

Neighborhood Communication Studies: Theoretical Innovation in Chinese Communication Research and Its Global Significance

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Abstract: This study systematically examines the theoretical development and academic contributions of Neighborhood Communication Studies (NCS) since its inception in 2013. Through a comprehensive analysis of theoretical literature, empirical research, and institutional archives (2013-2024), this study demonstrates how NCS has evolved into an innovative theoretical framework with distinctive characteristics rooted in Chinese scholarly traditions. The research identifies three major theoretical innovations: First, NCS transcends traditional media-centric approaches by establishing a "tri-body communication" framework that extends the scope of inquiry to all forms of information flow phenomena. Second, it introduces the "four proximities" theoretical construct—geographical, kinship, linguistic, and cultural proximities—offering fresh perspectives for understanding cross-cultural communication. Third, it proposes the "limited effectiveness" principle, revealing the spatial attenuation patterns in communication effects. The study demonstrates how NCS has developed systematic methodological tools through innovations in "T-shaped" (temporal-spatial) and "X-shaped" (cross-disciplinary) research approaches. This theoretical framework is now supported by a comprehensive research infrastructure in China, including digital libraries, databases, and the Spatial Communication Geographic Information System (SCGIS). Empirical evidence suggests that NCS demonstrates significant explanatory power in analyzing regional communication and cross-cultural communication phenomena. The study also addresses the theory's limitations, including challenges in theory-practice translation and international dissemination, while offering recommendations for future research directions. As an evolving theoretical paradigm, NCS contributes new dimensions to the global genealogy of communication theories.

Keywords: Neighborhood Communication Studies, communication theory innovation, regional communication, cross-cultural communication, Chinese communication research

1. Introduction

In contemporary society, characterized by deepening globalization, the communication landscape is undergoing significant transformation. The rapid advancement of digital technologies, shifting geopolitical dynamics, and intensified cross-cultural exchanges have prompted scholars to reassess the applicability of existing theoretical frameworks in communication studies. This context has catalyzed the exploration of new theoretical paradigms.

Traditionally, communication research has predominantly focused on mass communication, with particular emphasis on media-centric processes. However, in the context of globalization, the limitations of this research orientation have become increasingly apparent. Through empirical investigation, Zhou & Wang (2016)^[1] observed phenomena of "paradigm adaptation" and "structural transformation" in communication studies. These manifest in several ways: while media-centric research maintains dominance, other forms of communication remain understudied; the spatial dimension of communication phenomena requires deeper exploration; and the integration of interdisciplinary perspectives needs strengthening. Moreover, in the field of international communication research, the predominance of Western paradigms has motivated scholars to seek alternative theoretical frameworks.

Neighborhood Communication Studies (NCS) emerged as one theoretical endeavor within this academic context. This theoretical framework attempts to forge new explanatory pathways for communication phenomena, grounded in Chinese scholarly practices. As observed by a Canadian

scholar in 2013, the theory "demonstrates characteristics of universality and may offer complementary analytical perspectives for communication research."^[2] Throughout its development, NCS has gradually established a relatively complete knowledge system, theoretical framework, and empirical case studies. Over the past decade, the Center for Neighborhood Communication Studies at Peking University has conducted systematic research on this theory, facilitating relevant academic discourse.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of Neighborhood Communication Studies (NCS) is constructed upon its distinctive foundational propositions and analytical frameworks, establishing a comprehensive theoretical system through systematic innovation. This framework not only demonstrates internal theoretical coherence but also exhibits significant innovative value in communication research paradigms.

2.1 Foundational Propositions

The fundamental proposition of "universal periphery" transcends traditional cognitive boundaries in communication studies, advancing an ontological assertion: everything has a neighborhood, and all existences possess peripheral properties. This proposition encompasses three theoretical dimensions:

First, it breaks through the traditional binary framework that confined communication phenomena to interpersonal and mediated communication, extending the research scope to all processes of information exchange. Second, it establishes peripherality as a fundamental attribute of existence, providing an ontological foundation for understanding communication phenomena. Third, it reveals the universal characteristics of information exchange, asserting that all entities continuously participate in information exchange processes through their peripheral properties.

Regarding core theoretical perspectives, the "limited effectiveness theory" and "proximity compatibility theory" constitute crucial pillars of the framework. The limited effectiveness theory posits the temporal-spatial contingency of communication effects, establishing an inverse relationship between communication effectiveness and both spatial and temporal peripheries. This perspective not only provides significant guidance for international communication practices but also offers theoretical explanations for understanding the attenuation mechanisms of communication effects.

