

## THE IMPACT OF THE CHINESE MIND AND LANGUAGE ON THE PROCESS OF MODERNIZATION IN CHINA\*

D. Ray Heisey, Emeritus  
Kent State University\*\*

### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper presentation is to report research on characteristics of the Chinese mind and language that contribute to the Chinese process of adaptation as a means of constructing reality in the cultural context. The Chinese emphasis on relational and holistic thinking, on ambiguous and flexible language, and on political accommodation to meet national goals of modernization, is described as a way to social and cultural construction in the reform process. Using the Chinese concept of "building socialism with Chinese characteristics" is an intellectual, linguistic, and rhetorical strategy for taking China into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### Introduction

Modernization in any country is a process of change. It can be threatening to traditional culture, it requires creative thinking, and it depends upon many factors in the society as to whether or not it will be successful. China is no exception. The 20<sup>th</sup> century in China has seen many revolutions, changes, reform experiments, and upheavals. So far, China has managed to bring about at least economic reform in ways that have helped many in the population to make the transition with success, thanks to a government that continues to make stability a preeminent value in that transition.

How can an enduring traditional society and with a socialist government move toward a market economy and a process of modernization in an apparently successful development effort? Individuals can now own property, begin their own businesses, and get rich. Joint ventures with foreign companies in the West are common place and are helping to boost the economy, threatening many of the state enterprises.

China historically has a reputation for being able to absorb its conquering enemies and allow its own valued traditions to continue in spite of new leaders and values that have been imposed upon the people. The Chinese people are adaptable and their values have been inclusive, enabling them to change slowly and absorb deeply the relevant features of the new. "Since adopting the policy of reformation



and opening up to the outside world," says Guan (1998), "china's absorption and learning from Western culture are the most important factors in accelerating its speedy and consistent economic growth" (p. 29).

The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the research that focuses on characteristics of the Chinese mind and language, particularly, that contribute to this cultural characteristic of making new things, "Chinese." I will look first at the Chinese thinking pattern in its relational and holistic dimensions, then, at the language pattern that discloses its ambiguous and flexible nature, and, finally, at the political accommodation process that shows how the Chinese government currently in power adapts itself to meet the goals of modernization.

### The Thinking Pattern that Adapts

Taiping Chen (1999), a business man from Beijing, currently in the U.S., describes the difference in the way Chinese approach a problem in joint ventures as being "oriented toward sentiment, harmony, balance, stability, and relationships, compared to the Western way of using laws, reason, and strong logic" (p. 5). The Chinese thinking process centers on relational rather than legalistic concerns.

Professor Shijie Guan of Peking University's Department of International and Intercultural Communication argues that the Chinese people prefer relational thinking while Westerners prefer logical thinking, where the governing concepts are Aristotelian (Guan, 1997). For example, Chinese literature is replete with analogies and images where the emphasis was placed on "the hidden rules through similarity and relativity" (p.3), not on "abstract concepts" (p. 5). He gives the example of Ren, an important Confucian concept that is "mentioned 105 times in the Chinese classical work, *Analects of Confucius* but Confucians did not define what Ren actually meant" (p. 5). Another example is the late development of the rational and logical study of grammar in China, which did not become an independent subject until as recently as 1898 (p. 5).

One of China's most notable leaders in the 20th century was Sun Yat-Sen. He argued that "the essential spirit of Chinese culture" was "humanity and love," saying that Confucius taught the traditional emphasis was for rulers to rule with "humanity," not laws, like in the West (Xiao, 1999, p. 14).

