

Project Description: Rhetoric of Cultural Revolution: Impacts on Chinese Thought and Culture

I am applying for a 2001-2002 NEH fellowship for my book project tentatively entitled Rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution: Its Symbolic Appropriation and Impacts on Chinese culture and political communication. My application will be divided into four parts: description of the proposed study, significance and contribution of the proposed study, methodology and materials for the proposed study, and finally, current status and plans for the proposed study.

I. Description of the Study

This project is primarily a rhetorical analysis of political texts created for and in response to the political and social contexts in communist China. Its purpose is to help the reader understand contemporary Chinese rhetoric, culture, and communication by relating vertically to Chinese rhetorical tradition and horizontally to totalitarian rhetoric in recent human history. In particular, the study will examine the themes and forms of rhetoric during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) that are rooted in Chinese rhetorical tradition and share close resemblance to the totalitarian rhetoric practiced by Nazi Germany and Stalin's Russia. I will argue in the book that Mao Zedong and his followers appropriated the themes and forms of rhetoric from these two sources to meet their own purposes of mass mobilization and political/ideological control. My argument will be supported by a careful rhetorical analysis of various political discourse propagated during the Cultural Revolution in shaping and remolding Chinese thought and culture. The book will also discuss how the rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution has affected Chinese thought and culture and influenced contemporary Chinese discursive practice.

The book will consist of three parts. Part One will include a review of rhetorical features and practices in ancient China; a review of the characteristics of totalitarian rhetoric evident in Nazi Germany and Stalin's Russia, and a brief history of the Chinese Communist propaganda prior to the Cultural Revolution. Part Two will exemplify the symbolic appropriation of classical Chinese rhetoric and totalitarian rhetoric through a rhetorical analysis of political discourse propagated during the Cultural Revolution. Rhetorical texts to be examined are Mao's "little red book," political slogans, revolutionary songs and operas, loyalty dances, and big-character posters. In this part, rhetorical themes and styles will be identified and connections will be made between classical and contemporary Chinese rhetorics in their linguistic forms and persuasive effects.

Also in this part, a comparison will be made between the rhetor of the Cultural Revolution and that of Nazi Germany and Stalin's Russia on the rhetorical effects of ideological transformation, political control, and dehumanization. Part Three will be a discussion of the impacts of political rhetoric during the Cultural Revolution on contemporary Chinese thought, culture, use of language, and social relations as demonstrated in political rhetoric used by the current regime, the government-controlled media, the new generation of intellectuals, and political dissidents. (see attached chapter outline)

The book is intended for rhetorical scholars who are interested in political rhetoric in general and interested in the connection between cultural/ideological forces and political rhetoric, the impact of political rhetoric on social change and human behavior in particular. It should also appeal to those Sinologists who are interested in contemporary Chinese culture and communication patterns.

II. Significance and Contribution of the Study

My motivation to write a book on the rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution comes from my concern for contemporary Chinese rhetorical practices used by the current regime in mass communication, foreign relationship, and international negotiation, the communication patterns of some young Chinese intellectuals, and political dissidents whose use of rhetoric often fails to persuade their audience and often times causes cross-cultural misunderstandings. With the increasing contacts between China and the U. S. in the areas of trade, business, education, and politics, the need to understand contemporary Chinese culture and communication practiced by one-fifth of humans cannot be overly stressed. On the other hand, efforts need to be made in China to rebuild the Chinese rhetorical culture that should be based on the Chinese humanistic tradition and Western democratic principles. I believe I can contribute to the scholarship on political rhetoric and to the study of the rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution through my family experience, my training in rhetoric, my previous research, and my personal perspective that none of the current books on the topic has offered.

Current books devoted to the topic of the Chinese Cultural Revolution mostly fall into two categories: one is the historical account of the causes, factions, and major events of the movement and the other group is the personal memoirs of the movement. The former group of scholarship is mostly produced by Western scholars who did not personally experience the Cultural Revolution, but nevertheless apply Western theories of social movement and human psychology to the Chinese context. The latter group of works is produced by native Chinese who have personally experienced the Cultural Revolution and offer their individual accounts of suffering and family tragedies. Only two books examined rhetorical elements of the movement. One is written by Shaorong Human entitled To Rebel is Justified: A Rhetorical Study of China's Cultural Revolution Movement 1966-1969 published by University Press of American in 1996. The book uses a Western theoretical model of social change, in particular William Brown's theory of social intervention to analyze how the rhetoric of rebellion was justified. The book did not make connection to traditional Chinese rhetoric, nor did it make any comparison with the rhetorical features of other totalitarian societies. Further, the book did not explicate the impacts of such rhetoric on Chinese culture and communication. The other book, The Rhetoric of Propaganda: A Tagmemic Analysis of Selected Documents of the Cultural Revolution in China, 1966-1976 published by Peter Lang in 1994 written by Xiao-ming Yang, only analyzed six editorials carried by major Chinese newspapers. The book lacks sufficient scope and depth to render a sophisticated, contextual, and cultural/ideological understanding of contemporary Chinese rhetoric.

