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ABSTRACT

This thesis attempts to explain, in light of contrastive rhetoric, the Chinese preference of set phrases and the American disapproval of cliche. It asserts that because society and culture shape the way individuals use their language, Chinese and Americans hold different rhetorical expectations and observe different conventions in forming their discourse. After analyzing the driving forces behind the popularity of set phrases in Chinese discourse, it argues that the nature of the Chinese educational system explains the enduring role of set phrases in Chinese culture. This is due to the fact that education in China still relies heavily on memorization and recitation. The thesis concludes that the Chinese preference for set phrases conforms to the rhetorical theory and practice of the culture, whereas the American disapproval of set phrases represents the changing values of American society. (Contains 41 references.) (Author/MDM)

Different Mind, Different Rhetoric: an Investigation of The Role of Set Phrases in the Chinese Rhetorical Art

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis attempts to explain, in light of contrastive rhetoric, the Chinese preference of set phrases and the American disapproval of cliche. It claims that, as the society and culture shape the way the individuals use their language, the Chinese and the Americans hold different rhetorical expectations and observe different conventions in forming their discourse. After analyzing the driving forces behind the popularity of set phrases (cultural, linguistic, rhetorical, and exucational factors), it argues that the nature of Chinese educational system, which is still characterized by an orally rhetorical patten because of the role memory plays in the learning process, explains the enduring role of set phrases in Chinese culture. It concludes that the Chinese preference of set phrases conforms to their rhetorical theory and practice which are controlled by their culture, whereas the American disapproval of cliches represents the changing values of their society. Neither of these two rhetorics is superior or inferior; they are simply different.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

"Different composing conventions do exist in different cultures," says Robert Kaplan, a scholar who introduced the field of contrastive rhetoric some 25 years ago (296). Robert Oliver, author of Communication and Culture in Ancient China and India, claims that "The standards of rhetoric in the West ... are not universals. They are expressions of Western culture, applicable within the context of Western cultural values" (92). Such comments make it clear that rhetoric is not universally applicable set of techniques. Different mind sets demand different rhetoric.

Chinese rhetoric, for one, differs from the Western rhetoric in profound ways. Perhaps the best illustration of the vast difference in rhetorical theories and practices between one culture and another is the way the Chinese interpret and handle set phrases in writing. Whenever the Chinese write, they resort, as if by an unwritten rule, to pat expressions, usually consisting of four characters and often handed down from men of letters across the centuries, for ornament and for better style. A Chinese compiler of a bilingual handbook on Chinese expressions even goes so far as to declare that "no book, no newspaper, no conversation

in Chinese is complete without the use of these idioms [his term for set phrases]" (Chiang 1). This practice, by contemporary Western standard, errs on the side of showing little originality and creativeness, and those who use set phrases are guilty of wearing other's dull linguistic hats.

To be sure, set phrases exist in any languages. Since Chinese is a metaphorical language, many of the set phrases it employs are metaphors. However, if Chinese is a metaphorical language, English is no less so (Bagnall 135). What is intriguing is the fact that the Chinese set phrases do not lose their power through usage, nor do they so easily become downgraded into trite and hackneyed expressions. It is strange that the old coins of one nation shine for centuries while those of another nation lose their luster. Why?

To date little causal analysis has been done about the Chinese penchant for set phrases, at least not in the form of theoretical study with a historical perspective. Carolyn Matalene provides many insightful observations in her article "Contrastive Rhetoric: An American Writing Teacher in China," to which I owe a great deal in preparing this thesis, but she focuses on the users' motivation and stops there (792, 793). She does not tell us what role the language itself plays in the Chinese use of set phrases, a

topic beyond the scope of her article. Mary Erbaugh's "Taking Advantage of China's Literary Tradition in teaching Chinese Students" best summarizes Chinese beliefs about writing and her analysis of Chinese view of "power of the written word" (16) sheds some light on the question at hand.

Erbaugh sets the direction for this thesis when she states that "Rhetorical preference has ... everything to do with how the education system interprets the demands of the society which sponsors it" (22). This is echoed by Trivedi in his "Culture in Language Learning," who claims that "Rhetoric cannot be wholly understood without reference to the culture that produced it" (93).

The theoretical underpinnings for the thesis come from Walter Ong's exploration of "oral cultures" and "literary cultures," two important concepts meticulously discussed in his trail-blazing book Orality and Literacy. (Chapter II will discuss Ong's theory in detail.) In his book Ong examines the difference between orality and literacy, and explores the changes in thought processes as cultures move from orality to literacy. After discussing cognition in terms of orally patterned thought and chirographic (writing) patterned thought. He concludes that oral cultures are characterized by thought and expressions which are basically formulaic, structured in proverbs and other set expressions. He also discusses how the heavy oral residue

that marks literature and thought survives into chirographic (writing) cultures.

Simply put, Ong's theory is this: in an oral culture, people memorize what is most memorable and think in mnemonic patterns. A closer look at the Chinese language and its educational system shows that memorization still plays a very important part in the process of learning. What Ong describes as "heavy oral residue" cries for attention in Chinese education despite its long history of writing, dating from the 2,000 B.C.. As I will argue in later chapters, this explains the Chinese fondness for set phrases, which preserve the oral residue, reflecting and preserving the cultural and educational homogeneity of Chinese civilization.

This thesis, therefore, explores the several characteristics of Chinese rhetoric by focusing on the forms, functions, and importance of set phrases in Chinese written communication, discusses some of the differences between the Western and the Chinese rhetorical art, and suggests some insights into the relativity of the modern Western concept of cliches. In particular, I have tried to pin down the driving force behind the Chinese rhetorical practice in set phrases and to offer some possible explanations.

Understanding and appreciating the rhetorical theories and practices in other cultures can help people see the value and limitations of their own. "Self-knowledge requires that we understand other cultures," Jerry Martin reminds us (19). To approach the Chinese rhetorical art without cultural prejudice and philosophical bias and to examine how and why that rhetoric works for that particular nation will enable people of other cultures to see that their rhetoric is neither superior nor inferior, but simply different. As the world is increasingly becoming a "global village," this realization of the relativity of the Western rhetoric will keep people from the cultural narcissism by which many are shackled, both in the occident and the orient.

The Chinese predilection for set phrases in writing reflects their ingrained respect for tradition and social harmony, while the American emphasis on originality and creativeness exemplifies their idea of individuality (Matalene 802). This is so because, to quote Kaplan again, "]anguage ... both shapes and is shaped by the experience of the society of speakers" (10). The underlying hypothesis, then, is that "the society and culture to a high extent transcend and control the individuals" (Vahapassi 51) and the way they use their language. Upon this hypothesis rests my rhetorical analysis of set phrases in Chinese and cliches in English

Before making such an analysis, it is necessary to examine the American view of cliche and the Chinese notion of set phrases so that this subject of inquiry and comparison will proceed from a common ground. Chapter Two,therefore, defines the term cliche and presents a historical view of the term. After answering the question of what cliche is and how the notion develops, this thesis moves to describe in Chapter Three the popularity of Chinese set phrases for both literary expression and scientific inquiry. Chapter Four takes up the question of why set phrases are popular. More detailed description of this paper's format is as follows:

Chapter Two, "The Notion of Cliches," traces the historical development of this linguistic phenomenon in English and examines how this notion changes with time. It covers relevant literature concerning (1) the definition of cliches and (2) controversies over the notion of cliches.

