Revolutionary Change: Formula Change during the Cultural Revolution, People’s Republic of China

Anyone should be allowed to speak out, whoever he may be, so long as he is not a hostile element and does not make malicious attacks, and it does not matter if he says something wrong. Leaders at all levels have the duty to listen to others. Two principles must be observed: (1) Say all you know and say it without reserve; (2) don’t blame the speaker but take his words as a warning. Unless the principle of ‘Don’t blame the speaker’ is observed genuinely and not falsely, the result will not be ‘Say all you know and say it without reserve’.

Mao Zedong, The Tasks for 1945 (December 15, 1944)

9.1 Introduction

The formulaic genres explored in the previous chapters have presupposed a stable social order. But if formulaic genres manifest and code culture, then we would predict that social perturbations should manifest themselves in changes to the formulaic genres of a speech community. This chapter tests this prediction by examining the way in which formulaic genres changed after the Communist government came to power in China in 1949 and specifically during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. This is done by looking at the way in which vulnerable day-to-day formulae changed during the Cultural Revolution. It appears that the formulaic inventory underwent interesting changes, in that there were stable elements in Chinese culture existing alongside the revolutionary ones. The stable elements allowed for old formulae to remain in use, although often with changed conditions of use. The Cultural Revolution also highjacked certain older formulae to give them revolutionary significance in the cult of personality surrounding Mao Zedong.
The chapter then analyses the formulaic nature of the Public Criticism Meeting, which was a new formulaic genre of the Cultural Revolution.

9.2 Socio-political background

After a long period of war, including both the Sino-Japanese war and the civil war in which Communist forces fought with those of the Kuomintang, the Communist government took power in China in 1949. The period of war had been a massive upheaval. But the period after 1949 was a period of intensive social engineering, in itself an equal, or perhaps even larger, upheaval. Its aims were to create a new society in which everyone supported the revolution affectively as well as in practice. To create the changes that the Chinese Communist party required, it was necessary to institute practices that were, in part, at odds with traditional values and practices.

New social orders often create new rituals in order to provide a focus for their aims. There were many such rituals in post-revolutionary China. For the most part, these took the form of meetings. As Mu Fu-Sheng (1963:153) puts it, ‘everything the Government accomplishes is done by calling meetings’. Those attending them ‘would agree that these activities were quite unlike anything they had experienced in the old society’ (Whyte, 1974:23). Most of the meetings were of small groups (hsaie-tsu) and for the purpose of ‘study’, and ‘mutual criticism’ (Whyte, 1974:2). Their purpose, briefly stated, was to change hearts and minds:

At these meetings everyone is normally given pamphlets to read, an elected leader ‘reports’ on the contents of the pamphlet under study and all join in the subsequent discussion: why socialism possesses ‘incomparable superiority’ to capitalism, why ‘leaning to one side’ (the Russian side) is the only possible solution to China’s problem, what ‘ideological reform’ is and why it is necessary, and so on (Mu Fu-Sheng, 1963:155).

Part of the meeting agenda was to generate a dialectic, and so conflicts had to be created. This was done by having the members of the group candidly express their views. Such views were then criticized. Frequently, the person expressing the views was also criticized. Such mutual criticism was supposed to conclude in a meeting of minds. ‘Criticism and self criticism were to go hand in hand with the discussion and were viewed as indispensable from it’ (Whyte, 1974:47). However, where serious error or long-term recalcitrance was suspected, special ‘investigation’