

10

CONTEMPORARY CHINESE DISCOURSE IN TIMES OF GLOBAL TURBULENCE

Reconstructing cultural capacity and crafting international strategy

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Problems and aims

The world has never been so unstable and uncertain since 9-11, as the world's order is as shifting as it is polarising. In the post COVID-19 era, the olden human problems of poverty, climate change and nuclear rivalry are not getting better but only going from bad to worse. Many a scholar is asking, from various angles, what kind of role China, now an emerging global power, is playing, how and why, in the face of the trying times (Beeson & Li, 2016, p. 491; Kahler, 2018, p. 239; Öniş & Kutlay, 2020, p. 123; Stephen, 2021, p. 807). It should be added that more often than not they proceed from an American-Westcentric perspective and paint a gloomy, or otherwise ambivalent, picture of the rise of China vis-à-vis the incumbent powers and the wider world more generally (e.g. Babones, Aberg & Hodzi, 2020, p. 326; Chin, 2021, p. 91; Glasser, 2011, p. 80; Hameiri & Jones, 2018, p. 573; Hopewell, 2021, p. 634).

However, much less attention has been paid to the tool of communication that China possesses in relation to the sorry state of the world (Liu, 2020, p. 469; cf. Yang, 2020, p. 299). For example, rarely is it asked what China is capable of communicating, especially from the vantage point of its unique cultural heritage (cf. Husain & Bloom, 2020, p. 39; Schnell, 1999). This is a significant deficiency because communication, local and global, reflects par excellence a cultural community's mentality, capacity and willpower, and insufficient or inadequate understanding thereof will lead to misperception and misinterpretation of its action and potential.

Scant as it is, extant research into Chinese discourse, whether in terms of mass media, social media, public diplomacy or information agencies, has often been rendered from stereotypical or otherwise biased perspectives. As a consequence, images of abnormality, deviance or menace emerge: at home the Chinese Communist state "manipulates" the media in order to "legitimize" its authority and so to "control" its people (see Chang & Ren, 2018; Esarey & Xiao, 2011; Gleiss, 2016; Gong, 2012; Han, 2015; Hinck et al., 2016; Li & Rune, 2018; Lin, 2015; Nordin & Richaud, 2014; Sun, 2010; Wang, 2017; Zhang, 2013) and abroad it "exploits" communication to achieve regional and global "dominance" (see Gong, 2012; Hinck et al., 2016; Lee, 2016; Zhang, 2013).

Such representations are biased, stereotypical and reminiscent of the Orientalist discourse (Said, 1978, 1993), as well as George Orwell's *1984*, because China's vast societal changes are denied, deeper cultural traditions ignored and unique international context left out of the picture. As has long been observed, Western concepts, models and theories of communication masquerade as "universal" and, when applied to non-Western realities, only lead to misunderstanding, misrepresentation and stigmatisation (Asante, 1998; McQuail, 2005; Xiao & Chen, 2009).

The present chapter then sets out to achieve two, interrelated aims. First, it will argue that it behoves us to take a locally-grounded and globally-minded, culturally conscious and critical approach to present-day Chinese discourse. This will involve drawing on local intellectual wisdom and global scholarly achievements on the one hand and paying attention to cultural distinction and interaction on the other hand. Second, accordingly, it will reframe contemporary Chinese discourse in terms of a number of hitherto neglected or ignored but crucially important properties and principle: viz. its world view, way of thinking, norm of acting and canon of meaning making. As a result, a rather different image of the Chinese discourse will emerge; it has a holistic vision, dialectic pattern of thinking, balanced-harmony ethics and making-meaning-beyond-form rule. On that basis, it will be suggested that these properties of the contemporary Chinese discourse system be appropriated as possible inspiration and potential resource for confronting the common challenges and crises facing humanity.