Chapter Three, "Forms and Functions of Set Phrases," outlines history, development, and working of set phrases in Chinese written discourse and discusses how set phrases contribute to the success of communication. It provides the background necessary for an understanding of the way set phrases work both to ornament style and convey informative and persuasive messages.

Chapter Four, "Kinds of Driving Forces Behind the Popularity of Set phrases," analyzes the Chinese preference of these expressions. It argues that the nature of Chinese language and the Chinese educational system, which is still characterized by an orally rhetorical patten because of the role memory plays in the learning process, explains the enduring role of set phrases in Chinese culture.

My conclusion is that the Chinese preference of set phrases conforms to their rhetorical theory and practice which are controlled by their culture, whereas the American disapproval of cliches represents the changing values of their society. Neither of these two rhetorics is superior they are simply different.

CHAPTER II. THE AMERICAN NOTION OF CLICHE

Opening any of today's American textbooks on writing, one finds admonishment against cliches. According to these books, cliches make one's writing "flat" and suggest lack of hard thinking on the writers' part (Basic College Writing 189); cliches are "stale" and "dull" (Schwegler 474). Eschholz condemns them as "ineffective," (449) and Donald Hall accuses them of "prevent[ing] true contact" with the readers (Hall 6). These books insist, in chorus, that good writing should tolerate no cliches.

To contradict this advice is to alienate oneself, to go against the tide. However, a close look at this notion of cliche and especially at the history of its development will not only show the widespread modern acceptance of this concept but also reveal the limitations of the seemingly sound advice against cliches.

The word "cliche" comes from the French, who used it to refer to a metal plate cast from a page of type, with which a printer could make copies of a book without having to reset the typeface. More specifically, in present-day French, as Nigel Rees writes in his The Joy of Cliches: A Complete User's Guide, this word has three meanings: a printer's plate, a photographic negative, and a commonplace phrase

or idea. English has kept only the third definition, losing in the process the historical-metaphorical link with faithful reproduction through printing and engraving.

According to Professor Nicholas Bagnall, author of A Defence of Cliches, the best definition so far is what Sir Ernest Gowers gives in his book, The Complete Plain Words:

> A phrase whose aptness in a particular context when it was first invented has won it such popularity that it has become hackneyed, and is used without thought in contexts where it is no longer apt. (147)

Or, in Walter Redfern's words, cliches and "**Pat** phrases, phrases on **tap**, are often **apt** phrases; they fall pat into place" (131).

The definition seems to be the only thing people agree upon when they talk about cliche, although that definition alone is "far from being definitive" (Pickrel 252). They differ in everything else--classification, criteria, function, and purpose. It is this difference that makes today's drive for originality worth analyzing.

In his article "Identifying Cliches," Paul Pickrel, after criticizing handbooks for failing to provide a workable strategy to identify cliches, comes up with his own. He explains convincingly that vogue phrases, word-clusters, and proverbs should not be treated as cliches. He argues his

point this way: "a vogue phrase ... can return to linguistic usefulness once its vogue is past ... but a real cliche cannot;" (254) word-clusters represent "the kind of habit in a language that must be observed" (255) and proverbs are "close to experience" (256). Through many interesting examples, Pickrel shows us "how to distinguish between the familiar phrase that is hackneyed and dispensable and the familiar phrase that must be used as it stands because it embodies an essential habit of the language" (254). So people say "bread and butter" not "butter and bread"; "salt and pepper" not "pepper and salt." People always say, "She put on her shoes and stockings" rather than "stockings and shoes" despite the fact that she puts on her stockings first (Pickrel 255).

Don Nilsen, on the other hand, approaches "Cliches, Trite Sayings, Dead Metaphors, and Stale Figures of Speech in Composition Instruction" in another way. He talks about cliche in terms of metaphors, which he classifies into two kinds: "a dead metaphor" and "a literary metaphor" (278). He warns us against confusing the function of these two kinds of metaphors as they serve very different purposes. "The dead metaphor is used for basic communication" while "the literary metaphor...is used to create an emotional experience," he asserts (278). He further explains that if the purpose is

basic communication, it is not necessarily inappropriate to use an expression like "light as a feather." The user, he argues, did not intend "to use a fresh figure of speech at all but was merely attempting to emphasize the lightness" (278). So he concludes that instead of avoiding cliches as the rule of handbooks dictates, writers should just "control" them (281).

When Eric Partridge compiled his A Dictionary of Cliches almost half a century ago, he categorized cliches into four groups: 1) idioms that have become cliches; 2) other hackneyed phrases; 3) stock phrases from foreign languages, and 4) stock phrases from English literature. Critics found this classification both deplorably overlapping and almost uselessly broad.

Unsatisfied with Partridge's classification, especially bothered by what it implies--all these familiar phrases are "bad," Nicholas Bagnall offers his own list. He divides these phrases into nine classes:

1. Vicious. (**Shake-out** and **slimming down** sound good to the shareholders, bad to the sacked employees.)
2. Euphemistic. (**Pass on** for **die**.)
3. Self-deluding. Overlaps with both of the above.
4. Plain ugly. (**Arms of Morpheus** for **sleep**.)
5. Instant. Phrases that are so vivid (**cat on hot bricks; walking on eggs**) that they can not last.

6. Ironic, or camp. (Phrases used for affected and theatrical purposes.)

7. Phrases that have come through the cliche-barrier. (**Shed light, wash one's hands of.**)

8. Idiomatic doublets. (**rack and ruin, leaps and bounds.**)

9. Modified catchphrases. (**Pain in the knee** for **neck.**) (139)

All these different approaches to cliches suggest that cliche is too complicated an issue to be treated perfunctorily, as composition textbooks do. Different interpretations of cliche also indicates changing assumptions and conventions.

Most textbooks agree that cliches in English fall into four categories: worn figures of speech; stale scraps from literature; inseparable adjectives and nouns and overused phrases (Fowler 474). This convenient classification, which relies on time, repetition, and familiarity as its criteria, is widely challenged, as is shown above.

Furthermore, the crusade against cliche is based on the assumption that originality and creativeness are the primary virtues of a piece of writing. Contrary to popular belief, this value judgment is relatively recent, dating from the late 19th Century. Bagnall's "In Defence of Cliches," challenges his contemporaries with this question: "Is it

possible, that the 20th century is being unfair to a venerable cultural device?" (19)

In the same article, Bagnall reminded us that "In ancient Greece and Rome our present preoccupation with originality would have been incomprehensible" (19). In those days, people valued the virtue of imitation, which, in Bagnall's word, was "the most natural thing in the world" (14). It was only later that the notion of originality began to take fashion and prominence.

In ancient Greece, it was generally held that three elements contribute to success in discourse: nature, art, and exercise. Donald Clark, author of Rhetoric in Greco-Roman Education, after defining these three qualities, discussed the importance of imitation. He observed that "imitative practice is an exercise" (5), and that "many teachers both before and after Socrates used the imitation of model as a teaching device to illustrate rhetorical theory and guide the pupil's exercise" (10).

