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## **Mao Zedong and Chinese Rhetoric. A Brief Outline of Sources and Inspirations**

### **Abstract**

This paper aims to sketch out key rhetorical motifs produced by the Chinese propaganda machine under Mao Zedong (1893–1976). In particular, the dominant themes of the 1950s and 1960s are discussed through the prism of both communist ideology and links with Chinese tradition and culture. To achieve this goal, key features of the Chinese language, a brief outline of distinctive features of Chinese rhetoric correlated with European tradition as well as the principles of Maoism as an ideology are presented. In the main section of this paper, an overview of five selected rhetorical themes, based on their popularity in everyday propaganda, is discussed. The final section contains research conclusions. One of the distinctive features of Maoist rhetoric is the fact that both ancient Chinese traditions and the authoritarian language of communist ideology were inherently interlinked. This paper is intended to better understand this unique connection and to gain an insight into the specific nature of the Maoist perspective on rhetoric and communication.

*Keywords:* Mao Zedong, Chinese rhetoric, Maoism, Chinese language, Chinese propaganda

### **Introduction**

The subject matter of this paper is focused on Maoist rhetoric, its specific nature and sources of inspiration. Mao's school of thought was undoubtedly embedded in the ideology of Marxism–Leninism while the language of class struggle was typically used on many occasions. However, the specific nature of Maoism lies in its ability to combine both communist and traditional Chinese themes in order to create a new approach. This research perspective rests upon a rhetorical analysis of collected excerpts of speeches and slogans considering the context in which they were delivered in order to elicit the multilayered structure of Maoist rhetoric. The research material is taken from officially published English versions of Mao's speeches available online, as well as from the excerpts quoted by multiple authors and available historical sources.

This article is divided into seven sections. In the introduction, the general outline and structure of the paper are discussed. Next, attention is focused on two specific features of the Chinese language, namely its pronunciation and writing system. In the following section, a brief presentation of the specific nature of Chinese rhetoric is discussed. Directly afterwards, selected types of Maoist rhetorical themes and their sources of inspiration are outlined. The intention of this paper is to show that both communist and traditional Chinese references were present in Maoist rhetoric. Finally, a conclusion is reached based on the research while a list of references and sources is added.

### On the specific nature of Chinese language

There is a long tradition of using characters to note down words in China (Morton & Lewis [2005] 2007: 21–24). In the ancient era, there was a large number of Chinese characters and reaching perfection in the field was a great challenge. In contemporary Chinese, there are four main variants of the language, namely: *pǔtōnguà* (common speech) prevails in mainland China; *guóyǔ* (national language) dominates in Taiwan; *huáyǔ* (Chinese language) basically used by Chinese minorities in Southeast Asia; and *hànyǔ* (language of the Han people) which is the broadest term and describes two separate phenomena: either standard Chinese or all the available variations of Chinese. Moreover, there are two transcriptions of Chinese words into the Roman alphabet (Fenby [2008] 2009: 11). The first was developed by Thomas Francis Wade (1818–1895) and Herbert Allan Giles (1845–1935), appearing in 1892 and is commonly known as the Wade–Giles transcription, while the second was introduced by the Committee for the Reform of the Chinese Written Language in 1956 as *hànyǔ pīnyīn*. In this paper, all Chinese terms are written using *hànyǔ* system.

There are two main differences between Chinese and European languages in regard to pronunciation and writing. Spoken Chinese consists of four tones. Different tones of the same syllable are used to mark completely different words (Gluchowski & Kaśków 2016: 17). To illustrate, when the syllable *mā* is pronounced in the first tone, it means “mother”; as *má* (second tone)—“hemp”; as *mǎ* (third tone)—“horse” and as *mà* (fourth tone)—“to swear”. What is more, Chinese characters also consist of about 200 smaller particles, known as radicals (Sussman 1994: 43). Although the meaning is specified, when seeing a character one unintentionally also evokes the meaning of these smaller elements. One example is the character 好 (*hǎo* = good). It consists of two different characters: 女 (*nǚ* = woman) and 子 (*zǐ* = child). Whenever a Chinese speaker sees the word “good”, the picture of a mother and a child, an image which is the Chinese idea of well-being, is evoked in the mind. This shows that even though in Chinese the tradition of public speaking is not present in European meaning of the world (Morton & Lewis [2005] 2007: 24), Chinese rhetoric can also be particularly revealed in both texts and the interpretation of tones and characters. In the following section, the idea of Chinese rhetoric is explored at a deeper level.