Adopting a locally-grounded and globally-minded, culturally conscious and critical approach to contemporary Chinese discourse will constitute a form of cultural resistance to the hitherto hegemonic communication scholarship on China. Further, the Chinese cultural account thus attained will offer broader, deeper and so more precise insights into the identity, nature and potentiality of the present-day Chinese discourse (including its sub-branches), enlivening and enriching international communication research thereby. Moreover, this new framework may possibly serve as share assets of human communication because any cultural discourse (community) may contain useful resources and tools that may contribute to the solution of world problems.

Cultural discourse studies: A culturalist approach to communication studies

The present chapter adopts a culturalist approach to communication studies (CS), termed cultural discourse studies (CDS) (Shi-xu, 2005, 2009, 2014, 2015, Chapter 1 this volume). It has several basic features. First, CDS proceeds from a notion of communication as a global system of social practice in which speech actors interact with one another purposefully and consequentially by linguistic and other semiotic means and increasingly through technological channels in particular historical and cultural contexts. As such communication constructs reality, performs actions and exercises power. In terms of definition, CDS is parallel to mainstream CS. Second, in terms of conception, however, it is different in that it views communication, not as universal, but as composed of at once culturally diversified and competing discourses of historically evolved and ethnically characterised communities (e.g. the Chinese/Asian/Developing World), hence cultural discourses. Here communication is global in that there are aspects of commonality and degrees of interconnection between the composite discourses, but at the same time it is cultural in that, on the one hand, each such discourse as communication sub-system has its own distinctive and even unique ways of communication, including the context of communication, and that, on the other hand, the world's diverse discourses are more often than not in an equal relation with one another but in dynamic relations of domination, repression, exclusion, competition, resistance, cooperation, etc. In parenthesis, within a cultural discourse there may be sub-systems in terms of particular domains of social

interaction (e.g. social, political, economic, scientific, artistic and diplomatic) and in terms of different levels of abstraction (e.g. Chinese discourse/Chinese political discourse/Chinese political discourse of human rights). Third, the goal of CDS is to bring about intellectual-cultural diversity in CS, accomplishing scholarly transformation and research innovation thereby, on the one hand, and to reclaim marginalised cultural-discursive identities and rebalance cultural-power relations, enhancing cultural harmony and prosperity thereby, on the other hand. To that end, fourth, CDS practitioners are required to take up a variety of specific tasks ranging from deconstructing cultural hegemony in the field of CS; (re)constructing research frameworks of especially under/misrepresented cultural discourses; illuminating the cultural diversity and distinctions of human discourses; uncovering the relations, whether of domination or otherwise, in the interaction between different discourses and (re)inventing new discourses of cultural freedom, development and cooperation (Shi-xu, 2005, 2014, 2015; cf. Curran & Park, 2000; Farmer, 1994). Fifth, to ensure the success of performing these tasks, CDS methodologically adopts a locally-grounded and globally-minded, culturally conscious and critical approach. Being locally-grounded means that the researcher needs to be informed about the situated specifics of the discourse in question and to draw upon relevant native knowledge and wisdom, while being globally-minded means that the investigator should take into account common human conditions and interests and tap into appropriate scholarly achievements wherever they come from. Being culturally conscious requires one to pay special attention to the identities and distinctions of the discourse under investigation and to ascertain and critique power relations that emerge out of the interaction between different cultural discourses.

For the present task of carving out the contemporary Chinese discourse as a cultural system, the locally-grounded and globally-minded, culturally conscious and critical approach means that we must no longer rely on acultural, ahistorical, Westcentric or otherwise ethnocentric lenses and perspectives. Specifically, we need, first of all, to view the Chinese discourse in terms of its place and interaction in the global context and order of communication (“the wholeness principle”). Second, we should see it from a developmental perspective and be attentive to its agency and change (“the history principle”). In relation to that, third, it is vitally important that we pay special attention to its native traditions of the world view, ways of thinking, norms and values, rules of speaking, etc. (“the aboriginal principle”) Fourth, we must render our theorising reflective of the local currents and trends of communication (“development principle”). Finally, we must keep an open mind and be inclusive in disciplines and disciplines across cultures (“the receptiveness principle”).