The emphasis on imitation in ancient Greece is based on the idea of a truly learned man: a good orator should possess great knowledge which comes from the following exercises: writing, paraphrase, translational imitation, reading of poetry and history as well as of oratory, and the study of law and politics (Clark 14). Imitation was never an academic crime. These abiding values, then, were upheld for many

generations to come in Western education and literature. Many writers stood on the heads of their predecessors and created great pieces of writing out of familiar themes. For example, Gray's "Elegy" is stuffed with plunderings from Pindar, Horace, Dante and others; Milton's Lycidas is an amazing mixture of Christian and classical imagery, and Shakespeare's King Lear patterns on more than ten previous play scripts. Even T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," the seminal poem of modernism, is a grab-bag of borrowings.

The assumption that creativity, originality, and self-expression are essential to good discourse is of comparatively recent origin. Elizabethan grammar schools such as the one Shakespeare presumably attended, required artful translation of Latin texts into English and then back into Latin until the students had memorized the texts. When Benjamin Franklin wished to develop his style, he devoted himself to copying pages of Addison's prose until he had memorized them. Students were also encouraged to keep "commonplace books" in which they recorded particularly interesting ideas or apt phrases.

In Western culture, emphasis on imitation has had a long history. For many years imitation was more than an exercise; it was a whole way of thinking as well as a way of learning. People took it for granted that imitating improved

the imitator's ability. The idea of originality came partly because of the poor quality of model imitated. According to Bagnall, cheap literature and popular journalism in early twentieth contributed to the decline of emphasis on imitation (20). Too often, what was imitated fell short of great writing, and abundant journalistic works made the task of what to imitate a very hard choice.

Although it is impossible to date precisely when originality became a positive goal in writing, or in this case when cliches came under attack, we know through the seventeenth and into the eighteenth century traditional emphasis in composition was almost exclusively upon style and delivery, the standard Ramistic parts rather than upon content and ideas (Halloran 249). Only the modern views hold that imitation and cliches should give way to originality and freshness. Today, most people, writing instructors in particular, are leery of and on guard against cliches in spite of an occasional effort "to fight against the tide," to use a Chinese set phrase.

Americans object to cliches for a variety of reasons. In the American view, "cliches are long-lasting, possibly eternal, grown dull ideas" (Redfern 2). Figures of speech like "busy as a bee" are considered the old coins of language. They once made a striking impression but have since

rubbed smooth by repeated handling. Modern Americans argue that cliches fail to convey the same meaning as effectively as they once did in two aspects. The argument goes that trite expressions do not construct real meaning. Language is used to communicate, and when a cliche is introduced, everyone knows it even before it is fully uttered, and therefore the communication does not occur. Donald Hall, author of Writing Well gives another example to illustrate this point. He says: "When I reached the startling conclusion that the bottom line is the name of the game in a changing society, I say nothing to anyone" (135). the second part of the argument is that a cliche will not conjure up the same image it used to bring about, as people are too familiar with it to respond enthusiastically. In other words, cliches fail to create an emotional experience.

Through the same American lens, use of cliches signifies laziness on the part of the user. Cliche, under Redfern's classification, is "a labor-saving device" (17). People fall back on cliches because the ready-made phrases come most handy. Trite expressions come to mind easier than new and original figures. While in oral English, cliches not only exist here and there, but also are allowed. In written communication, however, trite expressions are a sin, an indication that the user is not using his mind. To use

someone else's tired expressions is considered as bad as using someone else's toothbrush (Cross 172).

Cliche-lovers are jeered at for another reason: lack of good education. Some Americans, like the Chinese, associate cliches with erudition. Ironically, cliches are often the badge of the half-educated. "Triteness depends on previous exposure," Nilsen writes in his "Cliches, Trite Saying, Dead Metaphors, and Stale Figures of Speech in Composition Instruction" (278). Someone who does not have a command of language is likely to hear a stock phrase for the first time and be impressed with it. Thereafter he will use it as though he had invented it himself.

However, what Americans fear most about cliches is that "stale words lead to stale ideas" (Cross 179). Pat expressions are no more than common thought. Since "Writing well is the art of clear thinking and honest feeling," to quote Donald Hall again (419), people should not fool themselves by using cliches and trite expressions that have become meaningless substitutes for feeling and thought. To find what we have inside us that is our own, to reach out to the audience, to express our own feelings and thought, writers, therefore, have to be as creative and original as possible. This is the ideal of American discourse.

Yet, this ideal is "impossible"; total abandonment of cliches is just a myth (Kari 266). Failure to live up to this ideal lies partly in the difficulty of defining cliches and partly in the unavoidable use of them. "Why is it that 'light as a feather' is trite while the 'wing of a building' is not?" Don Nilsen questions (278). So, "Clicheness is relative" Kari explains (266). Although cliches are often condemned on the grounds of age, they can be legitimately defended on other grounds, by the criteria of speed and clarity, familiarity, social bonding, and personal delight (Rank 45-47).

Besides, trite language serves a purpose. Cliches are meaningful phrases. Conventional circumlocutions like "Keep at arm's length," for example, are quite clearly understood by those who use them. "To burn the midnight oil" can be a cliche, but surely everyone knows that whoever burns the the midnight oil is not sleeping away his time. Such phrases, sometimes "a necessary lubricant for the wheels of social intercourse," serve communicative and social purposes (Bagnall 88).

Furthermore, new expressions build upon the old ones. President Bush's refrain "read my lips" is a catch phrase favored by many, but it does not appear from nowhere. It is obviously an interesting parody of the ancient trade of palm

reading, which has been around for thousands of years. To enrich the language, new expressions often grow out of the old.

So it is clear that although originality is a valid criteria in judging good writing, it is a limited one. "Unoriginality also has its merits" (Rank 47). Cliches can be boring, but they are "not immoral" (Pickrel 261). For these reasons, people like Don Nilsen call on others to be more "respectful" of cliches and stale figures of speech (279). Cliches exist. There are reasons for their being there. Daven Kari even argues that an intelligent use of cliches can improve students' writing style. He suggests that the six techniques of extending, partically converting, fully converting, punning, and combining cliches can be used in teaching writing (268-270).

While the Americans strive to break new linguistic ground, the Chinese try to preserve their literary tradition by repeatedly using their peculiar rhetorical devices. One of these devices is frequent employment of set phrases--cliches by American standard. The fact that there is no Chinese equivalent for the English word "cliches" not only indicates the very different Chinese attitude toward what Americans consider a serious problem but also suggests a mind set of a nation drastically different from American's. This difference both in attitude and in mind set provides a key to the understanding of Chinese affinity for set phrases.

CHAPTER III. FORMS AND FUNCTIONS OF CHINESE SET PHRASES

Most Chinese set phrases come from classical sources and are comprised of four characters. These set phrases are mainly derived from fables, historical anecdotes, and classical poetry, thus partaking of distinctive features of classical Chinese. Ke Zhou Qiou Jian (carve a mark on gunwale in moving boat where a sword was lost), Ya Miao Zhu Zhang (help the rice shoots grow by pulling them up), and Shou Zhu Dai Tu (stay by a tree hoping to catch a hare just because once a hare accidentally died there) summarize three age-worn fables and are frequently used to describe people who show ridiculous stupidity.

