

1 The Rhetorical Construction of Chinese Political Reality

China's radical economic reform program, often referred to as "China's Second Revolution," has, by the mid-1990s, become fully entrenched into Chinese society. Stock markets, entrepreneurship, and private enterprise have been reintroduced with a vengeance, after nearly half a century of absence. These economic transformations have so reinvigorated the national economy that they have raised fears among some of the rise of regional conflict. Perhaps more important to social and cultural scholars, however, is that the reforms have raised difficult and unsettling questions as to the legacy of the Communist movement, especially the Maoist past.

With the dissolution of the former Soviet bloc, the world has witnessed the breathtaking speed at which nations can fundamentally alter the economic and ideological frameworks upon which their political systems exist, and so in contrast the reform movement itself is not particularly remarkable. What makes the Chinese reform movement noteworthy is that market-oriented reforms have been introduced in a society that still loudly proclaims its allegiance to Marxism, albeit Marxism with Chinese characteristics. While Russia has recanted from Marxism-Leninism and is actively seeking to build a capitalistic society, China retains its allegiance to the socialist principles on which it is founded, with the ultimate goal of achieving the perfect Communist state.

Although the reform program provides fertile ground for analysis from many fields, including political science, economics, and history; one of the more neglected aspects is the radical change in the way the Chinese think about the reform program. The individual components of the reform agenda, including private enterprise, stock markets, and the rise of entrepreneurship, had all been repudiated in previous decades as not only illegal and immoral, but also as anachronistic. How could it be that all of these are now accepted as not only benign, but also necessary? The early legitimacy of the Communist Party and the Communist revolution itself rested in large part on an explicit belief that China's future lie in communism. Both China's declared identity and orthodoxy stood in stark contrast to the freewheeling nature of the reforms. The question, simply stated, is thus: How does one introduce a stock market and call it Marxism?

This question is more than academic, but of immense importance for all who seek to understand recent Chinese history, and indeed, social change in general. Observers of China during the 1989 Tiananmen Square movement were puzzled by the question of why such popular protests could arise during the period of greatest economic growth and increasing riches. In many ways, this paradox undercuts many of our favorite theories for explaining social change. If we see social change as resulting from economic dissatisfaction, in particular, then we are left at a loss to explain the tremendous upheaval during the Tiananmen demonstrations, when the entire society was benefiting from increasing economic opportunities. Moreover, if social change is conceived as resulting from social and political stagnation, inhibiting creativity, then we are left with no explanation of the demonstrations, arising as they did at a time of unprecedented individual freedom and opportunity in China.

Perhaps it is better to conceive of social change as arising from the mythical and ideological dimensions that lie at the heart of national identity. When we analyze it in this way, the introduction of the reform program has clearly introduced a legitimation crisis of epic proportions into contemporary Chinese politics, at both an ideological and institutional level. Ideologically, the nature of the reforms strikes at the heart of traditional Marxism, which posits the evolutionary disappearance of private property. Many of the reforms are not only capitalistic, but are directly contradictory to the policies of Mao Zedong, on whom the entire Chinese political structure rested for decades. The legitimation struggles of the West-

ern world seem to pale in comparison to the drastic implications of such a clear reversal of what was once clearly taught as China's destiny and glory. As one analyst has remarked, the reforms mean nothing less than "the decline of Communism in China."¹

This ideological crisis takes on its epic dimensions because of the great importance of ideology in Chinese political life. As I will demonstrate in Chapter 2, Chinese political and social life for centuries has relied on ideology for stability. Whereas specific political structures might rise and fall, a common ideological system has been a paramount concern for Chinese rulers. The undoing of what was considered a stable ideological anchor threatens to undo the entirety of Chinese politics and society.