Here it may be mentioned in particular that the following portrayal draws on the Chinese and Asian lineages of communication studies that began in the late 1980s and whose objective is to project Chinese-culture-based theory on the one side and to undermine Westcentrism couched in universalism on the other side (e.g. Chen, 2001; Chu, 1988; Heisey, 2000; Huang, 2003; Jia, Lu & Heisey, 2002; Lu, 2000; Ma, 2000; Miike, 2007, 2009; Xiao & Chen, 2009). The image to be painted as follows is, emphatically, not meant as monolithic facts or homogeneous features of the diverse Chinese communities, representative evenly across all social domains and settings. Nor is the depiction exhaustive of the Chinese discourse system. Rather, in place of the familiar, stereotypical perspectives and positions in the literature, this account serves as a suggestive and heuristic framework for explicating and for guiding the practice of contemporary Chinese discourse. As such it is subject to modification and renewing whenever new insights are obtained.

The emerging Chinese discourse in a turbulent world

We argued at the outset that Chinese discourse is largely misperceived and misrepresented in mainstream CS. As a matter of fact, we are far from having a universally valid framework of

analysis yet, and we won't until all cultural discourses have been properly discovered and compared and on that basis some kind of cultural inclusive consensus reached (Shi-xu, 2005, 2009). This means that any proposal for studying cultural discourses, whether in terms of their systems or practices, ought to be at once culturally appropriate and intentionally dialogical with regard to other cultural alternatives. It is in this spirit that we shall set out in the following to consider contemporary Chinese discourse and to contemplate its potential contribution to global governance.

In this chapter, contemporary Chinese discourse refers to the emerging communication of China Mainland, as both cultural system and practice, situated in the rapidly changing and increasingly turbulent world, since China joined WTO in 2001 and since 9-11 of the same year shook the world. That time was a turning point because wide and deep change has taken place in the nation, ranging from economic, political, diplomatic, military, technological to social spheres (施旭, 2022). The objective of this chapter is to delineate the Chinese communication as a discourse system. By that is meant the configuration of a set of *communicative mechanisms* (e.g. groups, institutions, facilities, technologies—"the motor system") on the one hand and of a set of *communicative principles* (e.g. worldview, key concepts, values, ways of thinking, principles of acting and rules of meaning—"the nervous system") on the other that a speech community has access to and makes use of in their social interaction. This system determines to a greater or lesser extent the success or failure of their discourse by guiding, enabling and sustaining it. As such it is relatively stable and durable. To increase communicative effectiveness then is to consolidate and coordinate this system.

Local and global context of contemporary Chinese discourse

To characterise contemporary Chinese discourse as a cultural system and so also to appreciate fully its possible global value and use, it will be necessary to consider its local and global context and its relation to it. As argued earlier, a cultural discourse is not isolated from or independent of local and global context but in dialogic and dialectic relation to it, especially given the expected and unexpected winds of the globalising world. This means that the creation and transformation in form and function of the discourse in question will arise and develop in answer to its surrounding shifting circumstances and that the meanings of the Chinese discourse cannot be understood without taking into account its specific and largely unique context. Here several points are particularly worthy of note.

After over 40 years of reform and opening up that started in 1978, China has undergone tremendous change ranging from economic, political, social, and technological to security spheres. As a result, it has assumed a new international status as well. China has moved from a closed society of class struggle (1949–1878) to one that is increasingly open and confident. Since the end of 2021, it has eliminated dire poverty across the nation. With a market-oriented system with Chinese characteristics, since 2010 it has become the world's second largest economy after the United States. In the face of the long-standing global order of division and hegemony, China has repeatedly called for building "a human community of shared future"—a proposal that has been taken up in various UN documents.¹ In that connection China has succeeded in initiating a range of regional and international networks: the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (started in 2017), BRICS (started in 2010), AIIB (started in 2013) and LMC (the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation started in 2016). To crown it all, the China-spearheaded Belt and Road Initiative interconnects the Eurasian and African continents through South East Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East, which accounts for 55% of the world's GDP, 70% of the world's population and 75% of the world's known energy reserves (Casarini, 2016, p. 96). Now China has embarked on the second-centennial journey of realising the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation, namely, "to turn China into a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, and harmonious".²

