Medium" have had on Chinese media where competition is intensely increasing and reform is further taken; and 6) the deep and far-reaching influence that Marshall McLuhan's theories on media have had on Chinese academic perspectives, and as well as their teaching methodology and technique, particularly in the fields of culture and communication.

**Key words:** Marshall McLuhan; China; Internet; Global Village; Media; the Extensions of Man

**Résumé** Bien que son nom a été largement oublié dans le monde occidental, Marshall McLuhan et ses pensées sont devenus de plus en plus attrayants pour des universitaires en Chine. Les causes principales peuvent être trouvées dans six aspects: 1) une nouvelle appréciation de la valeur des œuvres de Marshall McLuhan qui parle des effets de médias sur la société en raison de l'impact dramatique de la popularité croissante de l'Internet en Chine et son influence sur les Chinois et la société chinoise, 2) 457 millions d'internautes chinois embrassant le sentiment d'appartenance au "village mondial", où ils peuvent "étendre leur système nerveux central", 3) après avoir vécu tant de grands changements, les Chinois étant facilement convaincus par les théories de Marshall McLuhan selon lesquelles les médias peuvent changer les traditions, y compris le monde; 4) le style théorique de l'écriture de Marshall McLuhan donne une occasion aux universitaires chinois d'approfondir leurs recherches et développer leurs propres pensées et, 5) l'illumination significative que les deux concepts clés de Marshall McLuhan "Média chaud" et "Média froid" ont eu sur les médias chinois où la concurrence est en croissance intense et la réforme sera en outre prise, et 6) l'influence profonde et de grande envergure que les théories de Marshall McLuhan sur les médias ont eu sur les perspectives académiques chinoises, ainsi que leurs méthodes et techniques d'enseignement, notamment dans les domaines de la culture et de la communication.

**Mots-clés:** Marshall McLuhan; En Chine; Internet; Village mondial; Médias; Extensions de l'Homme

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## INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, when the name "Marshall McLuhan" (1911-1980) is mentioned to some Western academics, it seems laughter is the only response. People wonder why, after nearly half century, while his name has been nearly forgotten in the

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Western world and his works are little read and quoted, Marshall McLuhan and his thoughts have such a wide appeal in China? Chinese academics believe that the past half century of history, particularly the development of electronic technology and the information industry in the past 30 years, has proved Marshall McLuhan's theories on media and its effects. Nobody in this world can escape the impact of his thoughts that have significantly shaped our perceptions about the impact of media, such as "the Global Village", "the Medium Is the Message", "Electronic Media Is the Extension of the Human Central Nervous System", "Cold Medium and Hot Medium", and "Tribe-NonTribe-Retrieve".

In recent years many of Marshall McLuhan's works and commentaries and analysis of his works have been translated into Chinese. Among these, the Chinese version of "Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man," is appraised as one of the 30 top most influential translated books in China for the past three decades (cocobook.net 29/10/2008). The translator, Prof. He Daokuan (1942-today) of Shenzhen University, also the Deputy Chairman of China Cross-Culture Research Association, has become popular in China because of his contribution in translating Marshall McLuhan's works and for his research on Marshall McLuhan.

What has caused such interesting phenomenon in China? The following six elements should be accounted for.

## **SIX ELEMENTS**

### **The Rapid Popularity of the Internet in China**

The popularity of the Internet in China has made it possible for Marshall McLuhan and his thoughts on the impact of media on contemporary society to become popular in China. The rapid rise in popularity of the Internet in China has dramatically impacted both the people and the society, proving his theories and giving more weight to Marshall McLuhan's prescient insights.