The proximity compatibility theory, from a cultural transmission perspective, elucidates the relationship between communication effects and cultural similarity. The theory suggests that information transmission typically demonstrates higher acceptance rates and communication efficiency in regions characterized by geographical proximity, kinship proximity, linguistic proximity, and cultural proximity. This theoretical perspective provides a systematic explanatory framework for understanding cultural resistance and facilitating factors in cross-cultural communication.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

Building upon the aforementioned foundational propositions, Neighborhood Communication Studies (NCS) has constructed a systematic theoretical framework encompassing ontology, epistemology, and methodology. This framework not only reflects the internal logic of theoretical development but also demonstrates its scholarly value in communication theory innovation.

2.2.1 Ontological Dimension

At the ontological level, the theory's development exhibits an evolutionary trajectory from concrete to abstract, and from specific to general. This evolution reflects three critical stages in theoretical construction:

The initial stage focused on international communication, defining its research object as information flow phenomena within sovereign border regions. This positioning represented a direct response to practical communication issues, particularly a theoretical reflection on the phenomenon of "neglecting the near for the far" in international communication. During this stage, the theory primarily examined information exchange characteristics in border regions, revealing the fundamental properties of neighborhood communication as a distinctive form of communication.

The developmental stage shifted toward systematic exploration of spatial patterns of information diffusion. The theory began examining information flow patterns in space, introducing the conceptual

framework of "spatial diffusion mechanism." This framework not only described information transmission pathways in physical space but also revealed communication dynamics in social space. It demonstrated particular analytical value in explaining cross-cultural communication phenomena.

The maturation stage approached the interactive relationships between adjacent entities from a philosophical perspective. The theory achieved significant theoretical breakthroughs at this stage: First, it conceptualized neighborhood communication as a universal form of existence rather than merely a specific communication phenomenon. Second, it revealed the profound significance of adjacency as an ontological property. Third, it established philosophical foundations for understanding communication phenomena, providing a new paradigm for communication research.

2.2.2 Epistemological Dimension

At the epistemological level, NCS has developed a systematic analytical framework through the construction of several core concepts. These concepts not only describe the surface characteristics of communication phenomena but also reveal their underlying mechanisms:

The "proximity priority principle" stands as the theory's first core epistemological concept. This principle posits that information transmission follows spatial proximity patterns, wherein communication effects typically manifest in spatial sequences from near to far. This principle has garnered substantial empirical support, demonstrating particularly robust explanatory power in regional communication studies.

The "energy attenuation law" constitutes the second major epistemological pillar of the theory. This law characterizes the attenuation patterns of information effects across temporal-spatial dimensions, establishing an inverse relationship between communication intensity and distance. Its applicability extends beyond information transmission in physical space to encompass cultural transmission and meaning-making processes in social space.

The theory further introduces the concept of "adaptive interaction mechanism" to explain the dynamic relationship between communicating entities and their environment. This mechanism emphasizes that communication processes are essentially continuous cycles of adaptation and interaction between subjects and their environments. Through this concept, the theory offers new perspectives for understanding the self-organizing characteristics of communication systems.

These epistemological concepts collectively form an analytical framework for understanding the interactive relationships between communicating subjects and their environments. This framework not only possesses theoretical explanatory power but also provides methodological guidance for practical applications. It demonstrates particular analytical value in studying complex communication phenomena such as cross-cultural communication and regional communication.

The methodological innovation of NCS is primarily manifested in its unique construction of interdisciplinary research paradigms. This innovation, through the systematic integration of "T-shaped" and "X-shaped" research methods, provides a methodological foundation for multi-dimensional analysis of communication phenomena. The introduction of these two methods not only enriches communication research tools but, more importantly, pioneers new pathways for interdisciplinary research.

2.3 Analytical Framework

Building upon these foundational propositions, NCS has established a multi-layered analytical framework.

The temporal-spatial framework positions communication phenomena within dual dimensions of time and space. In the spatial dimension, it emphasizes directionality and hierarchical characteristics of communication, introducing the concept of "proximity gradient" to reveal how information transmission intensity varies with spatial distance. In the temporal dimension, it focuses on the evolutionary characteristics of communication processes, proposing a "temporal phases" theory that divides communication processes into three stages: initial diffusion, sustained transmission, and attenuated adaptation.