Scraps from classical poetry permeate everyday Chinese language. "Just as the weary traveller despairs of finding a road, Lo! a village appears and shade of willows and riotous flowers beckon" (equivalent to "there are as many fish in the sea as you can catch). "The turbulent wind precedes the mountain storm" (All happenings have their omens). "Never mind the storm, just sit tight in the fishing boat" (face danger with confidence). These lines from classical poetry are virtually household words. Human affinity for literary allusions is nothing new, so the English speakers prized

themselves with an occasional use of "to be or not to be," "far from the maddening crowd," and "fools rush in where angels fear to tread." But the Chinese do not just enjoy and relish set phrases; they heavily depend on them for communicating their thoughts, as I'll discuss in more detail in the next chapter.

Due to rote learning and imitation of good writing, which, as we shall see in Chapter 4, play an important role in Chinese education, set phrases are conveniently picked up and easily handed down from generation to generation. They take their current shape "through a long process of linguistic practice" (Sixty Lectures on the Fundamentals of the Chinese Language 53).

Set phrases are so central to Chinese rhetoric that even the communist revolution depended on them. New phrases approved by the Party dominate the way people express themselves. During the Cultural Revolution the whole nation voiced its support for "the Wall of Iron and Steel" (a metaphor for the Army) in its struggle against the "capitalist roaders" (the generation of veteran revolutionaries). After Deng Xiaoping made his political come-back, everyone's refrain was "four Modernizations" (the modernization of industry, agriculture, science and technology and national defence). When Zhao Ziyang, prime

minister, general secretary of the Party, and Deng's then hand-picked successor, conducted the economic reform before Tien Anmen Square Incident of June 4, 1989, people from all walks of life raved about "wading through the river by touching stones," a fixed phrase Zhao had coined to justify the necessity of slowing down China's Perestroika and Glasnost. Right now, people just find themselves indulging in such accepted expressions as "Since the smashing of the counter-revolutionary riot of June 4th," and "because of the bourgeois liberalization..." It is almost impossible for people not to spice their discourse with these phrases since "to depart from them is to depart from tradition, from communal understanding, from literacy," as Professor Matalene rightly notes (792).

However, most of the set phrases come from classics, and classics represent a social class. A good command of the phrases entails intensive study, which only highly educated people can afford to carry out. So ease and freedom in using set phrases is an accomplishment that confers power on the users (Scharfstein 131). In a way, they function as ego boosters, making users feel good about themselves by furnishing the users with a sense of superiority. Thus, when a person advises the other not to wait at the tree hole for the reappearance of the hare, he not only avoids the

embarrassment of bluntly calling the other stupid, but also impresses the addressee with his authority, sensitivity, and understanding. The user knows he is being condescending, this sense of superiority makes one feel good about oneself.

As the practice is carried out on such a large scale among those people, however, "feeling big" can no longer be the only purpose in using set phrases. In time, people develop the need not to feel an outcast in what Bruffee termed a "knowledge community" (647). Set phrases, at this point, serve as their I.D. card, keeping them from being ostracized from the group they identify with. For them, the use of set phrases becomes one of "the basic qualification[s] for acceptance into that community" (Bruffee 643).

Not surprisingly, many choose a fixed phrase not for its precision, but for its learned weight. This is particular so when users aim to produce the necessary effect upon an audience--linguistic showing off, in a sense. Not long ago, I got a letter from a college student in China. In a letter of twenty sentences, the writer used seven set phrases. She said in the letter that today's young people are crazy about studying abroad. They all believe that "Of the thirty six plans, running away is the best" (The last of the thirty six strategies in the classic The Strategies). Young people who hold this idea are "as countless as hair on a buffalo." Now

that she cannot come out despite all her efforts, she feels sad for "doing nothing but empty fighting on paper." As a college student writing to another one, this writer felt the need to affirm her identity as an educated person through the use of certain set phrases appropriate to her social role.

Chinese scholars, even when they write in English, still carry on the linguistic inheritance accrued from their native tongue. Vincent Yu-Chang Shih, a great translator of The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons, a book on chinese literary theory and criticism, in explaining why he undertook such a difficult task, has this to say: "Thinking that someone would have to make the first try, I rushed into where many feared to tread. It was my idea to throw a brick to induce jade" (Preface). The writer appealed to literary illusions, one English, one Chinese, to "ornament and enliven" his discourse. Another writer, Mrs. Keqi Hao, goes even further in her article on the question of standardizing English for use throughout the world. She actually replaces her thoughts with a new kind of set phrases, phrases dictated by the Party. The concluding paragraph of the article is so illuminative that I cannot resist quoting it in full:

> Of course there are many difficulties, among which is a taboo among linguists. It seems that they can only describe a language--otherwise they could be

> criticized by their colleagues for being prescriptive. However, the term "prescription" seems to be wrong only in linguists. A prescription can be a good one or a bad one; it depends on whether or not it **reflects the objective truth**. The criterion is whether it **pushes forward or pulls back the wheel of history, and whether it suits the needs of the people.** Facing the new challenge, linguists should break the old taboo, and take an active part in language standardization or reform. Languages are created by people. They should and could be changed to **meet the people's will.** (52)

Although she is writing this article in English, this writer is obviously just doing a word-for-word translation of her Chinese thoughts. These boldfaced phrases may sound too abstract to be meaningful in English; they, nevertheless, have their rhetorical function in written Chinese discourse. Walter Redfern, author of Cliches and Coinages, styles this kind of writing as "phatic speech, [which is] speech used as social cement and relying heavily on stereotyped language." Redfern argues that phatic speech "is not necessarily empty speech, hollow words. It can be sorely missed, conspicuous by its absence" (22). Chinese readers, when reading Mrs. Hao's

article, understand all the abstract ideas expressed. They do more than read between the lines--they read something into the lines . They know that Mrs. Hao, by using those Party-sanctioned set phrases as her ambiguous criteria of language standardization is declaring her allegiance with the Party. Whatever the Party says about language standardization will be the criteria she uses. It is like sending a picture postcard to someone else. Not much is said in the postcard but the receipant understands what is meant. Here, "what counts is the fact that language is used, not what it is used for," a characteristic of phatic speech (Vahapassi 18).

But why do Chinese favor set phrases in communication? Chinese is among the foremost of languages to abound in metaphorical expressions and rhetorical figures. The Chinese metaphorical phraseology, in one way, epitomizes the spirit of the language and the mode of thought of the Chinese people. In Chinese, its language "shapes the culture that it expressed," and is considered "as China's greatest heritage" (Scharfstern 31). It is impossible to depart from this heritage.

These set phrases have acquired such a wide usage and importance as to form the backbone of the Chinese language. Writers rely on these idioms to express themselves in an intelligent way, and readers expect this kind of phraseology

in their readings. The rhetorical situation in Chinese communication requires that set phrases be used to fulfil a tacit understanding between the writer and the audience.

Chinese language is regarded as being highly precise and rich in meaning. Its idioms give it this precise mode of expression. The sense of a whole paragraph or even of a whole page is often expressed in a phrase of only a few characters; thereby, instead of giving a long verbiage, one can, by quoting an appropriate simile or metaphor, express one's thoughts more accurately. Thus, set phrases in Chinese have communicative value. They increase conciseness, a quality valued in both western and eastern rhetoric.

