

## A review of *Science Communication Practice in China*

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**Reviewed Book**

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SCIENCE COMMUNICATION PRACTICE IN CHINA.  
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**Reviewed by**

**Fabien Medvecky**

**Abstract**

*Science Communication Practice in China* is a book that does two things. One very intentional, one less so. Intentionally, it presents the state of science communication and popularisation in China with a strong focus on the historical and policy context this is embedded in. Less (or possibly un-)intentionally, it makes explicit both its assumptions about what science communication should aim for and how it should go about its business, as well as forcing the reader to acknowledge their own assumptions of the role and place of science communication.

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Popularization of science and technology; Public understanding of science and technology; Science education

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Science communication in China, as described in this book, is both very much alike and very much unlike science communication as it is pictured in much of the western-driven academic scholarly literature. This makes for a book that at times is a reassuring read as it is very expected, while at others times, it sits awkwardly with assumptions that challenge how science communication is likely imagined by many readers. I take that as the strength and value of this book.

Indeed, reading this volume forced me to take a step back and re-think my assumptions about science communication. Not that this was the intention or purpose of the book, but simply, if I wanted to truly engage with its content, then I needed to accept that there are some very different aims and motivation for science communication. These differing assumptions and aspirations are not associated with simply how 'advanced' a state's scientific and economic position is; to take that position would be arrogant and inaccurate. Rather, this book makes explicit that some very good, thought-out science communication is imagined, driven by, and enacted according to radically different underlying assumptions

about the role of science in society, the relation between science and state, and the role and purpose of communication in these settings. In the process, it also makes explicit just how strongly readers are influenced by their own assumptions.

In terms of structure, *Science Communication Practice in China* is a fairly standard edited volume. The introduction nicely sets the scene and the tone for book. Specifically stating that “In all the chapters, the authors have made an effort to place the arguments in a historical context and list the impediment that the project faced in a specific area during its implementation”. And indeed, the chapters delivers on this promise. The chapters follow a logical route, first laying the down the foundation of policies and regulations in relation to science popularisation in China, followed by five chapters that focus on science popularisation with specific audiences in mind (the youth, farmers, urban working class, urban communities, and leading cadre respectively). It is worth noting, as can be seen from the chapter titles, that this book is all about science popularisation. Indeed, popularisation is what is fundamentally understood as science communication in this context (more on that below).

With the ‘who’ covered, the volume shifts to the ‘how’. Chapters 7 to 12 tackle various ways in which science popularisation is implemented, covering education and training (chapter 7), science popularisation resources (chapter 8), science communication in the media (chapter 9), infrastructure and museums (chapter 10), the growth of a dedicated workforce (chapter 11), and further and other activities in chapter 12. Before wrapping up, there is a discussion on the evaluating and monitoring of science literacy (and good too; if you’re going to have such a significant apparatus for science popularisation, you’d want to know it’s working). And the volume closes with a return to policy, this time a more detailed look at the *outline of national scheme for scientific literacy*.

Each chapter follows a fairly similar structure, presenting the historical context (as promised) and delivering very much what one might expect given the descriptive titles. But here already, this book challenges our notion of historical context. This is not a bad thing. History can be structured in many ways, and anchored around many points. What struck me was that the history was almost uniquely anchored in policy, political speeches and declarations. This had a two-sided effect. On one hand, it gave coherence and continuity to the book (a rare thing in edited volumes), on the other hand, it made the content very repetitive. But for me, the most interesting thing about this book is that it makes clear my own assumptions about what counts as science communication, what I think are the motivations and aims for science communication, as well as the assumptions most commonly found in scholarly literature around science communication.

In some cases, this book holds on to some very familiar rhetoric and assumptions, for example that techno-scientific innovation is a driver of economic growth. But in many cases, it breaks with other familiar rhetoric and assumptions; society, for example, hardly features. The most prominent players in the communicative landscape of this book are the state and (demographically determined) individuals. So what does that say about how we imagine science communication?

Perhaps the most telling, the volume is almost uniquely about science popularisation despite its title about science communication. Contrast that to the

increasing push for participatory science and two ways communication being promulgated in science communication scholarly literature. The field of science communication as imagined in much of the scholarly literature, let's face it, has been heavily dominated by a certain western, pro-democratic worldview. This comes with underlying assumptions and aspirations about power, the role of knowledge and more besides. Whether we endorse these assumptions and aspirations or not is not the point. The point is that these assumptions have shaped the discourse around what 'counts' as science communication (and sometimes, what counts as 'good' or 'better' science communication).

## Author

Fabien Medvecky is a senior lecturer in science communication at the University of Otago's Department for Science Communication. He has a background in philosophy and economics and works at the intersection between science, society, and values. He has written extensively on ethics in science communication and on responsibility in research and innovation governance. He was president of the Science Communicators' Association of New Zealand between 2015 and 2018.

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