This crisis has significant ideological dimensions, but also profound institutional implications. Economist Peter Lichtenstein argues that economic reform involves a tremendous upheaval of social stability, amounting to "the destruction, the creation, and the preservation of institutions."² The legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party, for example, rests on a certain vision of China's past and future, a vision that has been largely dismantled by the processes of reform. Deng Xiaoping and others, though, have attempted to maintain the primacy of the CCP while instituting a whole new way of life, complete with a different ideological anchor for society. Many of the institutions that have governed Chinese life for decades have become increasingly irrelevant and anachronistic.

This legitimation crisis is the reason for the explosion of political activity throughout China during the spring and summer of 1989. For a brief moment, the citizens and leaders of China were faced with the clear ideological and institutional tensions introduced by the reforms. The Tiananmen movement exposed the tensions, but did not resolve them. The resolution of those tensions must be a rhetorical resolution, and any rhetorical resolution will be years in the making. Moreover, this legitimation crisis is the direct concern of this book, and remains one of the foremost problems facing China's current and future leadership. How can one of the world's largest economies completely reverse itself, while remaining under the control of the very Party that had for decades pursued the opposite course?

The crisis surrounding the economic reforms differs from crises in the West not only in its proportion, but also in its resolution. Specifically, I argue that the political discourse legitimating

the reforms serves a different function than similar discourse in Western nations. Political discourse in the People's Republic works in a trickle-down fashion, in that it is carefully designed by the leadership to have the greatest possible persuasive impact on the populace. Western political discourse, especially in recent years, has been designed not to persuade the populace, but to appease them. Whereas Western discourse is contractual, with little theoretical dimensions, Chinese discourse is eminently ideological and theoretical, and carefully designed so as to seem unchanging and universal.

The implications of this study for understanding issues surrounding legitimation are numerous. We will attempt to address these more fully in Chapter 2, but here we will briefly comment that this study illustrates a legitimation crisis caused to a large extent by the government's own policies and actions. In other words, it is the Chinese government and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in particular that has begun the process of its own unraveling. This raises an important question: How can a government respond to external necessities while maintaining an internally consistent ideology in a nation that prizes ideological stability? A second important issue is this: Can a political party or institution renegotiate its political legitimacy? In large part, this is what the CCP has attempted; to renegotiate the basis of its legitimacy, from a Party designed to protect peasants from the rich, and in fact, to eliminate the rich, to a party designed to make sure everybody gets rich. We will explore the ideological difficulties inherent in this transformation and develop some conclusions that we can make regarding the rhetoric of legitimation.

I will attempt to analyze this fundamental crisis as well as its tentative resolution through a rhetorical analysis of the discourses generated by the Party congresses since the onset of the reform movement. We are reminded by Yan Jiaqi, an influential Chinese dissident and political theorist, that "the rules and methods by which men gain power are of extreme significance in human affairs."³ Significant, indeed, since the increasing power of the State due to technological and organizational advances means that these rules and methods are used to legitimate social, economic, and political systems that dominate human life to an extent unimaginable in previous generations. Moreover, the rules and methods by which rulers gain power are increasingly seen as not merely organizational and political, but rhetorical. By turning our attention exclusively to the rhetorical reconstruction of the dominant political ideology, we

can see clearly the “ways and methods” by which an entire national mindset has been refashioned. It is to our own peril that we ignore the rhetorical means of power.

I seek in this volume to contribute to the small but growing cadre of works that attempt to understand Chinese culture, society, and politics from within a paradigm of communication. I argue that culture and all its attendant systems are functions of and embedded within human symbolic activity.⁴ Politics, in this view, is not so much due to the manipulation of raw military or economic power or sociological factors as much as it is due to the symbolic constructions that surround it.

One of the earliest scholars to view Chinese political life from this perspective was Godwin Chu. Chu envisioned communication as an active force in social and structural change and established the role of communication in establishing the reality of political and social life:

Communication is not . . . merely . . . a stimulus or . . . a change agent that brings about effects in terms of specific individual response. Rather, communication is . . . the basic social process, encompassing an intricate entirety of verbal stimulus and response.⁵

Further, an understanding of communicative practices is vital for understanding political socialization and China’s political culture. Chu argued that Chinese political communication differs from Western political discourse in that it is explicitly normative and value-oriented, oriented toward changing the values of the audience. The Chinese government, according to Chu, views channels of communication primarily as a means of explicitly shaping political consciousness, rather than as a means for disseminating information. If this is so, we gain some initial clues for understanding the role of political discourse in resolving rhetorical tensions. Primarily, we see that political discourse functions to teach, and in one sense, to bind China’s populace to a certain ideology.

