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The Functions of Mao Zedong's Enigmatic Language

Ping Sun¹

ABSTRACT

Mao Zedong was a voracious reader in various fields and an expert in philosophy and history, and he knew the ancient Chinese history stories so well that he became highly skilled in applying those strategies and deceptions used by the ancient rulers in his own administration. Whenever he was dealing with some tough issues, he would make the past serve the present, using the characters in the ancient Chinese history stories to allude to some people or using the ideas in the philosophical books to explicate something. This special speech style adopted by Mao Zedong is called “enigmatic language”, an indirect language which is quite close to present “riddle”. Its real implied meaning changes with the specific referents and the concrete situations. This paper studies the functions of one of his commonly used enigmatic language styles, that is, his recommendation of the proper books to the people working close to him. Results show that by recommending the different books to those surrounding him he intended to inspire, to warn, to criticize and even to satirize his subordinates or his colleagues, insinuating his real political intentions as well as his purposes of gauging their genuine political loyalty. However, we also find that his enigmatic language depressed most of people surrounding him, who could not interpret his words properly to understand his implied intentions.

Key words: Criticize, enigmatic language, inspire, satirize, warn.

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1.0 Introduction

¹ Teaching Department of Ideological and Political Theory, North China Electric Power University, Beijing , P. R. China, Email: wpsunhd@sina.com.

Mao Zedong, commonly known as a controversial political leader, dictator, philosopher in Chinese history, is also known as a voracious reader and versatile writer (Li Zhisui, 1996). He loved reading books in history, philosophy, and literature, and Chinese history is his special preference. It is said that he read the *History as a Mirror*, 3,000,000 words, for seven times (Li Rui, 1992: 200) or even seventeen times (Wang Xiangping, 2011). Li Zhisui (1996), his personal doctor for twenty-two years, recalled that his bed was always piled with books and he frequently quoted those ancient Chinese emperors' stories in his daily talk with his subordinates. Willis Barnstone (2008) regarded him as "one of twentieth-century China's best poets," and a reviewer in *The Washington Post* called Mao's poems "political documents," but added, "It is as literature that they should be considered" (Raskin, 2009). His reading covers all the fields of history, philosophy, and literature, and he had a special preference for the ancient Chinese history stories. Early in 1916, in a personal letter to Xiao Zisheng, one of his classmates, the twenty-three-year-old Mao Zedong even recommended 77 kinds of books to him, and most of the books are undoubtedly history books. Chinese traditional culture is the soil of his thoughts in his whole life (Wang Xiangping, 2011).

Chinese traditional culture facilitated him with unique ideas in his administration in that he was an expert of making the past serve the present (Wang Xiangping, 2011). He surprised those who were working close with him for his excellent memory of the classical Chinese history stories. Whenever he spoke to his subordinates, the stories would occur to his mind and come out of his mouth freely. Sometimes he would recommend the ancient history books to his colleagues or subordinates, hoping them to comprehend the meaning involved in the stories. Those ancient stories, providing his speech with a mysterious atmosphere, really revealed his opinions and attitudes (Li Weizhen, 2014). This kind of speech made those poor-educated subordinates under heavy pressure because they couldn't understand the implied meaning in his words and consequently they couldn't follow correctly his words. Besides history books, he also recommended philosophy books to them, wishing them to use the philosophical thoughts to resolve the real complex matters in politics. All in all, Mao could find the perfect matches in the books he had already read for those persons or events he wanted to deal with. This speech style Mao Zedong preferred is kind of "enigmatic language" which is an indirect language and is close to present "riddle." Its implied meaning is flexible and it changes with the specific referents and the concrete situations (Huang Lin, 2012).

Previous studies have recognized Mao Zedong's preference for recommending books to the people working close with him as well as his enigmatic or indirect language style, but have not answered the following questions to disclose the functions of his enigmatic language. In what situations he would recommend books to them? What are his real purposes in recommending those books? Taking various real stories in Chinese history as the data, this paper aims to analyze the functions of Mao Zedong's enigmatic language. Findings show that whenever he was dealing with the tough persons or events, or he thought something difficult or improper to express directly, Mao would use what he had read in the books to reveal his expectations or warnings. His suggestions and directions to those governmental officials as well as his real purposes were all involved in his quotations of the words in those books or in his recommendations of the books to his subordinates. His praises for his subordinates will not be discussed, but his disapprovals of or expectations upon them will be focused here. By recommending different books to his subordinates and colleagues, Mao Zedong's various intentions like inspiration, warning, criticism, and sarcasm are implicated.