The interactive system framework emphasizes the dynamic interplay between communicating entities and their environment. Through two core concepts—"adaptive mechanism" and "feedback loop"—it explicates the self-organizing characteristics of communication systems. This framework offers novel perspectives for understanding cultural adaptation and communication effects, particularly

in cross-cultural communication contexts.

2.4 Analytical Models

The theory proposes two models of significant theoretical value. The first is the "tri-body communication framework," which systematically categorizes communication phenomena into three dimensions: human body, physical object, and media. This model transcends the limitations of traditional communication studies' excessive focus on mediated communication, constructing a more comprehensive analytical framework. Each dimension possesses distinct communication characteristics and patterns, while maintaining complex interactive relationships among the three dimensions.

The second is the "four patterns theory," which identifies four fundamental modes of information transmission:

- Spillover: characterizing centrifugal diffusion from core to periphery
- Involution: describing intensive information circulation within specific regions
- Diffusion: representing gradual information dissemination
- Enclave: explaining spatially discontinuous, leap-frog transmission

These four patterns not only describe different types of communication phenomena but, more importantly, reveal their underlying mechanisms and influencing factors.

3. Research Methods and Support Systems

3.1 Major Research Methods and Their Innovations

3.1.1 The T-shaped Research Method

The T-shaped research method embodies an innovative approach to cross-dimensional analysis in temporal and spatial dimensions. This method examines communication phenomena across horizontal (spatial) and vertical (temporal) dimensions, constructing a three-dimensional understanding of communication phenomena.

In the horizontal spatial dimension, the method particularly focuses on regional communication characteristics and patterns. For instance, through examining communication phenomena across different Chinese border regions, it reveals regional characteristics of communication activities in varying geographical spaces. Specific case studies, such as analyses of border port communication functions, demonstrate how spatial proximity influences communication effectiveness.

In the vertical temporal dimension, the method employs diachronic analysis to reveal evolutionary patterns of communication phenomena. This is exemplified by eleven master's and doctoral dissertations from Peking University, covering historical periods from the Qin-Han dynasties through the Wei-Jin-Northern-Southern dynasties to the Tang-Song-Yuan-Ming-Qing dynasties, as well as examining specific cultural elements' transmission trajectories. Notable examples include studies of traditional Chinese medicine, Hanfu (traditional Chinese clothing), and Hui-style architecture. Particularly significant are studies of cultural transmission, such as research on traditional festival culture, Mazu culture, and yellow wine culture, which reveal temporal characteristics of cultural transmission through historical evolution analysis.

This dual-dimensional analytical framework demonstrates unique advantages in research. Taking the transmission of Chinese traditional cultural elements as an example, researchers can simultaneously examine geographical distribution patterns in the spatial dimension (such as the transmission paths of celadon pottery and Chinese painting) and historical evolution processes in the temporal dimension (from ancient to modern transmission trajectories).

3.1.2 The X-shaped Research Method

The X-shaped research method expands communication research dimensions through integrating multidisciplinary perspectives. This interdisciplinary approach demonstrates unique analytical value across multiple domains:

In cultural communication research, scholars combine communication theory with ethnology and art studies to explore cross-border transmission mechanisms of traditional culture. For example,

analyse of traditional martial arts novels and related media productions and costume culture in regions surrounding China reveal the crucial role of cultural proximity in cross-cultural communication.

From sociological and anthropological perspectives, scholars have examined communication mechanisms in social phenomena such as cross-border marriages and ethnic identity. These studies integrate sociological group interaction theories with communication analytical frameworks, deepening understanding of cross-cultural communication.

In other disciplines, scholars have combined medical and epidemiological knowledge in public health communication research, studying information transmission mechanisms in epidemic prevention and control. Chen and Wu (2023)^[3] integrated geography and transportation engineering methods to analyze cross-border railway communication functions, exploring interactions between physical and communication spaces.

3.2 Research Support Systems

To facilitate theoretical research advancement, the Center for Neighborhood Communication Studies at Peking University has established a comprehensive research support infrastructure. March 2023 marked a significant breakthrough in this support system with the completion of three core research platforms: the Digital Library for Neighborhood Communication Studies, the Neighborhood Communication Database, and the Spatial Communication Geographic Information System (SCGIS). These platforms provide comprehensive data support for research endeavors.

These platforms integrate diverse resources including historical manuscripts, cartographic materials, and research reports, achieving digitalization and standardization of materials. More significantly, they establish spatial analysis tools for communication phenomena research, substantially enhancing research scientific rigor and precision.

