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A STUDY ON THE COMMUNICATION HISTORY OF THE THREE GORGES PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

The Three Gorges Project (“TGP”), the largest comprehensive water conservancy complex project in today’s world, shows different characteristics in its communication in different stages from the proposal to the argumentation, design, approval, construction and operation. From the perspective of project communication, the article uses historical retrospect to summarize the communication practice of TGP in different stages and with different characteristics during its lifecycle, and analyze the communication laws of TGP. According to the article, the project communication allows information transfer, value interpretation and image building in a complicated social context, and helps the public understand the project objectively, deeply and vividly, thus boosting the decision making, leading the anticipation, explaining the doubts, feeding back information, resolving disputes, and escorting the project, and facilitating the smooth achievement of the project goals in different stages.

TGP is the largest comprehensive water conservancy complex project in the world today. From its construction which lasted more than a decade to its successful completion and giving play to huge comprehensive benefits, TGP is of great significance in the modernization process of China, and has produced an extensive social effect across the world. A study on the communication history of TGP allows us to analyze the communication laws of national major projects, enhance our awareness of disseminating major projects, and provide reference for more major projects to be better disseminated and play a better role.

I. THE COMMUNICATION OF MR. SUN YAT-SEN’S “THREE GORGES DREAM”

Sun Yat-sen’s envisagement about the TGP was first recorded in *The International Development of China* written by Sun Yat-sen in English in 1918, in which *The Second Plan* includes the development of hydropower resources in Three Gorges.¹ From March 1919, *The International Development of China* was successively published on the English newspaper of US in China, *The Far Eastern Review*. In August 1919, it was translated into Chinese, and successively published on the *Construction* journal, an institutional publication of Kuo Min Tang (“KMT”), with an intention to promote consensus within the party. On October 10, 1921, the Chinese-version *The International Development of China* by Mr. Sun Yat-sen was formally published by Shanghai Minzhi Publishing House. In 1922, the English-version *The International Development of China* by Mr. Sun Yat-sen was published in New York, US.² On August 17, 1924, Sun Yat-sen delivered a speech titled the Principles of People’s Livelihood at Guangzhou National Higher Normal School, in which he mentioned again the development of hydropower resources in Three Gorges.

Sun Yat-sen fully employed multiple communication types including interpersonal communication, organizational communication, group communication and mass communication, combined his project ideal with the rejuvenation of the nation, gave the ideal of TGP a greater social influence gradually, and allowed the envisagement about the construction of TGP to move difficultly from a dream toward a reality.

II. THE COMMUNICATION OF TGP FROM DREAM TO FEASIBILITY

Mr. Sun Yat-sen’s political ideal about TGP gradually stepped into the technical research of water conservancy. The survey research reports and published by a series of professional technical periodicals and sporadic media reports were highly professional. For example, the “Powell Plan” proposed by Siaeny J. Powell, a British engineer, was covered by the then *Shun Pao*. In 1929, Chen Zhan’en, the Chief of Water Conservancy Section, serialized the *Recent Situation*

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1. Zhang Yunchang and Luan Linbin (chief editors): *A Compilation of Historical Literatures for China Three Gorges Project (1948-1949)*, China Three Gorges Publishing House, Edition 2010, p19.
 2. Zhang Lixian (author): *Memory about Three Gorges in the Period of Republic of China*, China Three Gorges Publishing House, Edition 2017, p18 and p19.

of *Yangtze River and Remediation Opinions on the Yangtze River Watercourse Monthly*¹. In October 1932, the *Survey Report on Hydroelectric Generation in the Upper Reaches of Yangtze River*² was developed by Yun Zhen and other engineers, which was serialized on *Engineering*, 1933 No.3 and No.4 proceedings of Chinese Institute of Engineers.

In 1944, G.R.Paschal, a renowned economist in US, presented the well-known *Paschal Report*, which was praised and strongly recommended by the Resource Commission of the Nationalist Government, and the American government was also interested in this report.