### On rhetoric in China

The traditional approach to rhetoric identifies the term with ancient Greece and the art of persuasive speaking. However, this phenomenon was not only present in the European tradition—being rhetorical

is a universal concept and, therefore, various types of rhetoric can also be identified in every speech community. In light of the above-mentioned observation and referring to the Far East, it is justified to say that: "(...) the Chinese had early reached an impressive level of sophistication in what is readily recognized as rhetorical thinking" (Liu 2004: 147). A large number of rhetorical devices have been uncovered in ancient Chinese texts, including references to authority, wisdom, examples from history, anecdotes, metaphors, proverbs, along with ethical, emotional and social appeals (Lu 1997: 7). This list proves the view concerning the similarities between rhetoric in different civilizations.

The rules of Chinese rhetoric are, undoubtedly, different from those in the European tradition. In terms of methodology, the term *xiūcí* is commonly used which is literally translated as "language care" (Kraus 2014: 243). As Liu explains (2004: 144): "[n]othing can be accomplished if the speech does not sound agreeable". This view reflects the main idea of Chinese rhetorical tradition, namely the careful selection of words used in a speech in order that it is possible to esthetically enchant the audience. In other words, at the centre of Chinese rhetoric is a desire to embellish rather than convince. The term *shuì*, which is translated as "persuasion", was coined by Hǎn Fēi (280-233 BC), an ancient philosopher and politician (Lu 1997: 7). Interestingly, persuasion is a side-effect—not a direct result of a speech—while the beauty of language may convince listeners to follow the advice expressed. This "secret influence" of a speaker is understood in the context of a time when Chinese rhetoric flourished, namely the Warring States Period (475–221 BC). Particular Chinese rulers were ambitious and impulsive. Therefore, giving any advice was a hazardous task. A typical image of that period is depicted by the following statement:

"A Chinese proverb (...) says, 'Being close to a king is like being close to a tiger,' meaning that in serving a king, one must carefully weight situations and measure his or her words for survival. Gaining the ruler's favor, the persuader would obtain power and wealth (...). When out of favor, the persuader would jeopardize his or her life, loss or credentials for the future, or live in poverty." (Wu 2016: 13)

The above-presented observations allow one to identify the key differences between European and Chinese rhetoric. Ancient Greek rhetoric was fundamentally based on arguments and aimed at convincing or dominating the other speaker and/or the listeners. Persuasion was the main objective. The beauty of an oration was a tool to reach the supreme aim. On the contrary, in China "(...) dialog (...) is characterized by an incessant effort to maintain consensus among the participants and their subordination to the commonly recognized authorities, to respect their hierarchy, to suppress the contradictory stances" (Kraus 2014: 243). Traditional rules, derived from Confucianism and Buddhism, exerted great influence on the Chinese art of speaking. Beauty seems to be dominant over power, while the language is subtle and full of allusions in order to convince the audience, but not to create an impression of victory or to impose the speaker's will. Perhaps the shortest conclusion referring to differences between the two rhetorical traditions may be expressed in the observation that whereas European rhetoric is focused on the speaker's victory, the Chinese school of speaking primarily appreciates harmony and balance.

### **Mao Zedong and his political concepts**

Mao Zedong is one of the most recognizable and influential political thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His ideas were popularized in many countries and by multiple political groups. It is worth noticing that Mao began

his political career early having involvement with the anti-imperialist May Fourth Movement (1919), the nationalist Kuomintang of China (1924), and, finally, as a leader of the Communist Party of China (Roux [2006] 2009: 138). Although during Japanese invasion Chinese communists and nationalists did not attack each other, after the end of the Second World War civil war and internal unrest broke out. Supported by the Soviet Union, the Chinese Workers' and Peasants' Red Army effectively took control of mainland China and on 1<sup>st</sup> October 1949 the People's Republic of China was established. A great transformation of the country was initiated.

The dominant ideology of that era was Maoism—defined as a Chinese movement derived from Marxism–Leninism which was based on ideas developed by Mao Zedong and his interpretation of Communism within Chinese frameworks (Cabestan [2006] 2009: 139). One unique characteristic of Maoism is that while Marxism–Leninism places the emphasis on workers as the vanguard of revolution, Mao's thought gives primacy to peasants as key supporters of social transformation (Buckley–Ebert [1996] 2002: 287–288). Maoism is, hence, strongly correlated with the Chinese mentality and folk tradition. An interesting observation is noted by Lu (1997: 18): “[a]lthough Mao and his Communist Party made great effort to eradicate the influence of Chinese traditional culture (...) it was necessary for Mao and his comrades to employ and appropriate these classical Chinese rhetorical forms in order to achieve their purposes.” Particular examples of Maoist references to classical rhetorical themes are presented in the following section.

