

Technical Communication in China: Past and Future

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An open China welcomes communication and exchanges—not only in the fields of economy, politics, and culture, but also in science and technology. Starting this past spring, a new slogan, *Going Digital*, appeared frequently in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The slogan was coined by Nicholas Negroponte, the professor in charge of the media lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). More and more Chinese are increasingly concerned about the magnificent power of computers and telecommunication, which is transforming our life as we move into the new millennium.

The first Chinese Technical Communication Conference (CTCC) took place in Beijing, PRC, in October 1995 and was hosted by Tsinghua University. Fred Klein from California was invited to participate as the official liaison of the Society for Technical Communication (STC). The conference was national in scope, and there was only one Westerner in attendance. Some 100 professionals from the PRC deliberated for three days and laid the foundation for the future of our profession.

Recently, the second Chinese Technical Communication Conference was hosted by the Institute of Communication Arts of Zhejiang University (ZJU) in Hangzhou, PRC. Hangzhou is known for its lovely landscape with alpine lakes, tea plantations, and silk production plants. The city has a famous tea museum, giant golden Buddha statues, Buddhist temples, Taoist shrines, and many more attractions.

The theme, “Technical Communication and Social Progress,” again brought together scholars from China’s first-rate universities and research institutes, as well as professionals in technical communication media; even scholars from Hong Kong and Australia attended.

An Old Story About Chinese Technical Communication

Contrary to the concept that technical communication, as a new academic subject, did not emerge in mainland China until the 1980s, research results presented at the conference suggested that we could trace the source to the early years of this century. The researcher from the Chinese Academy of Sciences (PRC) and a lecturer from the University of Newcastle (Australia) gave a joint presentation on a historical event that had sunk into oblivion for most Chinese. As early as in World War I, some Chinese students in the United States became the forerunners of our technical communicators. Contrasts of the conditions and development in the East and West, and experiences and study in the West, all spurred the students to realize that science and technology could make a nation stronger. They founded the Chinese Science Society (CSS) at Cornell University in Ithaca, NY, back in 1915. CSS was thought to be the first technical communication society of China. CSS’s goals and activities included technical journalism, technical translations, and the dissemination and exchange of science and technology.

The students also started publishing a journal called *Kexue—Science*, which has already reached 49 volumes, and still exists as a bimonthly publication. Three years later, the headquarters of CSS moved back to China along with *Kexue—Science*. Afterward, CSS built a close relationship with Zhejiang University (ZJU). Two out of six chief editors of the journal once taught at ZJU; the former well-known president of ZJU, Chu Kochen, was elected president of the CSS Board of Directors. Many members of the CSS worked at ZJU. The host university even invited the son of

one of the forerunners to attend the conference. Though 70 years old, he recalled some emotion-filled moments of his childhood. He talked about the days his father was busy editing the journal and presenting publish scientific lectures. A library honoring the pioneer still stands in Shanghai.

New Stage at a Critical Moment

The status of technical communication remained marginal, however. A formal society concerning technical communication in the PRC was not founded until the 1980s.

With the rapid developments of science and technology today, nobody can ignore the huge impact of technical communication on our society and culture. An open China has come to understand that technology and education strengthen a nation. This fact explains the powerful support and substantial aid to the conference that came from the authorities, such as the letter of congratulations from the President of the Chinese Science Committee (SSC), and the sponsoring and funding of the conference.

This conference, focused on “Technical Communication and Social Progress,” can be seen as a milestone— a mark of a new stage of studies and the practice of technical communication in China. In addition, the last two years have brought the establishment of graduate and B.A. programs with majors in technical communication, such as the Master’s degree program offered by Tsinghua University in Beijing.

This year is also the 100th anniversary of the word *keji—technology* since it was incorporated into Chinese in 1897. A century ago, *keji—technology* was introduced to the Chinese as the opposite of the traditional Chinese philosophy, Confucianism. Twenty years later, the slogan “Democracy and Science” was also introduced, calling for a social change from an agricultural society to an industrial one. For a whole century, important Chinese social trends could not be separated from technology. How should Chinese scholars face this change? These scholars and professionals discussed these topics seriously and freely, such as communication and education in a digital world, ethical issues, the effects and impact of technical communication, and so on.

Nobody doubts that the coming 21st century will see East and West meeting each other. Such convergence and interaction will have a deep impact on our perspectives about the world around us and our fervent hopes for the future. Technical communication, as one of the major elements of intercultural, international interaction, will grow more and more. Technical communicators in the People’s Republic of China welcome cooperation, exchange, and publication from their international colleagues.

(This paper was published in *TechniScribe*, October 1997, 4-5.)