In the fall of 1944, Dr. J.L.Savage, the chief design engineer and a high dam expert with the Bureau of Reclamation, US (“USBR”) presented the *Initial Report on the Yangtze River Gorges Plan*³, or the stunning *Savage Plan*. The Nationalist Government General sent the *Savage Plan* to US President Roosevelt via General Nelson. The White House of US disclosed this world’s largest water conservancy project to the press, and shocked the world. The then Commercial Counselor of UK in Chongqing personally went to Changshou to visit Savage, and reported the TGP to London for UK to make investment and supply equipment after the war. This was the first time for TGP to arouse extensive interest of foreign countries in terms of investment and equipment.⁴

Central News Agency, UPI, Washington on December 26, 1945: “An engineer from the Bureau of Reclamation, US will start to design a general plan for the development of Yangtze River basin. Chinese Government intends to build the world’s largest dam and hydropower plant in the Yangtze River basin, irrigate 10 million acres of land, and protect this area from flooding again.”⁵

On February 28, 1946, an article on the *Engineering News-Record* (ENR) of US reported that “China plans an unprecedented dam over the Yangtze River, which integrates power generation, irrigation and shipping.” According to the agreement by and between USBR and the Resource Commission of Nationalist Government, the dam planning was under way.

In September 1947, the News Office of Executive Yuan, Nationalist Government compiled and printed *The Plan on Yangtze Three Gorges Water Conservancy Project* in order to disseminate the Three Gorges hydropower project.

This stage shows that, the earlier survey report and professional articles were disseminated mostly by academic publications. Such industrial communication had a less social effect, and promoted the government policies in a limited way. As the top experts such as Paschal and Savage, who had both celebrity effect and professional competence, pushed the project ideal onto a substantial step in a manner of official document, the important models of “celebrity communication” and “official document communication” were formed for TGP, and allowed the initial envisagement and earlier survey of TGP to enter the stage of actual promotion by the government. The communication of TGP also moved from the project “philosophy communication” to the project “feasibility communication” stage.

III. THE COMMUNICATION OF TGP FROM CONTROVERSIAL ARGUMENTATION TO DECISION MAKING

On October 1st, 1949, the New China was founded. The history of China opened a new chapter, and the construction and communication of TGP also entered a new phase, during which the communication of TGP had been an act of country.

In June 1956, Mao Zedong wrote the poem *Swimming* after swimming Yangtze River in Wuhan, singing a new movement of the construction of TGP. The line “Till a smooth lake rises in the narrow gorges” describes a nice picture of the harnessing Yangtze river for national people. Through the poem, the project image was continuously disseminated among the public by word of mouth. And the poem stimulated the public’s yearning and anticipation for the construction of TGP.

In the first half of 1956, Lin Yishan, Director of Yangtze River Basin Planning Office published an article titled “Discussion of Several Questions about Yangtze River Basin Planning” on the *China Water Resources* journal No.5 and No.6.⁶ In September 1956, Li Rui, the then Director General of General Administration of Hydropower Construction, Ministry of Electric Power Industry, wrote an article titled *Several Questions about Yangtze River Basin Planning*,⁷

1 Zhang Lixian (author): *Memory about Three Gorges in the Period of Republic of China*, China Three Gorges Publishing House, Edition 2017, p27.

2 Yun Zhen, Cao Ruizhi and Song Xishang: *Survey Report on Hydroelectric Generation in the Upper Reaches of Yangtze River* by referring to Zhang Yunchang and Luan Linbin (chief editors): *A Compilation of Historical Literatures for China Three Gorges Project (1948-1949)*, China Three Gorges Publishing House, Edition 2010, p22.

3 Zhang Yunchang and Luan Linbin (chief editors): *A Compilation of Historical Literatures for China Three Gorges Project (1948-1949)*, China Three Gorges Publishing House, Edition 2010, p48-72.