Such precision and accuracy of expression can only be attained through a thorough knowledge of Chinese idioms. The phrase "Sun Wu Kong Da Nao Tien Gong" is used to describe one who makes great disturbance over a certain place. This phrase comes from a mythological account of the adventures of a Buddhist monk and his associates, of whom Sun Wukong is the most resourceful courageous, and defiant of authority. Anyone possessing these virtues and brave enough to stand up to evil authorities can be dubbed as Sun Wukong. So through using this phrase, the writer helps create in the reader's mind a full picture of the person described in much the same way western literary artists use allusions to classic works.

Accuracy and vividness give life to set phrases. "Bu Han Er Li" (one shivers even when it is not cold), for example, illustrates the extreme fear one has just at the thought of something terrible. "Bu Gong Dai Tian" is another vivid phrase. The literary translation of it is that one cannot share the same sky with one's enemy. Since these phrases are most appropriate descriptions of the situation in question, they are employed again and again in all kinds of discourse. For example, one might use the phrase "Bu Gon Dai Tian" to explain why President Bush launched "Desert Storm" against Saddam Hussein.

Similes and metaphors in all languages are accurate, concise, and vivid. In Chinese, however, they do not become trite and hackneyed through usage. Surprising as it may seem to twentieth Century Americans, there is no Chinese equivalent of the word **cliche**. While originality in thought is much encouraged in today's Chinese discourse, creativity with expressions has never gained as much popularity as it has in Western cultures. The Chinese take it for granted that time-honored phrases appear in discourse and, in many cases, the more, the better.

Apart from the traditional Chinese emphasis on imitation, another answer to the absence of the notion of cliche would lie in the characteristics of Chinese rhetoric. One of the

Chinese rhetorical values is its refusal to reach a conclusion. Chinese culture values indirection both in rendering a discourse and in understanding it. Writers offer a hint in its expression and leave much ample room for their audience's imagination. Set phrases are crucial to a rhetoric of indirection. It always uses autonymns to make an idea complete. So the ancient Chinese scholars have these famous lines to say: "To demand nothing for the being: to knock upon silence for the sound." Many Chinese set phrases are formed by this kind of relationship. Dogn Ben Xi Zuo (run to and fro); Diu San La Si (miss this and that); Ding Tian Li Di (towering from earth to sky) are examples which show the nature of the language as well as its rhyme and rhythm.

Set phrases in Chinese, as is shown above, come from various sources, but they all function to ornament style and convey informative and persuasive messages. They are indespensable for the success of communication and are central to Chinese rhetoric.

CHAPTER IV. DRIVING FORCES BEHIND THE POPULARITY OF CHINESE SET PHRASES

The previous two chapters focused on the American interpretation of cliche and the Chinese view of set phrases. For Americans, fixed phrases overly used tend to lose power since they fail to evoke the same image in the mind of the reader as they once did. For Chinese, however, set phrases take in increasing richness and depth of meaning with time: frequent use accelerates their popularity. One way to understand the popularity of Chinese set phrases and the American disapproval of cliche is to employ the methodology of contrastive rhetoric and delve into their cultures for an answer, since different discourse conventions exist in different rhetorics in these two different cultures.

Patterns of rhetoric vary from culture to culture, and cultural differences lead to different mind frame. One composition theorist who made a special contribution to this domain is Walter Ong. In his trail-blazing book Orality and Literacy, Ong divides the mind set of people into two kinds: orally patterned thought and chirographic (i.e. writing) patterned thought. Based on a thorough analysis of the relations between thought and discourse in oral culture, literate thought and expression in terms of their emergence

from and relation to orality, Ong evolved a theory which explains that "the entire oral poetic world or thought world relied upon the formulaic constitution of thought." The reason is that "in an oral culture, knowledge, once acquired, had to be constantly repeated or it would be lost; fixed formulaic thought pattens were essential for wisdom and effective administration" (24).

Ong's theory is simple in its outlines: in an oral culture, people memorize what is most memorable and think in mnemonic patterns. "The more sophisticated orally patterned thought is, the more it is likely to be marked by set expressions skillfully used" (35). Consequently the role set expressions play in oral culture is more crucial than it is in a writing culture (26). In chirographic culture, on the other hand, writing "frees the mind...of its memory work" (41), encourages, and demands originality.

Apart from mnemonics and formulas, Ong notices three other characteristics of orally based thought and expressions. Firstly, additive oral style with a heavy dependence on introductory "and" forms a sharp contrast to subordinative clauses which feature written English. Ong cites an example from Genesis I: I-5 to prove his point:

> In the beginning God created heaven and earth. And the earth was void and empty, and darkness was upon the face of the earth and the spirit of God moved

> over the waters. And God said: Be light made. And light was made. And God saw the light that it was good; and he divided the light from the darkness. And he called the light Day, and the darkness Night; and there was evening and morning one day. (37)

Since this Douay version (1610) is produced in a culture which still has a massive oral residue, Ong explains, the use of so many "ands" keeps close in many ways to the additive Hebrew original. Then Ong compares the Douay version with the translation in the New American Bible (1970), which he believes is "adjusted to sensibilities shaped more by writing and print."

> In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind swept over the waters. Then god said, "let there be light," and there was light. God saw how good the light was. God then separated the light from the darkness. God called the light "day" and the darkness he called "night." Thus evening came, and morning followed-the first day. (37)

While English, in which subordinative (hypotactic) sentences are a common feature, the Chinese language relies heavily on compound (paratactic) structure. Introductory

"and" occurs everywhere. Even if this coordinative compound "and" does not appear in the text, people know its presence is implied. To illustrate, a more literal translation of the first sentence of Mrs. Keqi Hao's paragraph on language standardization, cited on page 27 in Chapter III, would look like this: "Of course there are many difficulties, (**and**) among the difficulties is a taboo among linguists." When Mrs. Hao translated this sentence, she changed "and among the difficulties" into "among which" to make her English translation conform to English syntax. What is worth noticing is that this change brings about the only real subordinative clause in the whole paragraph. The rest of the paragraph contains many coordinative compound "and" as well as implied introductory "ands."

The above brief description of the common features of the Chinese language is important to an understanding of the popularity of Chinese set phrases. It shows the additive oral style of Chinese language, and it also tells how Chinese set phrases best illustrate this common feature, which I will explain later on.

Second, according to Ong, aggregative rather than analytic thought and expression dominate formulaic styling. Terms and phrases come in clusters to develop and implement memory, so the soldier is always brave; the princess always beautiful. "Oral expression thus carries a load of epithets

and other formulaic baggage which high literacy rejects as cumbersome and tiresomely redundant because of its aggregative weight" (Ong 38).

Chinese set phrases, in Ong's point of view, operate as "clusters to develop and implement memory." In Chinese, time does not just "fly;" it always "flies like an arrow." A river does not only flow (when used to indicate passage of time or change of times,) it must "flow eastward." A Chinese never merely expresses anger but "thunderously rages." When a star search is conducted in China, the stars do not simply "spring up;" they "spring up like bamboo shoots after a spring rain." If somehow "hell breaks loose," "evil spirits of all kinds dance in a riotous revelry." Chinese set phrases, upon which people can safely depend "for every situation" (792), notices Matalene, are easy to memorize and to implement.