However, this rise of China as an emerging global player has not engendered universal welcome or acceptance. On the contrary, the incumbent powers, especially the leading Superpower, feel worried about the dominant position they have been enjoying and are anxious to retain that global hegemony. While continuously promulgating the “China threat” theory, the United States has launched a host of programmes and forged myriad alliances directed at China, ranging from political, economic, diplomatic, legal, scientific, technological, informational and territorial arenas: the Indo-Pacific Strategy, China Task Force, the Five Eye Alliance, the boycott of Huawei, to name but a few.

Apart from those anti-China projects, there are even larger, longer and deeper crises of poverty, climate change, nuclear proliferation and the COVID-19 pandemic, now only confounded by the protracted war in Ukraine. And yet, over such human fundamental issues, the majority of the peoples of the world are silenced. The world’s 20% population from the developed countries possess 80% of world information whereas the world’s 80% population from the developing countries do the rest 20% of world information. On the internet, 90% of the content is in English and 5% in French, with the rest of world languages accounting for the remaining 5% (less than 1% in Chinese). The world’s Rest, as a consequence, has fewer rights, opportunities and resources to speak on the world stage; it is less listened to, and to make matters worse, more often than not misrepresented, repressed and exploited (Curran & Park, 2000; Said, 1993; Shi-xu, Prah & Pardo, 2016; Shi-xu, Kienpointner & Servaes, 2005; Shi-xu, 2014).

With a ‘background’ like this in mind, it would be easier to appreciate the precise meanings of the Chinese discourse, including the whys and wherefores. Now let us turn to the ‘internal’ properties of the discourse in question.

The Oneness worldview of contemporary Chinese discourse

Contemporary Chinese discourse is characterised by an image-based worldview which is holistic in nature (Chen, 2004; 秦亚青, 2012). That is, for the Chinese discourse community, the universe is a unified whole, the One, in which all peoples, things and events are parts of a whole and nothing is separable from it. This Chinese cosmological vision can be traced to the *Book of Yijing* 6000–7000 years ago and is reflected in the classical term 天下 (under-the-Heaven). Laozi (ca BC571–471) says, “道生一，一生二，三生万物 (the Way bears one, one bears two, e.g. ying and yang, and two bears three, e.g. ying and yang combined; 道德经)”. Zhuangzi (ca BC369–286) says, “天地与我并生，而万物与我为一 (co-exist with Heaven and Earth, and be united with everything, 庄子)”. Thus, unlike the Westerners whose nuclear-oriented worldview prizes them to focus on individual entities, the Chinese tend to pay attention to the entirety of, and the interrelations between, things and affairs of the world and, for that matter, of the lives of people (Cheng, 1987, 1988; 汪风炎, 郑红, 2005).

Today, the most typical re-articulation of this worldview in China’s global political discourse is 人类命运共同体 (human community of shared future). Since its first introduction at the CCP’s 18th National Congress in 2012, the term has become a common and frequent occurrence in China’s international, as well as national, political speeches and documents, at a time when the world is becoming increasingly divided, confrontational and exclusionary and when China heads towards the world’s centre stage while being barricaded by the American-led Indo-Pacific Strategy (cf. Yang, 2020, p. 8). The same concept has been applied to a wide variety of socio-cultural domains but all to remind and foster the ideals of collectivity and sharedness. Take for example such derivatives as 中非命运共同体 (a China-African community of a shared future), 亚太命运共同体 (an Asia-Pacific community with a shared future), 海洋命运共同体 (a maritime community