4 Compilation Committee of China Three Gorges Construction Yearbook: *China Three Gorges Construction Yearbook 1994*, Beijing, China Three Gorges Publishing House, 1995, p197.

5 Zhang Lixian (author): *Memory about Three Gorges in the Period of Republic of China*, China Three Gorges Publishing House, Edition 2017, p150.

6 Lin Yishan: *Discussion of Several Questions about Yangtze River Basin Planning*, *China Water Resources* 1956 No. 5 and No.6.

7 Li Rui: *Several Questions about Yangtze River Basin Planning*, *Water Power*, issue of September 1956.

which was demonstrating the original differences of opinion during the construction of TGP. In December 1985, an article titled “CPPCC Suggests to Suspend the Construction of Three Gorges Dam due to Disadvantages Outweighing the Advantages” was published on the Wenhui Daily of Hong Kong.

In June 1986, the Central Government decided that the Ministry of Hydropower would organize experts in different fields to present a new feasibility report for the TGP on the basis of wide solicitation of opinions and in-depth research and argumentation. This time, the argumentation fell into 10 sessions, with 412 experts invited from various industries across the country, who formed 14 expert groups. The TGP argumentation players included the government officials at different levels, experts and scholars from such circles of water conservancy, ecology, social sciences and geology, journalists, networks and media, as well as relocated people of some hydropower stations and the general public. The argumentation featured multiple themes, and the construction of TGP became a mass communication event.

On May 22, 1991, relevant authorities of China convoked the press briefing on TGP dissemination, clarifying the main direction of coverage and dissemination. Later, Li Boning created, directed and personally produced a feature program *Poor Mountains Are Calling*. On June 13, the office of the TGP Review Committee and the Ministry of Water Resources organized heads of 23 press media in the capital of China to have a field visit to the Three Gorges reservoir area and dam site. The Dissemination Section of Yangtze River Office printed the Brief Report on Integrated Utilization and Planning of Yangtze River Basin with a yellow cover and the Yangtze Three Gorges Water Resources Argumentation with a green cover.

Before and after this, major media in the capital and local areas of China opened special columns with their own unique features according to their own readers base and focus of attention. Such targeted column coverage played a great role in deeply disseminating the TGP.⁸

To provide the people with visualized understanding of the scale and function of TGP, 11 units including the Ministry of Water Resources, the Ministry of Energy and the State Scientific and Technological Commission jointly held the Three Gorges Project Exhibition at the Military Museum, which provided a powerful cooperation for the dissemination of TGP, and produced a huge effect.

On April 3, 1992, the Resolution Concerning the Construction of Three Gorges Project was adopted at the 5th Session of the 7th National People’s Congress with 1767 votes for and 177 against, and 664 abstentions.

More directly, the TGP communication in this stage featured controversy in feasibility communication. Controversial argumentation could provide intellectual support the decision makers, eliminate any potential dead zone of cognition, enable the decision makers to obtain various project-related information in a wider range and to a greater extent, promote the project decision making to be reasonable, and contribute to a more democratic result of decision making for the project. Led by the country, the TGP communication during decision making made preparations in advance, fully created an environment of communication, and proactively displayed the necessity and feasibility arguments for the earlier argumentation, and laid a social foundation for eliminating doubts, increasing cognition, and wooing the acknowledgement of a greater majority of common people.

IV. THE COMMUNICATION OF TGP FROM CONSTRUCTION TO OPERATION

On September 27, 1993, China Three Gorges Project Corporation was founded. During the construction of TGP, the communication of TGP was carried out by the company rather than the country.

