

Reviews

Michael Schoenhals: *Doing Things with Words in Chinese Politics: Five Studies*. Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1992 (China Research Monograph 41). 135 pp.

This book is about the power of language in contemporary Chinese politics. There are five studies dealing with various aspects of this issue. The first chapter sketches the methodological framework which is informed by the British anthropologist Maurice Freedman and reaches the conclusion that formalization of language ultimately becomes a form of power for the already powerful rather than an instrument of coercion available to all.

Chapter two deals with Party circulars - the so-called redheads (*hongtou wenjian*) - issued by the CCP Center or one of the CCP Central Departments. Schoenhals argues that these circulars play a greater role in forming political discourse in China than ideology. Therefore ideology becomes secondary to the bureaucratic apparatus which works out and circulates these redheads. The political language is not a product of ideological convictions and beliefs, but a product of language engineering done by small bureaucrats.

Chapter three is about ghost-writers. Schoenhals supplements the written sources by interviews with former ghost-writers. There is interesting information about the work of the pen-wielding team of Hu Yaobang and the working relationship between the team and Hu who was rapidly rising in the hierarchy. The inside story of how Lin Biao worked (or rather did not work) with his group is rather funny and shows a policy-making process dominated by chance and coincidence rather than clear ideological preferences.

Chapter four is about Hu Qiaomu, one of the most influential ghost-writers in PRC political history. More specifically the chapter deals with Hu Qiaomu's direction of *Renmin Ribao* in the 1950s. Apparently, each morning one of the junior editors would bring the paper to Hu Qiaomu who would then go over its contents, while he had his morning rice gruel. The editor would then jot down Hu Qiaomus remarks. Although the remarks are from 1955, they were republished in 1978 to serve as guidelines for newspaper work.

Chapter five deals with the relationship between people and texts and how the political manipulation of language influences the quality of Chinese academic writing. The examples of censorship cited give a clear indication of the intense politicization of academic

discourse. Schoenhals also shows the thoroughness of the alterations and revisions the articles and speeches by important leaders are subjected to before appearing in official publications.

These five essays form an important book on political discourse and the power of appropriate formulations (*tifa*). It is enjoyable to read with little glimpses of inside information. My queries are minor.

I am puzzled by the fate of the particular group of ghost-writers surrounding Hu Yaobang. Why were they sacrificed when their mentor moved to take up the position as Party leader? It appears clear that the new Politburo member in charge of the Party School, Wang Zhen, would not have any interest in keeping them, but why did Hu not take them with him? Did he stop using ghost-writers or did he form a new group? Is it so that particular people serve particular purposes at certain times and when they have served their role they can be dispensed with? If this is the case then the leader is much more dominating and the work of the pen-wielders much more circumscribed than Schoenhals will have it. Perhaps, the leader would only be interested in a certain *tifa* if it would advance his own interest and power, so that behind the formulations you have power considerations - individual leaders jostling for power and influence. If this is the case, language formulations would still be of interest, but they would not necessarily have a lot to say about policy-making and leadership struggle.

Another point concerns the language spoken by the leaders. Are the finely tuned formulations also for internal use among the leaders or are they mainly meant for public consumption? We know that ordinary Chinese have different preoccupations and talk in a different way when they meet publicly than when they meet privately. The same would probably be the case when the leaders meet. So apparently there would be a "hidden transcript" - to use a concept by James Scott. A discussion of the relationship between the "hidden transcript" and the formalized language of the pen-wielders would have been welcome.

Finally, this reviewer is not totally convinced that the language discussed in this volume remains unchallenged in the public discourse. It is clear that dissident circles use a different language. There is also an underground media and publishing world which is totally outside the control of the party-state and its formalized language. In fact, the marketization and commercialization of

Chinese society makes it increasingly difficult to uphold a system that was developed in the 1950s, when the central planning and allocation process was introduced in all spheres of society.

There are by now many approaches to the study of Chinese politics - clientelism, rational choice, bureaucratic politics, political culture, corporatism, etc. Schoenhals has contributed to the development of a new approach which stresses the importance of texts and language. For this he deserves credit. For anyone interested in the multi-faceted working of the Chinese political system this well-conceived book is worth reading.

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