The third characteristic about oral culture is what Ong calls "conservative or traditionalist." The need of repeating conceptualized knowledge to prevent it from vanishing in a primary oral culture forms a traditionalist or conservative set of mind, a mind that with good reason inhibits intellectual experimentation. Not surprisingly, old people, "repeaters of the past" (Ong 41), enjoy high prestige and occupy a high social status in such a culture. That is why a Western politician tries to impress his voters with baby-kissing, whereas a Chinese official, for the same purpose,

makes the gesture of visiting a home for the elderly. The different mind set demands different rhetoric.

As is discussed in Chapter III, most Chinese set phrases come from classical sources and are associated with classic poetry, tradition, and ancient scholastic master-pieces. In the Chinese eye, then, these set phrases are the gems of Chinese culture.

Now let us see how Ong's theory accounts for the popularity of Chinese set phrases. Strange as it may seem, the Chinese still have a massive oral residues despite their four thousand years of writing history and their invention of paper. Or to be more exact, the Chinese way of thinking, by Ong's definition, still preserves recognizable oral patterning. This oral patterning expresses itself in several ways in Chinese, which will be explained in detail below.

Thus, one reason set phrases are popular is that they are easy to remember, and Ong told us that people always remember what is most memorable. But, of course, there must be some other things that account for the Chinese preference for set phrases. What are worth looking at are cultural, linguistic, rhetorical, and educational factors.

Cultural Factors

Culture is "patterned behavior" (Spir 546), and each culture has a unique pattern. what is applaudable or acceptable in one culture may be deplorable or objectionable in another. For example, the value judgment of dogs in Chinese culture differs greatly from that of American culture. The notion of faithfulness and loyalty commonly attached to a dog in Western society seldom, if ever, occurs to the Chinese mind. Instead, filth and servitude signify the traits of these animals in Chinese culture, where a dog is associated with unfriendly barking at strangers, attacking ferociously at anyone its master sets it on, feeding obnoxiously on human feces and spreading disease. Chinese rhetoric reflects this value judgement. So to call somebody a dog is one of the worst curses Chinese people use to express their contempt. Not surprisingly, people can always rely on numerous set phrases containing defamation of dogs for an emotional response. When an underling gets promoted on the strength of an influential relative, he is "the dog taking advantage of its master's power"; an ugly person is "a human being with a dog's face"; and if someone is hopelessly incapable of disposing of a bad habit, smoking for instance, he is "a dog that will never stop feeding on mucks." Obviously, people with different cultural backgrounds do not

have the shared interests and common value orientations which would lay the basis for a hypothetical universal rhetoric.

This difference in value orientations is also reflected in the rhetorical choices. Language users in various cultures have to meet varied, but specific expectations of their audience for communication. The following passage quoted from a speech made by a Chinese Party official at the Tea Party celebrating the Chinese Spring Festival in honor of teachers shows how set phrases must be used to convey a message and how they are expected:

> Way back in 1964, comrade Mao Zedong pointed out **with farsightedness and clear vision:** as for nurturing the successors of the proletarian revolutionary course, "this is **a major life-and-death issue of tremendous significance** concerning the fate of our Party and our government. This is **an issue of great importance for hundreds of years, for thousands of years, for ten thousands of years for the proletarian revolutionary course** (Wang 1).

Rulers in China have always been believed to be much wiser than those under their rule. When they point out something, they must be described as doing it "with farsightedness and clear vision," be it true or not. The Chinese rhetoric demands it; the audience expect it. An absence of these

adverbial set phrases can not be unintentional: it may indicate the writer's questioning attitude toward the ruler's ability, or it may suggest the writer's lack of respect for the person discussed. In any case, this absence sends a strong signal to the audience who, out of habit, are inclined to read between the lines.

A certain way of expressing oneself is predetermined by the very culture people live in. For Chinese, set phrases such as "with farsightedness and clear vision" serve important purposes, although it would be comical for an American to apply the phrase to George Bush each time the President points something out. Likewise, while many Americans may agree that the war in Iraq was an issue of tremendous significance, few would consider it an issue of great importance "for hundreds of years," and much less "for thousands of years" to the American democratic system. American rhetoric simply does not require this. However, how many Americans can afford to omit the opening complimentary word "dear" each time they start a letter? When a person writes to complain to his boss that he has not got a raise in three years, is his boss really that "dear" in his eyes? Clearly cultural factors influence, if not determine, patterns of rhetoric. People are obliged to use commonly understood rhetorical resources that are appropriate to the communicative goal in a particular culture.

Chinese set phrases are part of the Chinese culture. They grow out of this culture and contribute to it as well. Although many dialects exist in China, the Chinese written language is shared by people in different regions. The geographical constancy of the language partially accounts for the relative unity and stability of Chinese civilization. Admittedly, it is hard to determine if the traditional Chinese traditional respect for stability helps preserve the consistency of language or the beauty of the language, which contains so many extensive literary and historical allusions and makes the Chinese cultural tradition so respectable. What is important, however, is that the Chinese respect for tradition and the Chinese cultural emphasis on history make set phrases popular and respectable. In pre-modern Western society, the master of rhetoric was, in the Ciceronian tradition, expected to "interiorize all that was best in his culture" (Halloran 621). The same is still true in a Chinese context. Chinese classics are part of the Chinese cultural elite, and they provide a valuable source of set hprases which are "most vivid, succinct, and compact" (Sixteen Lectures on Chinese Language).

Linguistic Factors

One major reason for the popularity of Chinese set phrases lies in the structure of those phrases. Most are composed of subject and verb or verb and object. In either case, they always make a grammatically complete Chinese sentence and create a clear image when employed. A typical Chinese set phrase is like a miniature portrait in words; it is best used to express abstract ideas. This characteristic of set phrases helps make up for what would otherwise be a serious shortcoming to the Chinese language: lack of terms expressing abstract ideas.

The Chinese language is unique in crucial ways, ways which support the use of set phrases. For one thing, written Chinese is not directly related to the spoken language, whereas the written symbols of Indo-European and most other language families represent spoken sounds, so that their writing is in essence a code for the spoken language. But the written symbols of Chinese, in sharp contrast, represent concepts.

Written Chinese is made up of symbols that represent not sounds, but ideas--a circle with a dot in the center to represent "sun," a crescent to indicate "moon," and so forth. Then, with the passing of time and the growth of

ideas, characters were combined to convey new meanings. The symbol for "bright," for example, is a combination of "sun" and "moon;" the "tree" symbol repeated twice is "forest." Thus, the word for "man" may be pronounced differently in different sections of China, but the written symbol never changes. It is like the limited system of international numerical symbols that we all share: 1000 is "thousand" to Americans, tysyacha to the Russian, mille to the Frenchman. The written symbol is clear to all. Thus, because of the nature of the language, the Chinese relate characters to concrete things, and tend to think concretely rather than abstractly.