Further features of Maoism are mainly a reflection of communist ideology including the brutality of life, mass purges, massive political events and indoctrination conducted through different channels. The last two are particularly interesting from a linguistic perspective as language was a key tool in order to shape new mentality while rhetoric played a prominent role in this process. What is more, ubiquitous propaganda excessively used language to transmit ideological content and to build a new attitude. The strategy discussed above proved to be an excellent one during communist China's great public campaigns including the Hundred Flowers Campaign (*bǎihuā qífàng*), addressed to intellectuals; the Great Leap Forward (*dà yuèjìn*) aimed at developing high-scale industrialization; and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (*wúchǎnjiējí wénhuàdàgémìng*), focused on removing any form of tradition. Some samples of rhetoric used during these campaigns are discussed in the following section.

### The scope of Maoist rhetoric

When Mao proclaimed the birth of the People's Republic of China in 1949, he initiated almost three decades of unprecedented changes in order to introduce and strengthen new ideology. Language was an important weapon in this battle, maybe even more than physical force, and played a crucial role in Mao's dream to create a new Chinese society. The spectrum of propaganda tools was broad. However, it is safe to say, as Liu (2004: 184) has done, that there were two main strategies, namely direct borrowings from the totalitarian practices of the Soviet Union, as well as those from Chinese imperial traditions. The influence of communist ideology in the sphere of Maoist rhetoric is obvious due to their similarities and common origin based on Marxism–Leninism. An illustration of this is the practice of publicly developed declarations of self-criticism. This psychological tool, which was one of the commonly used “persuasive methods” (Morton & Lewis [2005] 2007: 239), was focused on the strictly ideological use of language

which proved to be incredibly effective against individuals as well as selected groups within society. Surprisingly, classical Chinese culture also exerted its influence on Maoism, an ideology which officially claimed to be against ancient rules. The exemplification of this is the cult of personality, a practice developed to an extreme degree in traditional Chinese history, where an emperor and his family were believed to have a special “Mandate of Heaven” (*tiānmìng*). In the case of communist China, Mao was identified as such a deified person and, consequently, blind faith in his policies was promoted. Rhetoric was one of the key tools to support and develop this practice, an aspect which is more broadly discussed below.

The two above-mentioned factors, namely communist and Chinese traditional influences, were the cornerstone of Maoist rhetoric, creating its paradoxical and unique form. Communist Chinese rhetoric is regarded as extremely important in order to promote the values of Maoism. A brief analysis of language used during massive political campaigns, allows one to distinguish five themes fundamental for the rhetorical style of ideological struggle. According to Liu (2004: 184) this group includes: (1) reference to moral values; (2) mythmaking; (3) conspiracy theories; (4) dehumanization; as well as (5) radicalization. A brief outline of these key subjects and selected examples of their use are presented below.

**Moral values** are a popular theme in rhetoric. In the case of Chinese tradition, commonly accepted values included *inter alia* loyalty, hard work, bravery and respect for others (Buckley–Ebrey [1996] 2002: 42–43). Mao’s rhetoric points to the vicious attempts of his opponents, namely domestic exploiters and supporters of Western powers, to wreck “a new deal” based on communist values. Those two groups of enemies were perceived as immoral, eager to restore barbarian exploitation of the people:

“[t]he Chinese have always been a great, courageous and industrious nation; it is only in modern times that they have fallen behind. And that was due entirely to oppression and exploitation by foreign imperialism and domestic reactionary governments (...). From now on our nation will belong to the community of the peace-loving and freedom-loving nations of the world and work courageously and industriously to foster its own civilization and well-being and at the same time to promote world peace and freedom. Ours will no longer be a nation subject to insult and humiliation. We have stood up. Our revolution has won the sympathy and acclaim of the people of all countries. We have friends all over the world.” (Mao Zedong 1949a)

On another occasion, Mao observed:

“[y]ou have many good qualities and have rendered great service, but you must always remember not to become conceited. You are respected by all, and quite rightly, but this easily leads to conceit. If you become conceited, if you are not modest and cease to exert yourselves, and if you do not respect others, do not respect the cadres and the masses, then you will cease to be heroes and models. There have been such people in the past, and I hope you will not follow their example.” (Mao Zedong 1945)