2.0 To inspire

To inspire literally means to encourage someone to achieve something great willingly and eagerly. Mao Zedong gave his inspiration to his colleagues or subordinates so as to make them follow him closely without any complaints. But to interpret the real intention under Mao's inspiration was not that easy, especially for those poor-educated party leaders. This can be shown in the case of Peng Dehuai.

In April, 1959, the time of Shanghai Conference, Mao Zedong promoted vehemently "Hai Rui Spirit" to

encourage his subordinates to emulate Hai Rui so as to speak truth of the Great Leap Forward. The story of Hai Rui depicted Emperor Jiajing of Ming Dynasty as a dictator, who put many ministers in the court to death because of their truth-telling, but, Hai Rui, an upright official, renowned for his fairness, integrity, and commitment to reform, was the hero. The whole story, later put into drama on stage, extolled the courage and honesty of the official who had risked his life for the good of his country. The emperor, maybe moved by his genuine loyalty, put Hai Rui into prison but did not condemn him to death. Finally after the death of the emperor, Hai Rui was released from prison.

Mao Zedong's promotion of Hai Rui Spirit was taken by most of his subordinates as his expectation of them to follow the integrity and loyalty of Hai Rui to speak directly their hearts. Peng Dehuai, China's most honest, outspoken minister of defense, who had so often dared to criticize Mao, was undoubtedly no exception. It is on the Shanghai Conference that Mao mentioned he once recommended *The History of Ming Dynasty: The Records of Hai Rui* to Peng Dehuai (Chen Pixian, 2005: 289). Motivated and encouraged by Mao, Peng read this book carefully after his busy work. It is unknown to people whether Peng thought of Hai Rui when he wrote a letter full of criticism of the Great Leap Forward to Mao Zedong during the Lushan meetings in 1959, but evidence showed that he was extraordinarily encouraged by Mao's high praise of Hai Rui.

However, Mao Zedong's real attitude towards Hai Rui was ambiguous. Maybe he loved and hated this minister in the Ming Dynasty simultaneously, or to be more specific, he really preferred "the left-winged Hai Rui" (Li Rui, 2010: 359). Nobody knew his real inner heart. It is possible that his real intention was to "coax the snake out of the hole" (ibid: 83). Hai Rui was not sentenced to death for his integrity, but Peng Dehuai, the person who followed his example was purged in the Cultural Revolution and died miserably. Therefore speaking truth brought a disaster to Peng, who misunderstood Mao's inspiration.

Also in 1959, Mao urged the party officials as well as those working around him to read *The Records of Guo Jia*. In this book, Guo Jia was described as resourceful and decisive. But Guo died when he was only 36, which made Cao Cao depressed. Later after the defeat in Chibi, Cao even said that if Guo was still alive, they would not be defeated completely. On the second conference of Zhengzhou in 1959, the various drawbacks began to be obvious, which made Mao think about the Great Leap Forward. Quite similar to Cao Cao's longing for Guo Jia, Mao talked to Li Rui about Chenyun and signed that "When a country is caught in danger, people would think of the commanding generals; when a man sinks into poverty, he would think of his kindhearted and understanding wife".

Bo Yibo (2002:25) recollected "Mao Zedong asked all the officials in different ranks to learn from Guo Jia, hoping them to be wise and resourceful. Mao emphasized that the key word of the phrase 'resourceful and decisive' is 'resourceful'. Only be resourceful, can a person be decisive. Mao also added that 'decisive' means to make a prompt not hesitant decision. This is also useful and insightful to all of us". Pang & Jin (2011: 1907) recollected that during the Shanghai Conference, Mao sang high praise for Guo Jia and urged the officials to read *The Records of Guo Jia*, aiming to make them resourceful and decisive to offer real and comprehensive information and provide wise strategies. Sun Dongsheng (2006) also talked about Mao's recommendation to all the high-ranking officials of reading Guo Jia. Because Mao realized that in the process of constructing the country officials like Guo were really in need. After the Great Leap Forward, Mao had higher and higher expectations upon the officials to build an advanced country. In addition, Mao realized that the leaders' correct thinking or working abilities like being resourceful and decisive were very important.