I seek to go beyond Chu’s initial steps in that Chu does not focus on what has been traditionally identified as *rhetoric*. Rather, he sees interpersonal and small group communication as the most dynamic element of political socialization in China. Policy documents and proclamations from Beijing, in Chu’s view, serve a secondary role in providing a context for interpersonal pressure and

commitments. Purposeful communication from the elites to the populace serves only as a tool for the more important business of interpersonal persuasion.

In contrast, I argue that the legitimation of the reforms rests on the ability of the Party to create a compelling narrative that mandates the reforms, an argument consistent both with recent Chinese history and with the ideological constraints that exist within the nation. Harry Harding asserts that "the reforms have been the result of extraordinary political engineering by a coalition of reform-minded leaders led by Deng Xiaoping."⁶ This political engineering involves an intensive *rhetorical* battle to change the Chinese national identity and to define the ruling ideology, a battle that has been carried out in newspapers, editorials, books, proclamations, speeches, and Party meetings.

It is clear that the role of communication in governmental legitimation is vital in that social reality is established through symbolic means. In an insightful analysis of the role of communication in defining Chinese public consciousness, Michael Schoenhals argues that the role of formalized power language is often ignored by Western scholars, at their own peril. In particular, Schoenhals argues that linguistic (rhetorical) formulations, well familiar to all who study China, lie at the heart of the national political process.⁷

Schoenhals argues that political language is formalized language, and that power relationships are embedded in the ways in which political formulations are phrased. Although the Chinese government controls the media and other outlets of expression, by far the most controlling aspect of political thought lies not in institutions such as the official press, but rather in the formalized use of language. The strict linguistic formulations that emerge from Chinese politics, formulations such as "Long live Chairman Mao," "The Four Modernizations," "Oppose Spiritual Pollution," and "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics," serve to circumscribe the reality that can be described, and policies are launched or scuttled in large part by the ways in which they can be expressed. Schoenhals argues that:

The subject of the use and abuse of formulations is subject to constant strategic deliberation at the highest levels of the CCP. In some cases the process of policy making is indistinguishable from the process of policy formulation. Policy implementation at all levels is affected by concerns with questions like

How should this be put? What happens if we put it with that? Will putting it like this put people off? What do they mean by putting it differently? Can we really let them put it like that?⁸

These questions illustrate the intense rhetorical analysis to which policies are exposed before they are made public. Although all political systems rely on careful formulation of political language, the Chinese case is unique because of the ways in which the use of the language lends itself to easy, rigid formulations, formulations that in turn mandate and proscribe political theory. In the view of the CCP, inappropriate formulations lead to "ideological confusion," and thus inappropriate behavior. For example, in the late 1970s, party theorists declared that there was no reality behind the slogan "capitalist-roader," and thus the slogan was declared unscientific and therefore prohibited. To allow the slogan to continue to have currency would have implied that the theoretical foundation for the slogan had validity, a theoretical implication that would have denied Deng Xiaoping political legitimacy.