These excerpts show that rhetorical reference to moral values always arouses strong emotions. National pride and placing emphasis on the greatness of the Chinese people are overwhelmingly dominant in the above excerpts (hyperbole). Simultaneously, the fundamental role of moral values for the Chinese people in order to create a peaceful policy and maintain freedom is contrasted with clandestine actions taken by imperialists (contrast). There is also a warning (apostrophe) against going down the devious route offered by the traitors of revolutionary ideas. Although the excerpts contain communist ideology,

they are—interestingly—also based on traditional values (courage, industriousness, pacifism) which are highly respected by ordinary people in China.

**Mythmaking** is a popular rhetorical theme. One of the types of myths revolves around a leader. It is enough to mention the ideological position of Joseph Stalin (1878–1953) in the Soviet Union. Similarly, in traditional Chinese society the place of a leader was always respected. In Maoist rhetoric, both factors contributed to this. Surprisingly, Mao in his early years as a communist leader was perceived as a humble and devoted activist. Such an image is depicted by the American correspondent Edgar Snow (1905–1972) in his famous book: *Red Star Over China* (1937: 83). As time went on, the situation changed dramatically. In 1972, the same author wrote about his impressions on arriving from China after the Cultural Revolution: “[g]iant portraits of him [Mao Zedong—PG] hung in the streets, busts were in every chamber, his books and photographs were everywhere on display” (Snow 1972: 68). The Chinese leader was at the centre of public admiration and both types of rhetoric: spoken and visual contributed to promote Mao’s cult of personality. As it has been observed: “(...) Mao was mythologized as a living god, a savor of China. Mao Zedong’s Thought was revered as the guiding principle of every aspect of life. Millions of Chinese participated in the use of symbols and symbolic practices characterized by a strong religious flavor” (Lu 2004: 186). Not surprisingly, in Chinese official media Mao was compared (metonym, metaphor) to “(...) the Red Sun in people’s hearts” (Fenby [2008] 2009: 599). Overwhelming admiration and devotion to the leader were definitely one of the key themes of Maoist rhetoric whose origins were in both communist and Chinese imperial traditions.

Another theme present in Maoist propaganda was focused on **revealing conspiracy theories**. The specific nature of communist discourse was to emphasize the permanent threat allegedly created by Western reactionaries. Similar motifs were present in Maoist rhetoric. Interestingly, Mao showed how to fight and win against foreign powers, being full of hope while saying:

“[a]ll reactionaries are paper tigers. In appearance, the reactionaries are terrifying, but in reality, they are not so powerful. From a long-term point of view, it is not the reactionaries but the people who are powerful.” (Mao Zedong 1946)

The inevitable end of efforts to destroy communism in China was proclaimed by Mao during many occasions, for example when he stated:

“[I]fting a rock only to drop it on one’s own feet’ is a Chinese folk saying to describe the behavior of certain fools. The reactionaries in all countries are fools of this kind. In the final analysis, their persecution of the revolutionary people only serves to accelerate the people’s revolutions on a broader and more intense scale. Did not the persecution of the revolutionary people by the tsar of Russia and by Chiang Kai-shek perform this function in the great Russian and Chinese revolutions?” (Mao Zedong 1957)

Giving his advice for future, Chairman Mao concluded:

“[j]ust because we have won victory, we must never relax our vigilance against the frenzied plots for revenge by the imperialists and their running dogs. Whoever relaxes vigilance will disarm himself politically and land himself in a passive position.” (Mao Zedong 1949b)

All the above examples show how futile—according to the speaker—attempts to destroy Chinese revolution were. An oxymoron (“paper tigers”) and contrast (“terrifying”—“not so powerful”) are used to illustrate the illusion of power held by Western countries. However, the appeal to maintain vigilance is



also mentioned (apostrophe) while the permanent threat is highlighted not only by evoking imperialists, but also by animalization used to describe their supporters (animal metaphor). It is worth noticing that in Chinese history many groups accentuated the threat from outside, for example, during the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901) when an atmosphere of being under siege was heightened (Esherick 1987: 323). In the case discussed here, one can again uncover a reference to communist ideology, as well as to Chinese political traditions from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

