Ambient Propaganda: Attunement, Affect & The Chinese Dream

By Matthew Overstreet

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a study in rhetorical ecology

University of Pittsburgh
mwo4@pitt.edu
mwover.wordpress.com
@mwovers
I. Introduction

The city is a teacher of virtue, Socrates claims. But how exactly does the city teach? To find out, the following examines a specific city, and a specific set of virtues. The city in question is Xiamen, a mid-sized Chinese metropolis. The virtues are those of the Chinese government, headed by President Xi Jinping. As we’ll see, Xi’s Xiamen instructs its citizens in ways both subtle and overt. Through manipulation of the affective background, I’ll suggest, patriotic (E.G. pro-government) propensities are cultivated and maintained.

Xi assumed the presidency in 2013. This is a key moment because he is the first modern Chinese leader not handpicked by Deng Xiaoping, the father of the “reform and opening up” which gave us the Communist Party-led, hyper-capitalist China we know today. Per convention, with a new leader comes a new guiding political slogan, a “careful redrafting of the national myth,” to quote Xing Lu and Herbert Simons (267). The slogan this time around is “The Chinese Dream.”
Like any political slogan, the Chinese Dream is necessarily obscure. According to Josef Mahoney, it represents an “ambiguous metanarrative,” a web of feeling tied together by a master signifier, through which certain developments can be lauded and others condemned (15). For example, Mo Yan’s Nobel prize is part of the Chinese Dream narrative, but Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo’s similar award is not; a new aircraft carrier is, China’s football failures are not. Given its inherent ambiguity, the Chinese Dream is perhaps best defined by its purpose: to legitimate the Party as China’s rightful governing authority.

To see how the Chinese Dream works, here’s an ad for the Party which utilizes the concept.
Intrigued, in the summer of 2014 I decided to look into how the campaign was playing out on the ground. Specifically, I decided to do an in-depth study of the ways in which the slogan was being deployed in one city and in one medium. The city I chose, and where I spent two months, was Xiamen, a prosperous island city of about 2 million people off the coast of Fujian province. The medium I chose was public signage.
IV. Methodology

I first documented and photographed various uses of the Chinese Dream slogan. After that, along with my friend and collaborator, Fan Guifeng, I translated the signs into English. We then studied what we found, trying to determine the philosophical and rhetorical traditions the campaign draws upon, how the language constructs an audience, and the implied relationship between that audience and the rhetor.

V. Literature Review

Of course, I’m not the first scholar to examine public signs in China. A Chinese scholar, Yaming Jin, has recently examined the evolution of signage from a linguistic perspective. Focusing primarily on warning signs, those which seek to prohibit certain behaviors, Jin finds that as China entered its reform period in the late 1970s, direct, rather harsh forms of address (不许, bùxǔ, must not, for example) were replaced by more creative and abstract forms.
With Maoism, Lu argues, Chinese rhetoric became more direct, more demanding. Moral absolutism and a tone of scientific-minded “rationalism” now ruled. As of 2004, Lu still finds evidence of this shift. Public discourse, she writes, continues to emphasize “content over style, aiming to inculcate rather than to move or please” (180). This is especially true of official and political speech. Such speech, Lu writes, “still shows traces of the formalized, abstract, high-sounding, and dry communication style” of the Cultural Revolution (197).

According to Lu, the traditional Chinese mindset, shaped by Confucianism, was defined by a “love of moderation and restraint” (93). This translated to a rhetorical style marked by indirection and poetic flourish. Themes of harmony, holism and the value of practical wisdom were common, while abstraction and extremism—in both thought and language—were disfavored.

In these two accounts we see, not for the last time, something of a contradiction. While Lu finds that “metaphors, analogies, and stylistic devices” are rare in Chinese public discourse (180), Jin, writing just six years later, finds numerous examples of creative and stylistic language use. In terms of the Chinese Dream campaign, as it played out in Xiamen, we’ll see that to a certain degree, both readings are correct.