Professor Guan also stresses that the Chinese emphasize direct experiences and the expression of their ideas through images and that they learn by analogy and association, not by logical reasoning, as in the West. Discovery of "deep" laws comes through studying similarities and relationships among different things (p. 7). This principle may be seen in the way the Chinese characters are put together. The use of the ideogram is important in the cognitive development of the Chinese mind. Guan continues:

Because Chinese characters require a balance between the left and right hemisphere, they urge the development of the right cerebrum which is



responsible for imaginative thinking. Therefore, it is logically sound that those who use Chinese characters are advanced in imagery thinking, while alphabetic writings require left hemisphere superiority, which urges the development of the left hemisphere. Because the left hemisphere is responsible for logical thinking, so it is that those who use alphabetic writings are advanced in logical thinking. (Guan, 1997, p. 18)

In addition to relational thinking and using images, Guan argues that the Chinese mind prefers a holistic pattern, or a type of synthesis, rather than the American inclination toward analytical thinking. He makes the following comparison:

Synthesis means viewing an object in a way of combining in thought each part of the object as a whole with unification of its different natures, aspects and relations. Analysis means viewing an object in a way of decomposing in thought the whole object into each individual component, or differentiating its natures, aspects and relations from each other. (pp. 19, 20)

To illustrate this distinction, Guan uses the example of Chinese medicine, where the human body is considered "an organic whole made up of various parts" which are explained only by "the interacting relationships among the five internal organs" (p. 20).

Traditional Chinese medicine thus points to an organic, holistic relationship among the functions of the body elements, not disparate elements that can be treated without reference to any other function.

Peking Opera is another example of Chinese synthesis where the arts of singing, reciting, dancing, fighting are all integrated together to make one art form. "There is no synthesized genre of drama," says Guan, "like Peking Opera in the West" (p. 21). Even in such mundane things like descriptions of time and place reflect the holistic thinking pattern of the Chinese mind. The Chinese use the year-month-hour-minute sequence while the West uses the opposite, minute-hour-day-month-year. And in addressing letters, the Chinese order is country-province-city-street-person, while the West uses the order of person-street-city-state-country.

At the political rhetoric level, a recent example of using the holistic perspective in thinking is President Jiang's position on human rights that China chooses to interpret human rights in a comprehensive, more holistic manner by including rising above the poverty level, the right to eat, and the right to have a job, not just political freedom (Heisey, 1999, p. 9).

Related to the holistic thinking pattern is the Chinese emphasis on social harmony rather than the Western emphasis on dichotomy and individuality. Guan points to the traditional interaction of Yin and Yang, as two opposites that are seen as complementary forces that cannot be separated. Americans, Guan reminds us,



like to see everything in opposites, such as right-wrong, good-bad, war-peace, work-play, while Chinese are not so quick to draw lines between dualities, but see reality in more harmonious relationships. Ng's study (1999) of the influence of Confucianism on Chinese society concludes that Chinese are expected to live "in harmony with others" and to hold an ethic that "has great concern for relationships among people" (p. 13).

### The Language Pattern that Adapts

Since thinking takes place in the context of language, the two are inseparable. But there are some aspects of the way Chinese use language that can be discussed on their own terms. Reference has already been made to how Chinese characters are composed of ideographic symbols that depict specific objects with concrete images, as opposed to abstract concepts. Linguistic scholars point to one of the most important characteristics of the Chinese language as its ambiguity. Professor Jiazheng Wu, of the International Relations Institute in Beijing, argues in her book, *The Rhetorical Art of the Modern Chinese Language* (1992), that there are a number of linguistic characteristics of the Chinese language that make it especially persuasive. One of these is its "ambiguity and indirectness" that characterizes "one of the most rhetorical and unique dimensions of the Chinese language. The Chinese people delight in (and are very experienced in) communicating subtle meanings and below-the-surface interpretations of characters and concepts" (Heisey, 1998, p. 331).

One of China's leading linguists, Professor Yihong Gao (1998) at Peking University, citing one of her colleagues, argues that the basic difference between Chinese and Western modes of thinking and in language is the way sentences are constructed.

Sentence constituents are largely governed [in the West] by the inflectional of the verb, which denote tense, aspect, person, number, case, gender, etc.... In China, such a structural focus is absent. Instead, sentences are formed from "flowing phrase-chunks".... (p. 40)

While Western language requires "form agreement," based upon formal rules and objective denotation, Chinese emphasizes "meaning agreement" and "context and the reader's subjective perception," (p. 40) thus producing ambiguity.