With the rapid rise in popularity of the Internet in China, China has become a major country of Internet users. According to a survey conducted by CNNIC (China Internet Network Information Centre) on 19th January 2011, the rate of popularity of the Internet in China had reached 34.3%. So far a total of 457 million Chinese are Internet users. 303 millions are mobile Internet users. Most of the users are city residents. And the rate is rapidly going up with the increase in population rushing from the rural areas to the cities. As reported by CNCC (China Net Census Centre) July, 2010: city residents in China will overwhelm that of rural residents by 2015. The popularity of the Internet in China has dramatically impacted Chinese society; it has changed not only Chinese values, outlook, concepts, and ways of thinking, but also their behaviour patterns. All these happenings have attracted the attention of China's academic circles. An upsurge of interest in McLuhan has consequently spread throughout China—to study the effects that modern communication has on China's society. At this point, it is natural that Marshall McLuhan is held in high regard because of his valuable foresights and research on public media and its effects. Just as Sheri Cyprus points out: "Dr. Marshall McLuhan had accurately predicted future electric media would create a 'global village' of non-verbal communication that would be accessed all over the world, thus connecting the world's 'tribes.' The Internet did just that, as the access to information by those all over the world, became the important aspect of this new form of communication. The messages being sent are quite secondary to the importance of being able to send and receive written messages all over the world."

### **The Feelings of the 457 Million Chinese Netizens**

The 457 million Chinese Internet users love the sense of "Global Village", where they can "extend their central nervous systems". Thanks to his predictions coming true as members of the "Global Village", Chinese no longer suffer from the pain of feeling shut out of global affairs; instead they are free and active in the access to all the news about important issues in the world. For example, when the local TV reported, but not in detail, the inaugural speech of American President Barack Obama, Chinese "netizens" excitedly watched it in full, and voluntarily spread it as a gift to their friends. Another example is while the Western world was caught up in the famous American TV movie, "Sex and the City", Chinese were not far behind; they downloaded every episode and shared them at leisure with friends. Although this movie has never been shown publicly in China—actually even its name had not been publicly mentioned, it is not at all strange to many Chinese, particularly among the younger generation. So when the shooting of "Sex and the City II" started, the CCTV (China Central TV) reported it in "News Home and Abroad" which broadcasts at 7pm-7:30pm and has long been the most important news program in China. Still another example, during the three "Rushes of Going Abroad", many Chinese who could not afford studying abroad or immigrating overseas had the chance instead to share the new experience of living overseas with their friends who did by using SKYPE online to discuss the contrasts between the Western world and China. So it's no wonder that Chinese greatly admire Marshall McLuhan's messages about "Media Ecology", "The Medium Is the Message", and "Electronic Media Is the Extension of the Human Central Nervous System."

## **The Dramatic Impact the Modern Public Media has had on the Traditions**

Having experienced so many great changes, Chinese have been convinced by Marshall McLuhan's consistent theories that media can change the traditions (at least in the Western world) that heretofore have been largely shaped by the Bible and Shakespeare—that media can truly change the world.

Indeed, significant changes have taken place in China: the age in which the authority-controlled public media was the only voice that Chinese heard has gone forever; the traditional media's role of a baton in the hand of the authority has been greatly challenged; and the approach that the public media in China functioned merely as a propaganda tool controlled by the authority has been severely compromised.

The Internet provides not only inexhaustible and timely information resources for Chinese to study and as a source of entertainment; it also acts as a reliable and convenient source for Chinese to access whatever the local public media has not reported and to check the truth and accuracy of whatever it has covered. In fact, the Internet has become a powerful tool of self-defence for Chinese—through the Internet, instead of being passive listeners, as in the past, now Chinese are actively expressing their opinions on important events that happen around them. They are also using the Internet to get involved in administering justice, to seek help and expose corruption. Take Ms. Dong Yujiao's case as an example, which happened in Badong County, Hubei Province in May 2009. A girl in her self-defence had killed one and injured two of three officials who sexually harassed her. At first, the local public media kept quiet about it, but under the pressure of Internet users, they had to report it until this event ended in a fair result—the girl was finally released as innocent.