One more theme of Maoist rhetoric was focused on **dehumanization**. In particular, references to animals were made. Typical language in the media, as well as during political meetings, invoked animal metaphors, selecting those with negative connotations in Chinese culture. The range of insults (animalization) included “cows”, “snakes”, “monsters and demons”, “parasites”, “vermin”, “pigs”, “dogs”, and even “vampires” (Lu 2004: 190). Considering the fact that Chinese people are perceived as a collective nation, such an accumulation of metaphors indicates the decline of traditional bonds. It may suggest that a new, brutal ideology seemed to dominate in mutual relations. Paradoxically, to be fully aware of the negative meaning encoded in such metaphors, it is necessary to plunge into Chinese culture. This proves that Maoist rhetoric seems to combine the aggressive language of class struggle with commonly understood cultural traditions.

This observation leads to another type of Maoist rhetoric—focused on the **radicalization of language**. One example is revealed in Mao’s early work:

“[a] revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another.” (Mao Zedong 1927)

This is a manifesto of brutality. A comparison with commonly known trivial activities (contrast) intensifies one’s use of surprise and influence on the audience. Although Maoism had always used and developed sharp linguistic forms, by the time of the Cultural Revolution the rhetoric of hatred had reached its peak. One of the slogans coined by Mao claimed: “(...) all the truths of Marxism can be summed up in one sentence: to rebel is justified” (Huang 1996: 75). On the one hand, this showed the acceptance of violence as a necessary element in order to introduce changes, while on the other hand, the result was observed at a cultural level. Radicalism had also reference to language in which old customs and oral traditions were eradicated. As Lu (2004: 193) has concluded: “[t]he rhetorical landscape of the Cultural Revolution lends support to the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis that language influences or determines thought and affects human perception of reality.” The language of political campaigns showed how emotionally charged words can influence physical relations causing brutality, aggression and violence. However, the Cultural Revolution was not an unprecedented example of brutality in Chinese history. A similar campaign was also launched by the first Emperor of China—Qin Shi Huang (259–210 BC)—who cruelly ordered the eradication of all pre-imperial traditions (Morton & Lewis [2005] 2007: 53–54). This is another reference to show that Maoism evoked a link between communist cruelty and past examples from Chinese history.

All the rhetorical themes discussed above show how powerful and efficient Maoism was as an ideology of social enslavement. People completely immersed in daily propaganda could not resist it, and, in the majority, followed the aggressive path of the campaign launched, or became passive. To sum up, it is important to identify the sources of this great success of Maoist rhetoric. According to Powers (1997:

155), there were several practices commonly used to escalate tension, including the cult of the leader, creating divisions between the people and groups categorized according to ideologically created criteria, as well as the overwhelming presence of messages, posters and the other verbal and non-verbal reminders of ideological slogans which seemed to replace critical thinking. When political regression, the lack of stability, uncertainty and the degradation of administrative, social and cultural institutions are taken into consideration, a complete image of destruction appears. On the one hand, this picture shows the great devastating power of unpredictable Maoist rhetoric, while on the other hand, it displays the great impact of words which can completely reorganize even the longest-lasting and seemingly most stable institutions of human life.

### Conclusion

In this paper the focus is on the analysis of the selected themes and main sources of inspiration in Maoist rhetoric. The Chinese approach to public speaking is different from that in the European tradition and appreciates, primarily, embellishments and, secondly, persuasion. However, "(...) Chinese philosophers valued speech as much as the ancient Greeks, and (...) they were eloquent speakers and rhetoricians" (Lu 1997: 30). The specific nature of the Chinese view on rhetoric is discussed in this paper in relation to the Maoist approach. It is justified to state that in his political campaigns, Mao Zedong combined both the communist ideology borrowed from the Soviet Union and Chinese traditions with references to historic events. At first, this may seem to be a surprising conclusion, as Maoism is identified with a powerful ideology opposed to any forms of tradition. After consideration, however, it seems to be beyond doubt that the fundamental role in the Maoist revolution was given to Chinese peasants, namely the people in whom Chinese customs, traditions and old practices were deeply embedded. On the one hand, the ideological language of Maoism proclaimed a new world based on communist ideology and was propelled by a Chinese interpretation of Marxism-Leninism. On the other hand, the delivered speeches and coined slogans referred to well-known and easily recognized images from traditional Chinese culture. This is a significant feature of Maoist propaganda in which new forms of ideological transmission were combined with old ideas and well-known facts from the past to make the message both more understandable and stirring for its Chinese audience.

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