A successful case of insinuating his inspiration in the characters of the books he recommended is in his dealing with Zhou Enlai after the 9.13 Lin Biao Affair in 1971. After Lin's death, Mao Zedong planned to train Wang Hongwen as his new successor. Wang was chosen because of his multi-identity as a worker, farmer and soldier, as well as his being the leader of Shanghai rebellion, but he was short of ability and shallow in knowledge. Wang, who was regarded as "the Children's Corps" by the senior high ranking party leaders, was no competitor to Zhou Enlai in terms of either competence or experience.

Considering this as an obvious erroneous decision, Mao ordered Yao Wenyuan to give Zhou Enlai two ancient Chinese stories to read: one is *Records of the Historian: Ji and Zheng*, another is *Records of Jin Dynasty : the Story of Heng Yi*. In the first story, Ji and Zheng were two ancient Chinese officials in court. They were both loyal to the emperor. The former was known to people for his integrity and pride and the latter for his modesty and uprightness. When Ji saw that some incompetents were promoted above him, he complained to Emperor Wu. Emperor Wu used Zheng as his model, saying that “Zheng walked thousands of miles away without taking food”. Heng Yi was another loyal official to the emperor in the Dynasty of East Jin. Genuine loyalty from the officials to the emperors is the shared point in these two stories. It was obvious that Mao was dropping a broad a hint to Zhou: A loyal supporter to the Chairman would not complain of the nomination of Wang Hongwen as the Chairman’s new successor.

Zhou Enlai understood immediately what Mao Zedong intended to imply, so he offered to bring Mao’s decree to the party leaders and guaranteed his firm support to Wang Hongwen. On August 23, 1973, on one important conference convened by the Central Politburo for those ranking provincial party leaders and the high-level party officials of the departments directly under the Party Central Committee, Zhou emphasized the importance of Wang’s work in the Central Government, saying that “Under Chairman’s frequent requirements, I here want to bring his words to you. According to his opinion, we need to select young cadres. We cannot look down upon ‘the Children’s Corps’” (Pang & Jin, 2011: 2631). Zhou aimed to show to the higher ranking Party officials that Wang Hongwen was promoted to the important position by Mao Zedong, and hence they are not expected to disagree but obey.

3.0 To warn

If warning is given indirectly, it is supposed to be accepted easily. However, sometimes people could not understand the hidden warning so the result would not be that satisfying. Mao Zedong’s warnings to some members of the notorious “Gang of Four” were proved not to be taken seriously.

As what is mentioned above, Mao ventured to bring up Wang Hongwen as his successor. This was partly because he always preferred the illiterate persons to the intellectuals. Early in March, 1964, he said to the cadres of the Communist Party, “The secretary of the Party Committee in Dazai was illiterate and Emperor Zhu Hongwu was not well educated, but we cannot look down upon them. Not all intellectuals are capable. In our army there are many rough persons, but we defeated the well educated Guomindang soldiers” (Xu Jingxian, 2005: 287-288).

Though he had faith in the young and unschooled Wang Hongwen, he saw the potential danger of being illiterate. In July, 1973, Mao Zedong asked Wang Hongwen to read *After the Han: The Biography of Liu Basin*, which told a ridiculous story of an illiterate emperor, Liu Basin. He became the emperor by drawing lots in time of the invasion of the enemies when he was only 15 years old, a child cowherd. Being accustomed to the former leisure life, he found himself restricted by a lot of principles and he also felt uncomfortable in the imperial robe. Whenever he was free, he would take off the inconvenient robe and dress his usual clothes to play with his former friends, the cowboys. Later, the insurrectionary army under his leadership was defeated by Liu Xiu. Mao Zedong asked Wang Hongwen, the vice-chairman of the Central Party, to read this story, aiming to remind Wang to improve his abilities so as not to be a second Liu Basin, because Wang and Liu shared something.