To use language that is ambiguous allows the speaker or writer to adapt in numerous ways to the listener or reader, leaving much to the imagination. Whereas clarity and specificity are valued in the West in communicative style, the Chinese language allows tones and context to communicate meanings. In Hall's description, Chinese is a high context culture that depends upon a high degree of personal and



cultural context for language meaning instead of verbal denotation. Two Chinese sayings that have high currency are the socialist slogan of, "Getting the truth from facts," and the recent Hong Kong reference of "One country, two systems." These illustrate well how language that seems so clear is really very ambiguous as to its actual meaning.

Related to ambiguity in the Chinese language is another characteristic--flexibility. Linchuan Qiu (forthcoming) has written that Deng Xiaoping, one of China's most influential contemporary leaders, who recently died, but whose impact lives on, was known as a communist leader "with his unusual flexibility in political rhetoric" (p. 9). Qiu continues:

The Dengist rhetoric in building socialism with Chinese characteristics is widely known as pragmatism, a label that reveals as well as conceals. By calling it a pragmatic discourse, we do highlight the hallmark of Dengism on the one hand, whereas this conventional characterization fails to reflect its discursive tensions and richness of interpretive potentials on the other...Strategic pragmatism therefore does not refer to any specific solution of any realistic problem. Rather, it should be construed as a platform with tremendously broad space for juxtaposition, disposition and evolvment of various narratives and policy claims. (p. 4)

We see in this description a claim for flexible language that serves the goal of political pragmatism. The leader can adapt to the meaning and the audience needed at the moment. Of course, most political communication is adaptive and flexible, even in the West. But it is commonly accepted that the Chinese language has a unique richness of ambiguity and flexibility because of the four levels of tones that are required for communicating the meanings and the voluminous meanings that a given character can have, depending upon those tones and the way the character is used in the sentence. When these linguistic characteristics are functioning at the level of political rhetoric, it is all the more true that the language pattern of the Chinese is one that adapts easily and thus is conducive to effective use in a transitional period in the life of the country. This brings us to the final point of the paper.

### **Political Accommodation that Adapts**

There are a number of recent events in the political life of China, particularly at the international level, that can be cited to illustrate the nature of the political accommodation taking place in order to assist in the modernization process.

In China's well-known abstention in the Security Council of the UN in the Gulf War, allowing the U. S. to go ahead with its desired military removal of Iraq from Kuwait, we see a Chinese government eager to redeem its own image in the



eyes of the world following the Tiananmen Square incident. To abstain from using its veto, China made an adaptation politically that served well its purpose of identification with a variety of audiences in this situation. As I have argued elsewhere (Heisey, forthcoming), "China identified with the UN to show its own emerging big-power status, with Iraq to highlight its own independence, with the West to focus on its own ideology, and with the doctrine of the mean to influence its own political/social cohesiveness in the world community" (p. 228).

Another example is the rhetoric used by President Jiang in his summit meetings with President Clinton in 1998. Though Jiang's rhetoric is primarily characterized by the dimension of collectivism in contrast to Clinton's individualism, Jiang does make an accommodation in using the element of individualism when he appeals to the unique and independent value of wanting to use China's own interpretation of what human rights means. In another way we see Jiang's adaptation in this rhetoric. He tries to accommodate a compromise by appealing to the "particularistic value" of individualism when he argues for wanting "to establish solidarity and harmony with a capitalist country that does not allow its partner to practice its own domestic policies without interference from outside nations" (Heisey, 1999a, p. 17). Here is evidence that Jiang is adapting rhetorically to his potential adversary in order to achieve the goal of a certain degree of accommodation with the West as a way of keeping on track in economic reform.

In the area of human rights mentioned above, China uses language that attempts an adaptation of meaning to serve its own purpose as well as that of the West which has been critical of China's policies. Premier Zhu Rongji has argued recently that China should not have to take so much criticism from the U. S. on its human rights record because it has had to throw off thousands of years of feudal society, dictatorship, and colonialism. How can it be expected to do in 50 years what has accumulated over such a long period of time? He refers to the U. S. who is still working on its own human rights issues after its 200 years of democracy. He says that China is working on human rights issues, but maybe not as fast or in the same way as the U. S. would like. But this is due to the "responsibility of the Chinese government along with keeping a stable society that actually benefits the whole world because, being such a large country, a breakdown of the government could threaten world peace" (Heisey, 1999b, p. 11).