In consequence, set phrases, many of which are figures of speech, help develop the abstract in terms of the concrete, the unknown in terms of the known, equipping the Chinese with convenient terminology to describe abstract ideas. The Chinese language is devoid of the profusion of abstract terms in which English abounds. For example, the Chinese term for "contradiction" consists of a juxtaposition of "spear" and "shield." This stems from a story in the Han Fie Zi in which an armor-seller boasts that his spears can penetrate anything and his shields withstand anything. Also, the notion of "nepotism" (Qiu Dai Guan Xi), when translated into English, literally means "relationships between skirt

and belt," referring to a man benefiting from his wife's rich and powerful relatives. Another example would be the "rustication" of young people during the Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s. This abstract idea in Chinese is appropriately expressed in the form of a set phrases as "up to the mountains, down to the fields" or "join the production brigade and become a commune member."

While it is easy for Westerners to express abstract ideas, the Chinese are always forced by the very nature of the language to resort to concrete expression for abstract concepts. From a Chinese point of view, a quick and forceful handwriting can be best expressed through an image, so admirable penmanship is like "dragon flying and phoenix dancing." Similarly, a freely flowing style of writing is by analogy of "clouds floating and rivers flowing." Unlike English cliche, which supposedly create an emotional experience, Chinese set phrases are used for basic communication. They serve to get across a particular message.

Furthermore, the ambiguous meaning of these pat expressions demands free association from the audience. Their interpretation remains open to each individual. Every reader or listener has to respond to the message received according to his or her own experience, both socially and linguistically. The expression itself can be somewhat trite;

the reflection it produces in audience is always fresh. For Americans, on the other hand, to flaunt cliches is to surrender command of one's meaning, permitting readers to fill in the blank for themselves, something to be avoided.

Rhetorical Factors

Another factor in the popularity of set phrases is the peculiar conventions of Chinese rhetoric. It is possible to express oneself quite clearly in Chinese, but the Chinese are much more interested in good style than in clarity. They have developed a dense, rhetorical style, in which sentences are constructed in a repetitive way--parallel or antithetical--in either case often at the cost of the logic. Thus, in English, "ways and means," "full and complete" "first and foremost" are now considered redundant pairs and writers of English are always advised to cross out some of the useless words. But in Chinese reduplication is a common feature. Passing of night, expressed in a set phrase, is "stars moving and constellations changing;" to make trouble is to "disguise as devil and conjure up demons;" and to show off literary skill is to "brandish the pen and play with the ink."

Obviously, the second terms in all these phrases do not provide any new information. They just repeat in different

words what is expressed in the first part of the phrases. But they are necessary in the sense that they both meet the rhetorical demand of the Chinese language and serve to reinforce the image created earlier.

Sometimes Chinese rhetoric requires employment of several set phrases for the same idea. In his speech made at the Tea Party celebrating the Spring Festival in honor of the teachers, Wang Zhen, deputy prime minister of China, eulogized the teachers this way: "You, numerous comrades of teachers, **Jing Jing Ye Ye** (doing things with great fear and caution), **Ou Xin Li Xue** (working heart out and draining blood up), **Ke Jin Zhi Shou** (serving duty with entire loyalty) work **Qin Fen Wu Si** (diligently and unselfishly) at the educational front" (1). On such an occasion, whoever makes this speech is expected to use such set phrases. The verb "work" needs modifiers in this context. For a situation like this, a stock of phrases is readily available to the educated speaker or writer.

Educational Factors

The educational system, mirroring the wider society, also values set phrases and preserved oral residue, particularly in the role memorization plays in education,

from pre-school through university. Chinese both demands and entrenches oral patterning of thought. After all, "the residual orality of a given chirographic culture," Ong relates "can be calculated to a degree from the mnemonic load it leaves on the mind...from the amount of memorization the culture's educational procedures require" (41). For better or worse, the Chinese educational procedures cry for memorization.

Memorization is very important in the process of learning. The Chinese, like Americans, believe that knowledge leads to a meaningful life, and that word carries power. Yet the Chinese tend to equate knowledge with facts. They are convinced that truth comes out of facts, hence the Mao's well-known adage: "seek truth from facts." The more one knows facts, the more one is regarded as knowledgeable. The process of learning, in Chinese practice, becomes a process of memorizing important facts, be they classic poems or modern Marx' doctrines. John Dewey's philosophy, that education should aim at knowledge that is of practical use, does not gain much currency in China. A Chinese student is required to memorize almost all of the classic essays that are included in the textbook.

The importance of memorization feats in Chinese education also lies in the fact that memorization occurs at every level of learning. For the Chinese, a tenacious memory

is not just an ideal people fantasize about, it is an indispensable attribute in their learning process. Without a strong memory few people can fulfill the task of learning the written language itself, let alone "facts" in other disciplines. The chirographic structure of the Chinese language demands a good memory from its learner.

To start with, Chinese has a basically monosyllabic structure, which means that the basic constituents of Chinese words and phrases are single syllables. When an American learns the twenty six letters, he or she actually masters the key to the whole language system. But a Chinese has to learn the written language character by character. One has to memorize at least three thousand characters to be minimumly literate, and this task takes one about six years to finish according to the standard national syllabus for primary school. The tedious process of learning both calls for and strengthens one's memory.

Besides, Chinese characters often change in meaning as their context changes. Its characters are more like roots than words, because they never change. A westerner learning Chinese undergoes the difficulty that a Chinese learning English would have in understanding a text such as "The eye doctor had a real eye for old people with eye problems. Attending to the eyes of his patient, he eyes them with one

of his eyes." The nature of Chinese characters demands not only a good memory from whoever writes it but also great sensitivity to the linguistic, rhetorical, and social context of the characters memorized--simply to follow the meaning.

Learning written Chinese not only calls for memory but also strengthens it. As discussed earlier, in oral culture, people think memorable thoughts, thoughts that are shaped in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antitheses (Ong 34). Chinese language, interestingly enough, contains almost all of these characteristics with parallelism, analogies and paradoxical-sounding combinations of opposites being the most discerning ones. Ben-Ami Scharfstein discusses these characteristics in details in his book The Mind of China. He styles them "correlation logic." Scharfstein comments:

> Its structure is that of relationships, between, for example, something and nothing, or above and below. By the logic of Chinese, one says 'A great sound but scarcely audible' or 'Nonresistence means strength.' 'To sell' is defined by 'to buy' because both are the same transaction viewed from opposite standpoints. (138)

Obviously, the orally patterned thought shaped by language makes the language memorable.

While the structure of Chinese language requires and enhances memorization, the Chinese educational system canonizes it. Under the Chinese system, memorization feats make up the defining attributes of intelligence. Success and survival in the Chinese education system depend, to a large extend, on how one exercises and develops one's memorization. The following observation, though made by an American professor on foreign language teaching in China, is worth quoting as it applies to any step on the Chinese educational ladder.

> A Chinese English-literature survey class lists the "main" writers, gives birth, death, publication dates, names "important" books, gives "main" ideas and offers three or four sentences of canned social criticism to pigeonhole the writer safely in the official scheme of things, then a page or two of carefully edited text. A Chinese teacher in a literature class read the canned stuff aloud, wrote "main points" on the board in Chinese and English, broached no questions and held no discussion about a text he might or might not have read himself. For the examination, the students dutifully memorized this material and wrote it down exactly as teacher and text had agreed on its being said. (Holm 1)

This way of learning dominates the Chinese curriculum today as it has for more than three thousand years. Other American educators in China also noticed that the Chinese definition of learning, in practice, means committing facts to memory, and training of the memory occupied an important place in traditional Chinese education (Matalen 791 and Jones 56). Students in China are still subjected to the orally based rhetorical training.