Xu Jingxian (2005 : 295) recalled:

Mao Zedong really wanted to warn Wang Hongwen that he was born a cowherd, just like Liu Basin. His only revolution background is the rebellion in the Cultural Revolution. After the Lin Biao Affair, he was luckily chosen as a young successor because he was easily accepted by every political faction. Wang should be aware of it. If he did not improve himself, he would be finally defeated.

However, Wang Hongwen just followed the route of Liu Basin, taking no notice of Mao's warning, indulging himself into fishing, hunting and motoring everyday in Zhongnanhai. Later he joined Jiang Qing and became one important member of the "Gang of Four." Comparing Wang Hongwen with Liu Basin, "the former was even worse than the latter" (ibid: 300).

Mao Zedong's warning also went to his wife, Jiang Qing, an ambitious woman for power. To thwart Jiang Qing's ambition, Mao usually made her party rank low enough. But during the Cultural Revolution, Jiang Qing's ambition was out of control. Before the Tenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 1973, Jiang Qing urged Zhou Enlai and Kang Sheng to submit to the committee of inviting her and Yao Wenyuan as members of the Standing Committee of the Politburo. In the consequent Politburo meeting, Mao openly expressed his disagreement against it and said that "I think they can only be accepted as the members of the Politburo, not the members of the Standing Committee" (Yang Yinlu, 2013).

On March 20, 1974, Mao wrote his wife a letter, saying, "It would be better for us not to see each other. For years I have advised you about many things, but you have ignored most of it. So what use is there for us to see each other? There are Marxist-Leninist books—and books by me—but you won't study them seriously. I am eighty-one years old and seriously ill, but you show hardly any concern. You now enjoy many privileges, but after my death, what are you going to do?" (Li Zhisui, 1996: 578-579). From this letter we can see Mao was always expecting his wife to read Marxist-Leninist books as well as the books written by him carefully to facilitate her mind but Jiang Qing depressed him greatly.

On November 20, 1974, the depressed and irritated Mao Zedong wrote Jiang Qing another letter, requesting her to read *The Legend of Huang Qiong*, in which there are lines like "Tall things are easily broken, and clean waters are easily polluted." The real warning to Jiang Qing was insinuated: You should not be arrogant and domineering, because things will develop in the opposite direction when they go to the extreme. What Mao Zedong was really worried about was that his wife would disrupt all his previous plan and work, which later proved to be true.

Besides giving warning to Wang Hongwen and Jiang Qing, Mao also gave indirect warning to Xu Shiyu, a poor-educated brave soldier, by recommending him to read the classical Chinese book *The Dream of Red Mansion* (Pang and Jin 2011: 2644-2645). It was after the Lin Biao Event, on December 21, 1973, Mao interviewed the 43 members of the Central Military Commission, talking with them for one hour and twenty minutes. He had a face-to-face talk with almost each of them, giving concerns of their health as well as requesting them to read some good books. He gave special suggestion to Xu Shiyu, asking Xu to read the book *The Dream of Red Mansion* at least five times, because in his opinion only after reading a book for five times you can understand it completely. Mao also compared Xu with Zhou Bo, a significant historical Chinese figure, who was honest and simple but poor-educated. Mao's real intention was to warn Xu that in peaceful time it was inadequate to deal with the Politburo issues with the mind in the warring time.

4.0 To criticize

To those who were obvious obstacles standing in his way, Mao would not only give warning but criticize. According to Li Rui (2010: 273, 318), during the Great Leap Forward, on August 1, 1959, Mao Zedong wrote a letter to Zhou Xiaozhou, his former secretary, in which he quoted lines from one ancient book, written by Qiu Chi with the name *The Words to Chen Bo*. The meaning of those lines can be explicated as the follows: The sagacious persons would sing praises to those who can realize their errors and mend their ways; the ancient books and records also gave praises to those who would have no hesitation to change their minds immediately after they realized their own errors. Through this letter, Mao intended to criticize Zhou and other *xiucai* (scholars), hoping them to stand firm (Don't go the wrong way with Peng Dehuai) and mend their ways. Accordingly Zhou admitted that "I fell into the anti-communist group under comrade Peng Dehuai, becoming one important member". In the

consequent meeting on August 11, 1959, Mao emphasized that “these people wanted to scoop out the scholars”, but he thought that it was impossible, because “the scholars belong to us, not you”.

