

Language and politics in Mao's China

- Ji, Fengyuan. 2004. *Linguistic engineering: language and politics in Mao's China*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. ISBN 0-8248-2536-5

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Imagine that George Orwell's account of an imaginary future society is actually a meticulous copy of 30 years of Chinese Communist Party control over thought and language climaxing with the Cultural Revolution.¹ Imagine that Orwell's 'newspeak' of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* owes its model not to Nazi Germany but to the mechanisms of linguistic engineering ('the attempt to change language in order to affect attitudes and beliefs', p. 3) as propagated in 'Maoist newspeak'. Then you will realize that Orwell's utopia is not a novelist's fantasy, but, for the most part, a lucid account of the possibilities of mind and language control of a society.

It is well known and documented that the Chinese Communists were firmly committed to language reform after their 1949 takeover. They initially concentrated on simplifying the traditional writing system and on a massive literacy program (about 80% of the population was largely illiterate at the time of the proclamation of the People's Republic). Their less successful endeavours were the unification and dissemination of *putonghua*, or 'common language' (actually, the speech of Beijing), and the popularization of the phonetic transcription-system, known as *pinyin*, in

order to phoneticise the script and thus abolish the traditional writing system. Most forcefully propagated and enforced, however, was the successful program of linguistic engineering during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). It was used as an instrument of ideological persuasion to create new, revolutionary human beings.

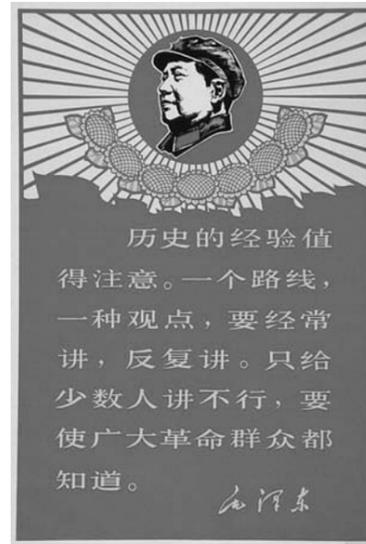
'Love'

Ji begins by reviewing the possibility of guided interpretation of messages and the relationship between language and thought, as initiated and covered by the 'Whorfian-Hypothesis' and Relevance Theory. She subsequently reviews in detail linguistic engineering before the Great Cultural Revolution: how information was controlled and disseminated by several government agencies from the beginning of the communist takeover in 1949; how radio, newspapers, film, school lessons and discussions with communist cadres in schools and workplaces propagated political information in a linguistic form that even illiterates could process, grasp and memorize. The author gives numerous examples of strategies that included the propagation of a personality cult ('quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong'), numerical formulae of various kinds ('the Three 'isms': collectivism, patri-

otism, socialism), keyword slogans (the 'Great Leap Forward'), and even Chinese character slogans (such as the 'eight character constitution' to popularize agricultural policy). Its success was so great that even illiterate peasants began to use 'ideological vocabulary' in daily life. The vocabulary of everyday life was thus semantically extended to conform to Party policy and to show its user's commitment to the Party and especially to chairman Mao. Thus 'revolutionary love' became the basis of the relationship between husband and wife, while 'hot love', pertaining solely to the Party and Chairman Mao, showed one's 'Mao worship'. At the same time, the distinction between 'blood relatives' and 'party associates' was semantically and politically eliminated, so that all Chinese became 'quin ren' (relatives) or 'xiongdi' (brothers and sisters) of one another.

The red and the black

Linguistic engineering was driven to its extreme during the Great Cultural Revolution. Ji gives convincing examples to show that Mao's words became the stock phrases of everyday life and communication in China. People fought 'quotation wars' (*da yulu zhang*) to win arguments, while streets, shops, theatres, and even people and children (the name 'Wenge', for example, meaning 'Cul-



Mao zhuxi yulu: lishide jingyan (Quotation from Chairman Mao: the historical experience) Beijing: Beijing Chubanshe, 1968. Printno. 68105-6.