Chinese propagandists are acutely aware of the persuasive and emotional impact of wordplay, and dub those most powerful formulations as "scientific." The phrase might have either one clear meaning, or a multitude of meanings, providing for a variety of subtle changes. In order to meet the needs Party propagandists, periodically updated annotated lists of scientific formulations are maintained by agencies such as the People's Liberation Army. In this scheme, some ideas are never able to enter the public consciousness, since there are no politically acceptable words to convey them:

The use of 'incorrect,' 'inappropriate,' and 'unscientific' formulations is not condoned, and those who insist upon using such formulations will be denied access to wider audiences. Only by replicating or mimicking the formal qualities of the discourse of the state can critics of the state make their voices heard . . . the CCP achieves far more with far less by manipulating the form rather than the content of the discourse.⁹

In scientific formulations, form and content are one. If every reference must be to what *is*, no reference can be made to what *could be*. China's leaders have been intimately involved in the prescription of form and have felt free to label formalistic elements of all forms of literature and art as either "revolutionary" or "counterrev-

olutionary." For example, after the Revolution of 1949, Mao Zedong himself attacked the use of the traditional "eight-legged essay" as antirevolutionary.¹⁰ Only a few top leaders have the right to introduce new formulations without approval from an even higher leader. Thus, the government controls the introduction of new ideas. By controlling the form, the leadership controls ideological innovation itself.

Chinese politics, then, rests on a "language game" that must be recognized to understand political change and stasis.¹¹ Kenneth Burke clearly articulated the view that all human activity is constituted and constrained by language. Language use is inherently rhetorical, in that rhetoric is "rooted in an essential function of language itself, . . . the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols."¹²

The process of naming, or identifying, a situation, is crucial in the later development of any human action. In naming a situation, reality is defined for those who take part in the language, and a motive for dealing with the situation is proposed. Political discourse is itself a form of "secular prayer," in that it serves a corrective function; making drastic policies seem wholly acceptable, and inconsequential policies seem wholly radical. All political documents are substantive, in that they create a world, and, as such, a set of motives.¹³ In other words, constitutions really do *constitute* reality, since the language we use to describe a reality becomes that very reality. Murray Edelman carries this one step further when he argues that a political constitution, a linguistic construction, "legitimizes in morally unquestionable postulates the predatory use of such bargaining weapons as groups possess . . . [and] fixes as socially unquestionable fact the primacy of law and of a social order."¹⁴ The language of a constitution (or any other political touchstone) establishes as inevitable, and morally unquestionable, the power relationships within a society.

Language defines not only political life, but also economics. Donald McCloskey argues that the field of economics, as well as any other human symbolic endeavor, is fruitfully understood under the rubric of rhetoric, or the study of how people persuade.¹⁵ For the economic reforms to be implemented and maintained, radical changes had to occur in the *discourse* of the nation. A new image of China had to be rhetorically imprinted into the national consciousness, and the ruling orthodoxy had to be altered so as to allow the radical economic changes. This rhetorical process has altered the

structural and economic relationships and values upon which "New China" has been based.

If we are correct in assuming that language constrains social and political life to this extent (and I think we are), then the subtle transformation of China's constitution and dominant rhetorical artifacts (in the documents of the Party congresses) demolished and replaced the existing order of values and relationships. In establishing a new set of economic policies and regulations, the rhetoric of the reform movement encourages a new national identity, a new governing ideology, and a new imperial order, one every bit as powerful, if not more so, than the system of control inherited from the Emperors.

With this perspective in mind, then, the economic reforms taking place under Deng's sponsorship lose the sense of inevitability that often characterizes their discussion. Rather, we recognize that the reforms are taking place against a background of internal debate within the nation as to the proper ideological basis for modernization. As the very basis for the reforms relies on the rhetorical construction of a sound ideological basis, understanding the rhetoric of the reform movement is the proper place from which to begin any further analysis of China's economic and political life.

In order to illustrate the rhetorical campaign to legitimate the reforms, I will focus on the documents arising from the Party congresses held since the death of Mao Zedong. The addresses from these congresses are considered to be key predictors of future governmental policy. Although the reforms have been introduced, nurtured, and in large part legitimated through other forms of communication, particularly the mass media, it is the Party congresses that not only set the immediate political agendas, but serve a symbolic role in establishing the legitimacy of policy. Whereas newspaper editorials and articles in journals reflect ideological battles, the Party congresses reveal the winners. In addition, a new Central Committee is typically chosen at these meetings, to serve until the next scheduled Congress, and revisions are made to the national Constitution. As the Central Committee is the ruling group of the nation, the makeup of its membership is important for the direction of the nation. The particular outcome of Party congresses is always determined during work conferences held beforehand, and the actual Congress serves to disseminate the wishes and perspectives of the top leadership.