Lin Biao, commonly known as Mao’s firm follower and supporter as well as successor, was later sensed by Mao as disloyal because of the gradual strains between them. Mao’s severe criticism of Lin did not make him subservient but drove him to fly north for the Soviet Union. On September 13, 1971, Lin died in the Undur Khan area of Outer Mongolia in that flight, because of the plane crash. Their strains dated back to Lin’s gradual grasp of power. After the Lushan Conference in 1970, because of the increasing power of Lin Biao, Mao Zedong proposed the three means of depowering Lin by using three metaphorical expressions: “Throwing Stones” refers to adding the remarks of criticism for Chen Boda and others on some documents; “Adulterating Sands” means adding extra members to the administrative group of the Military Commission of Central Committee of the Communist Party of China; and “Undermining the Foundation of the Wall” hints at reorganizing the Beijing Military Region. Besides these three concrete means, he also toured to different places to warn those officials against being lured by Lin Biao.

Wu Faxian (2006: 860) recalled that Mao Zedong prepared well early for getting rid of Lin Biao. Before he started his south trip to meet with regional political and military leaders, he even asked the Central Office to deliver every member of the Standing Committee of the Politburo a thin book, named *HeDian*. Wu said that he was confused by those puzzling lines in this book, for example, “Medicine is good for curable diseases, not for incurable ones; A bragging doctor has no effective medicine, and the patient is thus destined to die in his hands”. Wu thought that Mao Zedong was probably hinting that Lin Biao was not a sincere doctor, who just openly shouted the slogans for his longevity but privately wanted him to die early. But in Wu’s opinion, Lin had always been a loyal assistant and firm follower of Mao since the Long March to the Cultural Revolution, and he had never heard Lin uttered a disrespectful word against Mao.

He Dian, according to Liu Jixing (2010), is a collection of ghost stories, in which all the characters are evil and inhuman. Mao’s recommendation to all the members of the Standing Committee of the Politburo of reading this little book really revealed his severe criticism of Lin Biao, an “evil” high ranking party leader. This on the first hand proposed a threat to Lin Biao, and on the second hand gave a warning to some members of the Standing Committee of the Politburo: From today on, you should pay attention to your political stand and it is dangerous to follow Vice-chairman Lin who had evil intentions.

5.0 To satirize

On the Lu Shan Conference in 1959, Zhang Wentian made a long three-hour speech in the group meeting. He systematically theorized the drawbacks and errors since the Great Leap Forward, holding a positive attitude towards Peng’s “letter”. Zhang’s speech aroused Mao’s attention (Pang and Jin 2011: 1950). On August 2, 1959, Mao wrote a letter to Zhang Wentian, which was printed and delivered to every member of The Chinese Communist Party’s Eight Plenary Session. Part of the satirical letter is as the follows (Li Rui 2010:1966):

How can you go to that club? It evidenced the saying that things of a kind come together and people of a mind fall into the same group. What do you really intend this time? You spared no effort to find out those dark materials. They seem to be valuable things. But when they are exposed to light, people can see they are all fakes...I think that your aged disease recurred. You didn’t get rid of the malarial parasite so now the chills and fever attack you...You totally forget the key elements of Marxism. If you rush into the military club, your literacy and the military skills may complement each other. It is really an excellent result. What can we do now? The only thing you can do is to use your chopsticks as the special sticks to play the drinker’s wager game, that is, to make a complete change.