A more rhetorically focused study can be found in Xing Lu’s Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, from 2004. This book, by a Chinese-American academic, shows how the rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution continues to shape Chinese thought and language. Lu’s primary claim is that with Maoism, formalized and restricted language came to dominate public discourse, leading to “linguistic impoverishment and thought-deprivation” (49).
VI. On The Ground

Chinese Dream imagery was pervasive in Xiamen. Literally every public space had numerous Chinese Dream signs. I found them on the sides of buses, on TVs in the elevator, on giant billboards above city squares. The campaign, it can be said, represents an effort to refashion the cityscape. Through proliferation and iteration it changed how life in Xiamen was experienced.

On TV screens in the elevators of residential buildings...
On electrical boxes...

In the park...

At the bus stop...
The messages fit into two categories. Some are obviously Confucian in nature, urging filial piety, social harmony and other Confucian virtues. For example, here we have a large “孝” character (xiào, filial piety), with text and imagery indicating that this is a desired virtue. Next to this type of message though there are those which purely celebrate the Party. Here two men are “singing a song in praise of the Party.”
The same duality exists on a linguistic level. The campaign mixes very poetic, abstract language—the type of language Lu associates with traditional Chinese rhetoric—with incredibly blunt, socialist-inspired language. So here we have “The realization of the Chinese Dream is every home has good fortune.” And right next to it, “The Party is good; socialism is good; reform and opening up is good.”

So, based on these signs, we can say that both Lu and Xing are partially correct. As Lu suggests, the signs do betray an awareness of the persuasive power of “stirring beautiful imagination.” On the other hand, someone—perhaps someone in the local Party office—remains wedded to blunt, rather dry rhetoric which seeks to “inculcate rather than to move or please.”
Given what appears to be a lack of any noticeable persuasive effect, is the Chinese Dream campaign an instance of failed rhetoric? Perhaps. Perhaps government propaganda, even of a stylish sort, is bound to be ignored by sophisticated, 21st century city-dwellers. Or perhaps the campaign itself is ill-conceived. Given its mix of Confucius and Mao, poetry and Party-speak, the campaign does seem rather incoherent. Certainly, it lacks any argument that can be conveyed in a neat soundbite...

What do locals think of the campaign? To try and find out, I did a number of interviews with Xiamen residents. To a person, the attitude displayed was a lack of interest, mixed with bemusement. The most common response to questions about the campaign was “I hadn’t noticed,” followed by “the government is always trying to tell you something.” When shown pictures of particular signs, reactions were vaguely positive: that’s a nice sentiment, or that’s a pretty picture. Still, no interview subject reported being moved towards any particular thought or action. As one student put it, government propaganda is just “not very cool.”

But what if we think beyond language?
As we’ve seen, the Chinese Dream campaign isn’t persuasive on a conscious level. Contemporary rhetorical theory, though, warns us not to discount that which escapes awareness. Belief is not purely symbolic, but instead arises out of the interaction of symbols, bodies, space and things. Therefore, as Thomas Rickert argues, we must consider the ambient, “the background of intelligibility” (5), the ways in which rhetorical action organizes experience, “not so much to persuade in any direct sense, but to attune and inflect our sense of bodily inhabitation” (155).

Affect is essential to any understanding of the ambient. Affect is intersubjective emotion, a sort of friction which occurs when symbols, bodies, spaces and things collide. According to Nigel Thrift, affect manifests as propensities—the increased (or decreased) willingness of bodies to think and act in certain ways. Like a “network of pipes and cables,” affect constitutes “the root texture of urban life” (58). And more and more often, Thrift argues, city planners are manipulating it.

Thinking in terms of affect and ambience, we can see how the Chinese Dream campaign might persuade without being consciously persuasive. Rather than evidencing claims, or suggesting action, it ties Party to family, health, wealth, etc. Through the juxtaposition, iteration and proliferation of these feeling-laden symbols it could be said to skew, ever so subtly, the affective equation by which citizens make sense of the world. Babies are good, melts into reform is good, melts into the Party is good: all beyond the edge of thought.
The result could be an increased propensity for certain (conscious) beliefs—that the CCP is China’s rightful governing authority, for example—and a certain felt coolness to other claims—calls for free elections perhaps....

Speculation? Yes. But no one I spoke with expressed dissatisfaction with the government. Indeed, recent surveys indicate over 80% popular approval (see Lewis-Beck, et al.).

Rhetoric can operate beyond consciousness, beyond cool.

Perhaps this is how the city teaches.

The Chinese Dream fills otherwise empty space with the vague hum of patriotism.
Works Cited


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