The formal or keynote address from each Party Congress is often delivered by one of the top leaders of the Party, normally the

secretary general, and serves as the centerpiece of the Congress documents. As the Congress is taken to be the key statement of the nation's goals and priorities for the next several years, in mandatory small group political meetings, each of these speeches becomes the center of attention for study and application.

We should note that because of the role of the Party leadership in predetermining the outcome of these congresses, the speeches of individual leaders do not necessarily serve as reliable indicators of that individual's thought. Instead, the speeches most often reflect the current consensus within the Party hierarchy, since each speech is usually derived from a process of ghostwriting and the input of the Party on all major speeches. Individual speeches, then, reflect the "will of the Party." Each speech is addressed to multiple audiences and reflects the input of a variety of influences, such as competing political factions.¹⁶

The rhetorical significance of the speeches extends far beyond the immediate setting in which they are delivered. Especially during the mid-1980s, when the status of the reforms was still somewhat uncertain, the entire nation of China was organized into a vast network of small groups that served as channels of communication. These small groups, organized around neighborhoods or work units, would meet regularly (weekly or twice-weekly, normally) and in the group context, discuss the editorials and Party documents sent down from the central leadership. Although both the regularity and the importance of these meetings have decreased, they have served as the contexts in which much of the legitimation rhetoric of the government has been disseminated throughout the society throughout the period of the reforms.

In this study, we will examine four major meetings that have taken place since Mao's death; the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Party Congress (1978) in 1978, the Twelfth Party Congress in 1982, the Thirteenth Party Congress in 1987, and the Fourteenth Party Congress in 1992. These meetings redefined China's leadership and focus, and provided the direction for the coming decades. The speeches to be examined include those of Deng Xiaoping, Hu Yaobang, Zhao Ziyang, and Jiang Zemin, thus representing not only China's key reformers (Deng, Hu, and Zhao), but also Jiang, who has not been a key element in the reform faction, but did replace Zhao as Party secretary after the Tiananmen Square movement of 1989. Through a careful analysis of these documents, it is possible to chart the rhetorical trajectory of the reform program.

Each speech will be analyzed to determine the ways in which the document attempts to accommodate the existing orthodoxy, while ideologically legitimating the reforms. In addition to these speeches, I will examine the 1981 *Resolution on CPC History* in order to illustrate its contribution to the demystification of Mao Zedong and the ideological grounding of Deng Xiaoping's role as the new leader. Each of these documents has served a key role in progressively implementing a new understanding of ideological orthodoxy and the nature of socialism. When their influence is considered collectively, it becomes clear the documents have radically reshaped the Chinese ideological consciousness, and provided the justification for reforms that would have been considered unthinkable at the time of Mao's death.

A brief discussion as to the translation of the relevant documents is in order. It goes without saying that any serious discussion of rhetorical artifacts must be grounded in an understanding of the primary language, rather than in translation. I fully agree with this principle, and in response will make note of any variation between the Chinese formulations and English translations that affect the understanding of the concept. However, given the widespread use and importance of the key concepts that I will examine, it is not necessary constantly to refer to primary language materials. Rather, in order to guarantee the accessibility of my conclusions to a broader audience, I will refer to English language versions of the primary sources.