Mao's severe criticism of Liu Shaoqi, one high ranking party leader, was obviously harbored in his mind for a long time. Giving Liu Shaoqi the position of chairman, head of state, in 1959, had been a test of his loyalty, and later by 1962 and exactly on the 7,000 Cadres' Conference, Mao was becoming convinced that Liu was less than loyal. On that conference, the cadres focused on the policies of the Great Leap Forward. Liu refused to accept Mao's official explanation that natural disasters caused the economic disasters. In his opinion, it was the man-made disaster that struck the whole country. Liu's viewpoint was widely shared by the cadres but not by Mao, who became furious. The 7,000 cadres found the conference an opportunity to pour forth their complaints against the party leadership, which was taken by Mao as complaints directed against him, because he was the Chairman of the central authority. From this conference, the two great leaders diverted their views and strains in the alliance between them engendered. Liu Shaoqi was later seriously ill but not well-treated. He died in prison during the Cultural Revolution, from physical abuse, illness, and medical neglect.

But Mao never openly criticized Liu, instead he made his attitude clearly in his recommendation of books to him. On the evening of January 13, 1967, Mao Zedong sent his secretary to fetch Liu Shaoqi to the Great Hall of the People for a face-to-face talk, which turned out to be their last interaction. On Liu's departure, Mao recommended him two books, while telling him to take good care of his health. According to Li Taihe, the chief of bodyguards, Liu felt excited when he returned to his residence. He asked his secretary to find him two or three books, one was possibly written by philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and another by Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach. Li was not quite sure about the names and authors of the books. Liu Shaoqi's dear daughter Liu Aiqin also mentioned Mao's recommendation to her father of two books. In her opinion, Mao asked her father to read *Mechanics Materialism* written by the German zoologist Hegel and *Mechanist* by Denis Diderot. Xie Yongli expressed the following views in *Beijing Daily*:

Mao asked Liu to read these books to hint that human development is constant and will not stop at one socialist goal, so is revolution. At that time Liu doubted about the Cultural Revolution, and Mao really wanted Liu to understand the principle of development is movement, change, and revolution. Revolution is the solution of problems but it is not the end. Therefore these two great leaders have already diverted from each other in their opinions.

These two books had a clear revelation of Mao's ideas: Mechanical materialism sees the world as something separate, static and one-sided, ignoring the universal relationship. By recommending these books to Liu, Mao intended to satirize Liu's fossilized world view. To Mao, Liu couldn't keep up with his pace and thus he saw no prospect of socialism.

However, the mechanical Liu didn't see through Mao's implication. Liu's wife, Wang Guangmei later recalled that Liu felt optimistic and relieved at Mao's words, because Mao didn't criticize him severely but showed great concern of his health, and he believed firmly of their good friendship (Li Weizhen, 2014: 168). The vice-chairman and the fixed successor of Mao, who had been working together with Mao for more than 30 years, couldn't understand what was really hinted in the recommendation of the books, not mention Wang Guangmei, Liu's wife. As a matter of fact, in the early stage of the Cultural Revolution, Mao had already cautioned the party leaders against the "Khrushchev" near them. It was estimated that at that time Liu couldn't stretch his imagination to think that he was the Khrushchev whom Mao hinted at and planned to get rid of.

6.0 Conclusion

From what we discussed above we can see that Mao Zedong was a voracious reader in fields like history and philosophy, and he was also an excellent implementer of putting his wide knowledge into practice. Assuming himself as an emperor of modern China, he was good at applying those strategies and deceptions used by the ancient rulers into his administration. He was highly skilled in using the historical stories or the philosophical ideas to explicate some abstract things or to express his own

attitudes.

An expert in making the past serve the present, he recommended different books to different persons, aiming to give them different directions. By recommending the books to those surrounding him he intended to inspire, to warn, to criticize and even to satirize his subordinates or his colleagues, insinuating his real political intentions as well as his purposes of gauging their genuine political loyalty. And he usually put new meanings to those ancient stories to imply something more, which puzzled most of his poor-educated subordinates and even some of the high ranking party leaders who couldn't understand his real intentions. Consequently they either stubbornly kept on the previous route or ended miserably.

By the analysis of the functions of Mao Zedong's enigmatic language, we have a new understanding of this controversial political leader, dictator, philosopher in Chinese history. This paper also provides a new perspective of studying history, which might shed some light on the studies of language, especially the metaphorical use of language.

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