Notably, the research team actively explores innovative applications of artificial intelligence in communication studies. Through integrating Large Language Models into research systems and developing intelligent teaching and research support tools, the team is progressively establishing a new paradigm for AI-assisted communication research.

4. Theoretical Development and School Building

Over the past decade, Neighborhood Communication Studies (NCS) has demonstrated systematic theoretical construction and institutionalized development trajectories. This process manifests primarily across three core dimensions: institutional network establishment, educational system development, and international platform construction.

In terms of institutional development, the Center for Neighborhood Communication Studies at Peking University, established in March 2024, serves as the core research institution coordinating relevant research activities nationwide. The theoretical institutional framework has been further expanded through four specialized research institutions established in coastal and border regions, providing crucial support for empirical research on cross-border communication phenomena. The establishment of the Chinese Neighborhood Communication Studies Consortium in November 2023, comprising 69 member institutions (including key universities, research institutes, and media organizations), marked a new phase in theoretical development.

In the educational dimension, the theory has achieved deepened development through systematic curriculum design and talent cultivation programs. Since 2019, Peking University has offered doctoral-level courses in NCS theory and applications, which by 2023 had evolved into university-wide elective courses. This educational framework has been adopted by multiple higher education institutions, particularly those in border regions, cultivating a cohort of professional researchers in the field.

Regarding international exchange, theoretical dissemination has progressed simultaneously through academic and public communication channels. The research team has presented and discussed the theory at eight international forums, establishing academic exchanges with institutions including the University of Westminster, University of Sussex, University of Sydney, University of Helsinki, and McGill University. To promote global academic dialogue, the research center in collaboration with the China Internet Information Center (CIIC), has established a daily-updated English-language Facebook page titled "China & Neighbors."^[4], demonstrating significant influence in international

communication research and practice.

This institutionalization process reflects the systematic integration of research, education, and practical applications in theoretical construction. By combining theoretical construction with institutional development, NCS provides a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding contemporary communication phenomena. This systematic approach to theoretical construction and institutional development offers valuable insights for the evolution of global communication theories. Under the joint promotion of institutional construction, educational system development, and international platform building, the theory has achieved transformation from academic conception to practical application, demonstrating characteristics of institutionalized development.

This developmental stage not only reflects the theory's maturation but, more importantly, ensures research continuity and systematicity through institutionalized construction. The establishment of institutional networks provides organizational guarantee for theoretical research, educational system development ensures sustainable cultivation of research teams, and international platform construction creates conditions for global theoretical dialogue. This multi-dimensional institutionalized development model provides a new paradigm for communication theory construction.

5. Conclusion and Future Research Directions

This study systematically examines the developmental trajectory, theoretical framework, and practical applications of Neighborhood Communication Studies (NCS). Research findings indicate that the theory not only constructs a distinctive research paradigm but also achieves methodological innovation through its "T-shaped" and "X-shaped" research approaches. The progressively established knowledge system, theoretical framework, discourse system, and empirical case database provide new analytical tools and cognitive pathways for communication research. This theoretical innovation offers significant implications for advancing communication research paradigms.

Regarding institutional development, the theory has received systematic organizational support. The establishment of the Center for Neighborhood Communication Studies at Peking University and the formation of the Chinese Neighborhood Communication Studies Consortium, comprising 69 institutions, have laid a solid foundation for the theory's continuous development. Particularly noteworthy is the implementation of modernized research platforms, including the Digital Library, Database, and Spatial Communication Geographic Information System (SCGIS), which achieve technological innovation in research methods and provide robust support for theoretical research.

Looking forward, NCS development faces three key tasks:

First, strengthening international articulation. This encompasses improving English-language academic platform construction, promoting in-depth dialogue with international academia, and exploring accurate conceptual translation across linguistic contexts. These efforts will facilitate broader recognition of the theory within the international academic community.

Second, deepening cross-cultural studies. Through testing the theory's explanatory power across different cultural contexts, further validation and refinement of the theoretical framework can be achieved. This cross-cultural research perspective will enhance the theory's universality and application value.

Finally, advancing theory-practice integration. This involves developing more specific research tools and application schemes, exploring the theory's practical value in various communication scenarios. Through positive interaction between theory and practice, continuous theoretical refinement and innovation can be promoted.

The advancement of these developmental directions will contribute to the further maturation and refinement of NCS, providing more constructive theoretical guidance for understanding contemporary global communication phenomena. Meanwhile, the developmental experience of this theory offers valuable reference for indigenous innovation in communication theory.

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