There are two primary sources of documents for this study; materials published by the Foreign Languages Press in Beijing and translations from the United States Department of State Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS). For the purposes of this study, these two sources will provide adequate translations. I make this judgment based on the following reasons. First, I will be focusing on the official government discourse surrounding the economic reforms. Thus, I am most interested in examining not what was said, but what was *officially* said. It is to be expected that official publications from Beijing have been subjected to intense official scrutiny and revision after the original speech was delivered; however, the principles of translation and editing are the same as those in place for the original release of any document in Chinese. As Lieberthal and Dickson have remarked, "Scholars should not forget that government officials, whether American or Chinese, are doing the selection. . . . What is included or excluded reflects government

interests and concerns."¹⁷ In other words, any distortion that occurs in the translation occurs according to the principles geared toward the government's interest. Since it is just as important to find precise foreign translations as it is to come up with precise words for domestic usage, it can be assumed that the translation conveys exactly what China's top leaders want it to convey. In this sense, it is to our advantage to examine documents that have been heavily scrutinized and edited, because my goal is to demonstrate the official explanation for the reforms.

For the sake of convenience, I occasionally refer to FBIS materials rather than official Foreign Language Press documents, since many of the older documents are not readily accessible. I do not believe that this will significantly affect my analysis, in that the Chinese media attempts to adhere to stock formulations and phrases when referring to important policies. Since the FBIS translations are based on official media reports, we can expect there to be little variance from the same general principles stated above. The linguistic formulations and phrases are well known and identified by most analysts, and the FBIS translations can be reasonably trusted to translate documents according to the principles of language precision and specificity. Indeed, it is normally only Taiwanese analysts who choose to use different English translations to refer to certain stock phrases, such as the "primary stage of socialism," which some Taiwanese occasionally translate as the "first stage of socialism."

The organizing principle in this book is chronological, in that I will turn in each chapter to demonstrate how each stage of the reform process is marked by a theoretical emphasis that allows for further latitude in the implementation of reforms. The subsequent chapters will be arranged as follows:

Chapter 2: *The Mythical and Ideological Dimensions of Political Legitimacy.* This chapter examines the role of rhetoric in establishing political legitimacy, and especially the rhetorical bases of legitimacy in China. I will discuss the role of the Mandate of Heaven and virtue in the classical Confucian concept of governmental legitimacy, and demonstrate the continuity of these concepts with contemporary Chinese political thought. Specifically, I will argue that legitimacy is based on the national myth, which offers a narrative account of the Party's origin, and ideological orthodoxy, which serves as an analogous concept to the Confucian understanding of virtue.

Chapter 3: *The Crisis of Legitimation and the Demystification of Mao Zedong.* This chapter traces the legitimation crisis that arose

in the People's Republic after the death of Mao Zedong and the attempts at legitimation by Hua Guofeng and Deng Xiaoping. I will explain the strategic ways in which the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Party Congress and Twelfth Party Congress established Deng's legitimacy and set the stage for the later reform policies. I argue that Party meetings grounded the reforms in Mao's own instructions and the policies of the early Party, and that the 1981 release of the *Resolution on CPC History* served to delegitimize Mao Zedong and thus to loosen the ideological constraints on the reforms.

Chapter 4: The Thirteenth Party Congress and the Primary Stage of Socialism. This chapter reviews the theoretical impasse the reformers reached in the mid-1980s in establishing a market-oriented society. I argue that the reformers sought to legitimate the reform agenda by redefining the primary commitment to socialism within the society during the Thirteenth Party Congress in presenting the doctrine of the "primary stage of socialism."

Chapter 5: The Fourteenth Party Congress: Transition to a "Socialist Market Economy." This chapter documents the tensions that arose in the wake of the reforms in regard to the increased democratic expectations and the increasing prosperity of the nation, as well as the conservative campaign against "peaceful evolution." I argue that Deng Xiaoping was able to take a more aggressive role in seeking to undermine opponents of the reforms due to the successful legitimation of the reforms, and that the documents of the Fourteenth Party Congress refocused China's national agenda by introducing the concept of a "Socialist Market Economy."

Chapter 6: Chinese Political Discourse and the Rhetoric of Legitimacy. This chapter summarizes the progression of the strategy of legitimation, and the role of rhetorical action in establishing the ideological orthodoxy of the reform agenda. I will reexamine the utility of a rhetorical perspective on political legitimation, and summarize what is revealed about human communication generally by this analysis.