Another example is a speech made by Zhou Jiugeng, the former director of Jiangning District Housing Authority, Nanjing province, on 28 December, 2008. His official speech annoyed the public so that his photo was exposed online in which he was seen wearing a luxury watch that cost around RMB ¥ 100, 000 and he was also seen to be smoking the most expensive cigarettes which only rich people can afford, that cost RMB ¥ 1,500 per carton. Internet users kept questioning where he got so much money to pay for such luxuries, which he could not possibly have afforded on a public official's salary. Soon, with the help of Internet users, many of his luxury houses and details of bribes he'd accepted were exposed online. On 20 March, 2009, he was expelled from the party, expelled from office, accused of crimes and transferred to judicial organs for handling.

Chinese have witnessed what Marshall McLuhan had the foresight to predict half a century ago: that media changes the people, it changes the society and it changes the world; also the audience decides the media. Nowadays, whatever Chinese Internet users are concerned with online is more and more affecting the Chinese public media. Very often the Chinese public media has to adjust its focus according to the interests of Chinese Internet users.

## **Marshall McLuhan's Highly Theoretical Style of Writing**

Marshall McLuhan's highly theoretical style of writing provides an opportunity for Chinese academics to extend their academic research, and to expand their own thoughts as well.

In the Western world, among those critical voices to Marshall McLuhan, the strongest one is that "his theories lack logic and systemic details". Even Dr. Paul Levinson, the most famous media scholar in the digital age, who highly appreciates Marshall McLuhan's theories, admits that: "McLuhan's writings are not at all in the academic writing style. His books have neither large sections of well-organized writings nor rigorously logic narratives. Therefore it is not necessary to read his books in the order from the first chapter to the second chapter". However, the reason Marshall McLuhan has been seriously criticized most by the Western world is one of the reasons that McLuhan's theories have become popular in China, because by that Chinese academics then have the opportunity to extend their academic research and to expand their own thoughts as well.

The reasons for this phenomenon are both historic and political. Ever since the so-called "Great Cultural Revolution", for many decades such qualities as "unique", "thoughtful", and "creative" were not encouraged in the ideology of China. Actually free thoughts were not encouraged at all. In order to avoid political risks, Chinese academics had to choose the safest way, which was to "research"—in fact to "re-crew" the academic accomplishments of the few most famous domestic scholars, such as Xun Lu (1881-1936) and Moro Guo (1892-1978). Implementing such a philosophy of "safety", Chinese academics hid themselves behind the thoughts of the famous scholars' so as to avoid revealing their own true thoughts that might bring them trouble. For so long time there was no an academic system for Chinese academics to freely and properly develop their academic thoughts, consequently, few Chinese academics have developed their thoughts and theories; no real, meaningful academic research or findings have been made, either. The side effects now still exist in the circle of Chinese academics. The current situation is: Chinese academics are still taking the safest way which they have been used to, that is, either to borrow the "power" of the world-famous scholars by "re-crewing" their academic accomplishments or to borrow the "mouths" of world-famous scholars to mask whatever they themselves wish to say, but dare not.

Not only Marshall McLuhan's highly theoretical style of writing provides an opportunity for Chinese academics to extend their academic research, and to expand their own thoughts as well, but also Marshall McLuhan's academic ethic demonstrates for Chinese academics how to seek the new findings and produce creative merits.

In the eyes of Chinese academics, Marshall McLuhan was a courageous scholar who was full of adventurous spirit, dared to try something new, was not confined to limits, for what he believed was right, he firmly and fearlessly stood alone, enduring being misunderstood, criticized and defeated. For example Marshall McLuhan has been strictly criticised for making his research go beyond the bounds of British and American literature, deeply "invaded" the territory of the media world; and letting his thinking "fly" freely in his academic pursuit without caring about being at odds with commonly accepted ideas; and having insisted on his free expression in his highly theoretical style of writing, ignorant of the conventional rules. However, it is his academic courage—stood alone for what he believed was right regardless of the consequences that make his theories survived the texts of so many criticisms, denials, and the time as well. No doubt, the course, in which Chinese academics have introduced McLuhan and his theories into China, is also a course in which they have learned, absorbed and spread McLuhan's thoughts, his spirit and his academic ethic. Through translating, teaching and researching McLuhan, Chinese academics are drawing the courage, the confidence and the insight from McLuhan, which are what they most need in extending their academic research and expanding their own thoughts. For this reason, McLuhan and his theories are not only the valuable academic resources for Chinese academics to research, but also a valuable source for Chinese academics to gain the strength for them to persuade the meaningful academic research.