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tural Revolution') were (re)named to conform to Mao's revolutionary spirit. Simultaneously, one was afraid to commit a 'one-character-mistake' (*yi zi zhi cha* – the mispronunciation of one Chinese character) because it could destroy an individual and his family: mispronouncing the name of a leader was taken as a measure of counter-revolutionary conviction. In brief, the era's Chinese discourse was in part speaking and writing using quotations from the 'Mao Bible / The Little Red Book' and was characterized as 'repetitive, narrowly political, and cliché ridden' (p. 155), with the color 'red' elevated to cult status. Thus there were (good) 'red words' (*hongzi*), a (good) 'red storm' (*hongse fenbao*) and (good) 'red terror' (*hongse kongbu*), all of which contrasted with 'black' (*hei*), symbolizing all evil in Mao's empire.

It is not surprising that the so-called 'Public Criticism Meetings', in which suspected opponents of the communist regime were verbally and physically dehumanized, were also macro-structured to consist of rituals and formulae. Ji argues that these were the agents of persuasion and control of the people that permeated all public and private life: even traditional greeting habits were changed, and characters in the new model revolutionary operas spoke in standardized scripts that revealed their class and exposed their ideological standpoint, thereby following Mao's dictum that art should be secondary to politics. The result was a culture lacking literary imagination. Hardly any novels were published between 1966-1972, while Mao's works were published en masse.

When life is primarily a class struggle against the 'black evil', school instruction is of primary importance to its rulers. The study of English survived the Cultural Revolution, probably owing to Mao's 1968 remark that 'It's good to know English'. Yet, as Ji illustrates nicely, the method of instruction was completely void of any foreign cultural ref-

erences. It lacked any sense of structured curriculum, because instruction was based on themes of Mao worship and reciting stock phrases of propaganda that ignored structured grammatical foreign language instruction.

Because of the Revolution's apparent success, it comes as a surprise that Ji can summarize 30 years of indoctrination by concluding: 'The Maoist dream of a revolutionary people retooled by formulae, propaganda, and directives to follow the right path remained a fantasy' (p. 246). But as we all know, a great deal has changed with the rise of Deng Xiaoping in 1978, when the Party moved away from most of its totalitarian goals and policies and the people followed suit at breakneck speed.

Ji's book makes fascinating reading. She brings much new information to the attention of people interested in 'Chinese Affairs', to socio-linguists interested in language planning and policy, and to historians and political scientists who want to know more about the Great Cultural Revolution and its foundations. The linguistic part of the book is written non-technically, in a clear style, and thus makes pleasant reading even for a wider audience. She includes so much background information that history and politics stifles the emphasis on linguistics, resulting in a pace that sometimes drags. Nevertheless, it should be on the bookshelf of every non-totalitarian-oriented reader as a constant warning against the possible impact of 'the people's democratic dictatorship' that is now trying to protect its people by formulating new directives of censorship.² ◀

Notes

1. For excellent as well as first-hand accounts of the reform attempts between 1949 and the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, see also Martin, Helmut. 1982. *Chinesische Sprachplanung*. Bochum: Studienverlag Brockmeyer; and Geduhn, Hans-Jörg. 1985. *Sprachplanung in der Volksrepublik China 1976-1980*. Bochum: Studienverlag Brockmeyer. Geduhn concentrates on the time between 1976-1980, when the Chinese authorities concentrated on reactivating their original language planning efforts. In this respect, these German accounts complement Ji's monograph.
2. See Yuwen, Zongguo. 1957. (Chinese Language) 'Editorial' (August 1957, p.2). Reprinted in Seyboldt, Peter Y. and Chiang, Gregory Kuei-Ke, eds. 1979. *Language Reform in China: Documents and Commentary*. White Plains, N.Y.: Sharpe; Folkstone, Kent: William Dawson & Sons Ltd. See this volume also for representative accounts of Chinese Communist rhetorics.

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