To understand how and why the orally based rhetorical training works, it is necessary to look closely at two of the most dominant features of the Chinese educational system--elitist and it is examination-oriented. This is where the demands of the society are "interpreted" in the education system. The Chinese academic curriculum has traditionally served the narrow interests of domestic elites. This tradition greatly emphasized ascetic study, the content of which was barely related to the problems of everyday existence (Arnove 473). At the core of the curricula stood classical literature, with practically no room for scientific or legal subjects, the underlining assumption being that "good writers make good rulers" (Erabuch 16). To be steeped in Chinese classics, a step toward officialdom, all one had to do was to learn them by rote before being able to expound them in the infamous "eight-legged essay" or Ba Gu Essay in Civil Service examinations.

Civil Service exams came into being in 196 BC and were abolished in 1905. Classical literary questions were the only things that were to be tested in the exams. "The examination system," noted Matalene, "made memorizing the classics and composing poems and essays according to the traditional forms prerequisites for membership in the governing elite" (797). Although today's exams differ from the traditional ones both in content and form, the coveted goal of education remains more or less the same: a university degree--the gateway to the highest rewards of power, status, and financial reward.

Elitist and examination-oriented school systems develop their own paradigm and learning strategies. Education aims at passing exams, and learning means mastering of keys to doing so. The surest way to success in exams, then, is still memorizing everything covered in the text and explained by the teacher in class.

Students, of course, have creativity and originality. They may have their own interpretation of their texts, too. However, they can only entertain themselves with "all their bright ideas" in privacy. So far as the education system goes, students are not encouraged to be original. They have to memorize what they are told and throw back in exams in most cases what is given so as to pass exams. Learning occurs on a "need to know basis." When passing exams becomes the

ultimate goal of education. memorizing factual knowledge constitutes the ends of learning.

All in all, memorization ranks high in Chinese rhetorical practices, its feats being considered in good proportion to one's intelligence. With rote learning playing such an important role in Chinese education, the training students are subjected to is still, in essence, orally based, despite the shift from orality to literary which occurred much earlier in China than anywhere else.

In conclusion, the popularity of Chinese set phrases, as this chapter suggests, has everything to do with the Chinese cultural, linguistic, rhetorical and educational factors. The Chinese affinity for set phrases is determined by its oral patterning of thought. Chinese culture produces peculiar conventions of Chinese rhetoric, and Chinese rhetoric has, in turn, shaped Chinese culture.

CHAPTER V. SUMMARY

As previous sections have shown, different mind sets do have different rhetorics. The Chinese fondness for what Americans would call cliches indicates the depth of the cultural differences between East and West. In the Chinese eye, set phrases are used both for basic communication and better style; therefore, they rank high in Chinese written discourse. But those ideas and practices are not shared by modern Americans because Americans have a different set of values and, consequently, a different rhetoric.

By contemporary American standards, good writing should show insight or originality. It should always strive for new ideas and fresh expressions. True communication, in essence, rejects automatic writing as unexciting commonplaces simply bore the reader. On these grounds, the American attack on cliche becomes justifiable.

The Chinese, however, encourage the use of set phrases, phrases that in the American eye are cliches. First of all, they recognize that cliches are unavoidable. "Language revolves on familiar phrases," (266) Daven Kari writes in his article on defending the use of cliche. The Chinese seem to value this statement more than Americans. They know that fresh phrases always grow out of the old, and writing without cliches is beyond human reach.

The Chinese use set phrases for another reason: "social bonding," (Rank 47). Vertically, they identify themselves with their forefathers in terms of both the linguistic form and the contextual content. Horizontally, they bond themselves to their contemporaries by using set phrases sanctioned by the Party. In many cases, Americans use fixed phrases for the same purpose of social bonding. The Chinese, however, do so more consciously.

So it is clear that although originality is a valid criterion in judging good writing, it is a limited one. Dependence on set phrases has its merits, too. Americans lean more toward originality because of their culture and their "individual-centered " way of life while the Chinese emphasize identification with the past due to their particular tradition and "group-centered" way of life. Differences in cultures lead to differences in rhetoric. In fact, differences exist not only between two cultures, but also within the one culture if one takes into account diachronic as well as syncronic changes. Value orientations, basic codes of behavior, and the use of rhetoric change with times. This awareness of the difference is important. It is important not just because other ideas and times and places are interesting, certainly not because they are intrinsically superior. It is important because awareness of our own and

other cultures will allow us to break out of the narrow circle of the moment. It will give us the freedom from abitrary rules and freedom to go beyond convention. When we understand how rhetoric works in other cultures, we can better understand how it functions in our own. We will understand how things differ and why times change.

Viewed in terms of contrastive rhetoric, it becomes necessary for us to question the validity of modern American writing teachers' advice against cliches and seriously consider this question posed by Nicholas Bagnall: "Is it possible..that the 20th century is being unfair to a venerable cultural device?" (19).

The investigation of the role of Chinese set phrases in discourse provides some implications for American pedagogical approaches to the notion of cliches. Instead of imposing "the cult of Originality" (Bagnall 22) upon students with handy but cheap comments such as "avoid cliches," "get rid of trite expressions," and "do away with hackneyed phrases" (many of these comments are becoming cliches in themselves), American writing teachers, armed with the insights of contrastive rhetoric, might focus on the nature and functions of cliches. They may then go beyond mere condemnation of cliches and instead evolve ways to help students learn where "cliches" are appropriate and where they are not, given the

circumstances surrounding a piece of written discourse--including its cultural context.

First, American composition teachers might help their students recognize that cliches exist as part of linguistic and cultural inheritance. Total avoidance of cliches is impractical since it "lead[s] not only to a diminution of mutual understanding, but also to an impoverishment of the language itself" (Bagnall 22). Furthermore, not all cliches are bad for good writing, which should always be a conscious act of rhetorical choice. Sometimes, a well-chosen cliche can best serve a particular rhetorical situation.

Second, American writing teachers should make their students see that different criteria for judging cliches exist. While cliches can be attacked on the grounds of age, time, and repetition, they can be defended on other grounds, by the criteria of speed and clarity, familiarity, social bonding, and personal delight (Rank 45-47). What counts in good writing is not mere avoidance of cliches in writing, but an intelligent rhetorical choice based upon a clear set of criteria.

Third, rather than asking students to avoid cliches, American writing teachers might teach them how to manipulate cliches. Contrastive rhetoric may help writing instructors teach their students how to identify, understand, and

revitalize cliches. Kari's six methods of treating cliches can be a good start for composition instruction on cliches. (See Chapter II)

Set phrases and cliches are passed down through generations. They contribute to language acquisition and to adaptation to the values and thought system of a particular culture. Contrastive study of them has pedagogical as well as theoretical implications. The present study of Chinese uses of set phrases is only a beginning; much more research needs to be conducted to help writing teachers from both America and China approach the question and others related to it from a more fruitful perspective.

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