Owing to the influence of Marshall McLuhan's academic ethic, a hero has arisen in Chinese academia recently. He is Mr. Fang Zhouzi, who obtained Doctor Degree of biochemistry in Michigan State University, USA in 1995, and bravely started the war to fight against unethical practices in Chinese academia after he returned China and founded the first Chinese Net-Literature in 1994. In his website, Mr. Fang Zhouzi exposed some Chinese professors who had plagiarized the academic accomplishments of overseas scholars'. For that on August 29, 2010, Mr. Fang Zhouzi was attacked and hit in the waist with an iron hammer by the murderer who was hired by one of the exposed professors. Yet, Mr. Fang Zhouzi does not give up. Discharged from the hospital he is now still firmly and fearlessly fighting against those unethical practices in the Chinese academia. His behaviours are highly appreciated by the majority of Chinese academics.

### **Marshall McLuhan's Two Famous Concepts of "Hot Medium" and "Cold Medium"**

Marshall McLuhan's two famous concepts of "Hot Medium" and "Cold Medium" have significantly enlightened Chinese media in its reform when it is seeking to survive with the increasing competition.

According to Marshall McLuhan, "Hot Medium" means that which offers clear, bright and high-definitive information. Due to its high-definitive information, such media is "hot" enough itself so that it does not require much imagination and involvement from the audience—without much related "warming up" of thinking, the audience can process the information provided. Thus, "Hot Medium", with its high-definitive information, hits audience like huge waves; the result is the audience is soon over-fed. On the contrary, "Cold Medium" refers to that which offers fuzzy, easy, comfortable and low-definitive information; thereby it invites the audience to participate using their imagination and applying previous knowledge, thus filling in the missing details to achieve a complete understanding. What Marshall McLuhan pointed out here has greatly helped Chinese media to have insight and better understanding of the features of media and its laws of functioning as well. This is particularly obvious in Chinese TV services in which digital TV programs are promoted which provides 120 channels of programs, consequently sharpening competition among the 120 channels. Having been enlightened by McLuhan, Chinese TV experts have realized that old-pattern communication practices, which always cram and condemn the audience with arbitrary, conclusion-made notions and views, have to be reformed if they want to keep the audience—to keep themselves going. As the reform proceeds, nowadays those "too hot" Chinese TV programs are gradually being replaced by "cold" ones. Such reform is really welcomed by the massive Chinese audience.

Take the 30-episode Chinese TV series "Latency" for example, which was the most appealing program in 2009 and was repeatedly played for several months by several Chinese TV channels. During the time the TV series was on, almost every Chinese family engaged in intensive watching. It created the highest watch rate in China, and became so well known that almost every Chinese knows about it. Why was it such a success? While its theme was very ordinary—a story of a spy, what was not ordinary was that in the development of the plot it did not show people who were good and who were wrong just by simple "red faces" or "black faces", and the characters in it did not speak much like those in other TV series with similar themes; instead much room was left for the audience to fill in, to guess, to imagine and to complete—really the TV series successfully satisfied the audience's need to participate and to fulfil by themselves. Until now the story of the TV series and its characters vividly live on in Chinese mind, much as though they had actually once existed.

## **The Deep and Far-Reaching Influence Marshall McLuhan's Theories on Media have had on Chinese Academics in the Fields of Culture and Mass Communication**

Marshall McLuhan's theories on media have had a deep and far-reaching influence on Chinese academic perspectives, and as well as their teaching methodology and technique, particularly in the fields of culture and mass communication, which is shifting the research emphasis from being text/script-centred into being reader/audience-centred.