A final example of China's political adaptation in order to move along the path of modernization comes from his address at Harvard University in 1997. He stressed in this address that there should be more mutual understanding between the two countries—the largest and most powerful developed country and the largest developing country, more mutual exchanges, China should be allowed its own path of development, and China has a reform movement going that is comprehensive and peaceful in its nature. A detailed examination of this address at NCA in New York concluded:



... what Jiang tried to accomplish in this address was to present the Chinese view of the reformed China, no longer tied to the ideological constraints of the Mao period, but now open to the opportunities of the market economy, even though marked by the unique Chinese characteristics as developed under the creative thinking of Deng. Jiang wanted to convince his audience that China was making great progress in its reform measures and turning the corner in its own plan for domestic development and improvement, as well as getting back into the circle of the world's accepted nations in terms of international behavior. (Heisey, 1998, p. 6).

What Chinese leaders use in their rhetorical constructions is important for the persuasion process in their national politics. "Due to the powerful influence of the long cultural tradition," concludes Gong (1998), "[the] 'exemplification-emulation' pattern is still effective in today's china. Decision makers are wont to adopt the 'model-emulation' strategy in political and social persuasion, and the masses are usually accustomed to emulating such models" (p. 12).

Chinese scholars (Gong, 1998; Lu, forthcoming) have emphasized the importance of the Confucian notion of *zheng ming* (the rectification of names) which permitted Chinese rulers, including Mao, to use the naming process as a way of "correcting one's thinking and style of work" (Gong, 1998, p. 11) to bring about a proper social construction of reality. Naming a market economy as socialism with Chinese characteristics is a current example of this Chinese process.

In the recent rhetoric of the Chinese leaders, we see the use of adaptive language and pragmatic policy that are designed to keep China on track in its path of economic reform and in its plan for modernization.

## Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that the thinking pattern of relational and holistic thinking of the Chinese and the language pattern of ambiguity and flexibility, both of which lend themselves to the process of adaptation, facilitate in political accommodation domestically and internationally. This political process assures the political leaders that the advances for change and reform can be carried out within the accepted framework of traditional values because it is being done "with Chinese characteristics."

Deng Xiaoping's perceptive rhetorical strategy has been the epitome of adaptation when reform and change toward modernization are seen through the lens of an adapted socialism that pertains to China's situation and its own historical and cultural conditions. This makes adaptation acceptable, instead of threatening, and evolutionary instead of revolutionary. When reform is viewed in relationship to China's own situation and in a holistic manner, as opposed to strictly a Western view, and when the terminology of reform is used that has traditional Chinese



ambiguity and linguistic flexibility, the political accommodation of the modernization process creates its own sphere of Chinese reality and social construction.

China has too much to gain from its economic reform movement and its modernization process to allow the recent incident of the Chinese embassy bombing in Belgrade, the U. S. charges of spying and receiving military intelligence, and the more recent verbal threats in its relations with Taiwan to deter it from its main course, or path of development, as Jiang likes to call it. The responses in these incidents from the Chinese people and from the Chinese government are indications of their determination to be independent in the face of their equally determined position to become more modernized and developed in all important respects. China is a world power and will achieve even greater prominence in the community of nations in the next century. These signals of dominance in its own sphere of influence must be seen in their context. The Chinese sphere in international relations is taking on greater independence at the same time that it seeks strategic partnership with the United States.

I believe that using the Chinese concept of "building socialism with Chinese characteristics" is an intellectual, linguistic, and rhetorical strategy for taking China into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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\*\*D. Ray Heisey, Professor and Director Emeritus, School of Communication Studies, Kent State University, Kent, OH 44242. Phone: 330-678-4707 (Home). Fax: 330-672-3510 (Office). Email: [Rheisey@Kent.Edu](mailto:Rheisey@Kent.Edu)

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