In October 1994, China Three Gorges Project Corporation established the Press Release Center formally as a core organization guiding and disseminating the TGP. On September 27, 1993, *China Three Gorges Project Newspaper* was formally published, with a supplement of *Three Gorges Weekly* in 1998. On December 14, 1994, the first issue of *China Three Gorges Construction* journal was published before the formal commencement of TGP construction. In 1994, preparations were made for the publication of *China Three Gorges Construction Yearbook*. On May 18, 1995, the Three Gorges Exhibition Center opened formally. In 2002, the website of China Three Gorges Project Corporation was revised to give full play to the Internet dissemination.

To intensify the audience’s positive understanding of TGP construction, China Three Gorges Corporation (CTG) convoked press conferences and planned for important topics at such milestones as the formal commencement of the project construction, interception of river, power generation of generator sets, and successful impoundment, spoke to the outside world through foreign and domestic media, answered questions from the public and set up an open and transparent project image while increasing the TGP’s social influence. At the same time, by relying on Chinese National Committee on Large Dams, a national first-level committee, CTG established the Committee on Public Cognition and Public Relations of Reservoirs and Large Dams, held the Forum on Public Cognition of Reservoirs and Large Dams, inviting experts and scholars to promote and boost the public’s cognition of TGP.

Since TGP’s successful construction and operation, CTG, as the main body of communication, has been further improving the professional degree of news planning, organization and dissemination in the lifecycle, eliminating doubts and

⁸ Cheng Shoutai: Before and After the Adoption of Resolution on Constructing the Three Gorges Project, *J. Hundred Year Tide*, 2010(5).

confusion, and leading the public opinion, with a sound and positive social opinion field formed outside the Group day by day. The TGP communication in this stage promoted acknowledgement with cognition, served the project effectively through the project, and became part of the project construction.

IV. EXPLORATION ON THE REGULARITY OF TGP COMMUNICATION

Looking through the TGP communication history, we can say that the communication act was throughout the project lifecycle, and we had to solve different problems in different communication stages. Today, it is necessary for us to grasp relevant laws in the evolution of history.

Project communication is an important part of the project. Project communication is both a communication act and a project act, running through the project lifecycle. It is an organic component moving forwarding synchronously with the physical project and equally important. Through project communication, it is possible to pass the project philosophy and build the project image, reach a social consensus around the project, and boost the construction of the physical project. Without a better communication, without a better interaction with the public, there will be no good project. The value of project communication is to better highlight the value of project activities.

No dispute, no project. Any proposed significant project will inevitably challenge the human's existing cognition. Different cognition models and paths are always likely to lead to the review of viewpoints, whereupon disputes will occur. However, the "controversial nature" of a project is not always a negative obstacle. Standing on a wider field of view, it is different opinions and different "disputes" that further optimize and improve the project ideal, design and reality. Sufficient opinion expression and effective dispute resolution would allow dissenting opinions to become constructive ones, which enriches the connotation of project communication.

Project image building is the core of project communication. The building of a better project image may lead the project communication toward optimization of project image. From the initial patriotism of "Constructing the Three Gorges for China" to today's "one mark and three examples", TGP is the pillar of a big country. The project image has kept deepening, enriching, and even destructing over time. But the basic laws that the project image leads the project communication will not change.

The aim of project communication is to boost the public's cognition and acknowledge of a project. Project communication is significantly public and interactive. On the one hand, it certainly has an aim of boosting the project construction. On the other hand, it has to feed back the public's cognition, emotion and demands for the project. A mechanism of collecting the public opinions and feedback of public emotion will enable continuous assessment, adjustment and optimization of the construction of physical project, allow the project to be more consistent with the social value and code of ethics, and finally help push the project activities to move forward continuously.

In a new era, a series of national significant projects will also necessarily go beyond the real entities and become a power force that shape the civilization, transform the world and affect the future. In a project era, the harmonious coexistence among the artificial nature, human society and natural ecology can only be achieved through improving the project attainment, following the project laws, and conduct proper project communication. This will drive the high-quality sustainable economic and social development, help the Chinese nation realize a great rejuvenation, and contribute more ideas, experience and solutions of China to the world's development.

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