How far and how deep has McLuhan influenced Chinese academics in the fields of culture and mass communication? Look at the following statistics: since the year 2000, the first Marshall McLuhan's book "Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man" was published in Chinese by The Commercial Press (China) as its classic product, Nanjing University Press published his collection, entitled "McLuhan's Highlights" in Chinese, Journal of Shenzhen University published several comments on McLuhan's theories, the journal of Beijing Broadcasting College "Modern Communication" published two dozen articles on McLuhan's thoughts, and more than ten Chinese universities have created specific chapters in their curriculum of culture and mass communication to introduce and comment on McLuhan's thoughts and theories. So nowadays, Marshall McLuhan is known by just about everyone in the fields of culture and mass communication in China.

In the past decade, Chinese academics in the fields of culture and mass communication have never stopped their efforts in the study of Marshall McLuhan, and they have found that Marshall McLuhan had applied what he had learned about "text analysis" when he studied in Trinity College Cambridge into media analysis and that Marshall McLuhan, metamorphosing from an ordinary literature lecturer into a great master of media, completed not only his transformation of personal academic perspectives, but also symbolized the two major changes in the fields of literature theory and communication theory in the 20th Century—the first was literature analysis from being author-centred (focused on analysing the authors' historical background) into being text/content-centred (focused on analysing literature works); the second was from being text/content-centred (focused on analysing literature works) into being reader/audience-centred (focused on analysing the audience, the media, its functions and its effects).

Deeply influenced by these findings, Chinese academics in the fields of culture and communication are trying hard to liberate their research and teaching from being text/content-centred and plunge into being reader/audience-centred — focusing on the audience's feeling, the audience's receptive effects; also they are combining their new teaching methodology and technique with a close co-operation with the media. By exposing more to the media they have offered theoretic advice to the media, in turn their further research has been greatly promoted by the feedback and enormous first-hand data from the media. Therefore more practical measures and better programs have been made to meet the needs of the fast developing Chinese society.

Such a transformation in the research and teaching emphasis is benefiting not only more and more Chinese students, but also more and more Chinese government departments, media workers, industrial and commercial world as well.

Another important influence that Marshall McLuhan's theories on media have had on Chinese academics in the fields of culture and communication is his emphasis on researching the inter-effects between the media and the audience, also the needs of the individual who is the terminal audience of the advanced media: both the Internet and TV. Prof. Xiu Yaokui (1939-today) commended: "McLuhan paid great attention to the inter-relationship between the individual audience and communication technique. For him, it is a private affair between the communication media and the individual audience."

In 1966, McLuhan pointed out: "As important as it is for educators to shift from teaching into findings, so that learners directly participate in the course of learning, all media should give up these comprehensive packages and turn instead to tailor to the individual". Chinese academics appreciate the new vision which McLuhan opened in the research on media and communication, and Chinese academics believe that this new vision meets the needs of the advanced net-TV age, which features an audience which, in most circumstances, consists of a single, active individual in front of the terminal of a lap-top or a TV set, instead of a large number of people, "passive target" as they said.

No doubt research into this new vision is renewing the concepts of Chinese communication, emphasis on the inter-effects between the audience and media technique has been implemented and this will finally benefit the development of China's external image as a more active member of the global village.

## **CONCLUSION**

The first "McLuhan Rush" took place in the 1960s in the U.S. when the media and academia highly appreciated his research on the effects media has on society. The second "McLuhan Rush" happened in the mid-1990s when the U.S. and Canada started a new academic discussion on Marshall McLuhan and his thoughts. After nearly half a century, the third "McLuhan Rush" is happening in China. It comes as no surprise. Through a process of historical selection, it meets the need in China to understand the impact of the development of new media technologies and adapting a market system. As

a remarkable visionary with valuable foresights on media technology and its effects, Marshall McLuhan and his thoughts are inspiring the Chinese academic world and the media world to further explore the effects that media technologies have on society and also to understand the mission that the media itself should fulfil.

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