III. Methodology, Motive and Linguistic Competence

The primary data for the study will be selected rhetorical texts produced in ancient China; rhetorical texts and speeches written by contemporary Chinese political leaders such as Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Jiang Zeming and their followers in domestic and international settings, documents and rhetorical artifacts produced during and after the Cultural Revolution. Other data will be interviews of those who experienced the Cultural Revolution, and personal observations. The purpose of interviews is to collect memories of Chinese people's rhetorical experience during the Cultural Revolution and discover their reflections on how such use of rhetoric influenced their thought, social behavior, and perception of political reality. Some secondary sources produced by both Chinese and Western scholars related to the topic will also be used.

I decided to embark on a book project on this topic mainly for four reasons: First, my family, especially my parents were both persecuted and suffered physically and psychologically during the Cultural Revolution. I myself witnessed how the use of rhetoric mobilized first the young people, then the whole country to the level of Mao cultism, the dehumanization of "class enemy," and the destruction of traditional Chinese cultural values and norms. As a participant and victim in the rhetorical experience of the Cultural Revolution at a young age (I was 12 when the Cultural Revolution began), I am familiar with all the rhetorical themes and forms propagated at the time and deeply sense their impact on my thoughts and actions and those people around me. Second, I have received training in rhetoric and rhetorical criticism in the U. S. and hold a Ph.D in Rhetoric and Communication from the University of Oregon. This training enables me to engage in an intellectual analysis of this rhetorical phenomenon and allows me to examine the forces of rhetoric both at the cultural specific level and universal level. Thirdly, I have a good command of classical Chinese rhetoric as demonstrated in my book Rhetoric in Ancient China, Fifth to Third Century B. C. E. published by the University of South Carolina Press in 1998. (The book won the 1999 National Speech Association Winans-Wichlens Award.) My cultural and academic background allows me to describe, interpret, and evaluate the rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution with a historical and cultural perspective and rhetorical sensitivity. Moreover, being a native speaker of the Chinese language allows me to interpret rhetorical texts in their original Chinese language and to conduct interviews to Chinese nationals in Chinese.

IV. The Status and Plans for the Study

In the past three years, I have been doing research on contemporary Chinese political discourse. My works on the topic have been accepted for publication respectively by refereed journals such as Discourse & Society, Intercultural Communication Studies, and as a book chapter for Chinese Perspectives on Rhetorical and Communication Theory edited by Ray Heisey. I have presented three papers on the rhetorical analysis Chinese political discourse at the National Communication Association Annual Convention. These works laid a solid foundation for my book project. I am planning to go to China in the summer of 2000 to collect more primary texts and conduct interviews. My research and preparation for the book will be ready by summer 2001 after which I will start the writing stage.

I need three sources of support to complete the writing of this book. First, I need a publisher who is interested in publishing this book. Fortunately, the University of South Carolina Press has expressed great interest in publishing the book. In his reply to the acquisition manager of the University of South Carolina Press, Professor Tom Benson from Penn State University, the chief editor of rhetoric series, said, "I think a book on this subject would certainly be appropriate for the series, and that Lucy (my American nick name) is in a good position to write it . . . My own view would be to strongly encourage the project." (see attached e-mail from the publisher). Though I have not signed an official book contract yet, I am strongly encouraged by the prospect and I am confident a book contract will be forthcoming. My second source of support is release time. As a faculty member at DePaul University, I am eligible for a year-long academic leave between 2001-2002 academic year with one-half of my annual salary. This leads to the third source of support, the external support for this one-academic year to allow me to finish the book project.

My project meets the goals and purposes of the NEH Fellowship for College Teachers and Independent Scholars. Your granting of the fellowship will provide the support and assistance necessary to complete my study and make a significant contribution to the understanding of rhetorical practices and contemporary Chinese culture.