with a shared future), 网络空间命运共同体 (a community of shared future in cyberspace), 人与自然生命共同体 (a community of life for man and nature), 地球生命共同体 (a community of all life on earth) and most recently 人类卫生健康共同体 (a community of common health for mankind) since the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic.³ Chinese President Xi says, “宽广的太平洋有足够空间容纳中美” (The huge Pacific Ocean is big enough to include China and America). Arguably, China’s trans-continental and trans-ocean initiative, 一带一路 (One Belt and One Road), launched in 2013, is inspired at least in part by the holistic notion. As such, the international programme now involves 65 countries and 4 billion people across Asia, Africa and Europe in myriad ways, effectively offsetting the isolationist and containment strategies of TPP and Asia-pivot. In that connection, one may think of the global institutions of AIIB and BRICS which China has spearheaded. Still another example may be China’s continued support of the Paris Agreement on climate change. It is noteworthy, too, that China has initiated a host of regional and international networks, which are open and inclusive, such as Xiangshan Forum, Boao Forum for Asia (BFA), the China-Africa Cooperation Forum (CACF) and China-CELAC Forum, whereby it actively engages large groups of countries, especially those from the Developing World, and emerging economies for discussion and consultation, while participating more and more in international and global dialogues such as the Climate Change Forum and the Shangri-La Dialogue. So despite varied interpretations thereof (e.g. Bujak, 2016; Fallon, 2015; Krukowska, 2016; Misiągiewicz & Misiągiewicz, 2016), the plethora of China’s recent international projects of this magnitude cannot be adequately understood or appreciated, perhaps not even imagined (by some nuclear-minded, egocentric culture), unless the Chinese worldview of Oneness is brought into view.

From those expressions and activities, it may be inferred that the Chinese holism and the relations involved are not just spacial but also temporal, social, cultural, technological, etc. Further, the discursive use of the concept rhetorically calls for inclusiveness, unity and cooperation, thereby diffusing or neutralising the current trends of anti-globalization, neoliberalism, populism, protectionism, separatism and so on and so forth.

For discourse research then, efforts may be made to discover whether a holistic conception is appropriated, how the concept is constructed, for what purposes and with what effect. Here in particular, special attention may be paid to the role played by the Chinese tradition of viewing the world. For global communicative practice, the importance and value of this worldview cannot be over-emphasised, given the current international order of worsening polarisation, confrontation, domination and exclusion. It will be useful especially for the policy makers to internalise, promote and practice the holistic and comprehensive view as new and effective guide, resource and tool to tackle the global division and disorder.

The dialectic way of thinking of contemporary Chinese discourse

The Chinese discourse is guided by a dialectic way of thinking, which is often embodied in intuition and imagery. That is, the Chinese speech community tends to view the world in terms of entities, elements or forces that are interrelated and interact with one another, resulting in complex interrelations and constant change. It is therefore a relational, antithetical and dynamic mode of reasoning. From another perspective, it may be said that the Chinese are inclined to heed multifacetedness, multidimensionality and the possibility of change of things and affairs. Functionally, it serves to neutralise adversaries, overcome difficulties or resolve problems or diffuse crises. In this sense, it is a wisdom that is optimistic in attitude.

Laozi says, “有无相生，难易相成，长短相形，高下相倾，音声相和，前后相随” (For “to be” and “not to be” coexist, There cannot be one without the other: without “difficult”, there

cannot be “easy”; without “long”, there cannot be “short”; without “high”, there cannot be “low”; without sound, there can be no voice; without “before”, there cannot be “after”; “祸兮福之所倚，福兮祸之所伏” Good fortune follows upon disaster; disaster lurks within good fortune (老子). Many classical Chinese sayings also bear witness to this kind of dialectic thinking: 你中有我，我中有你 (I am part of you and you are part of me), 以柔克刚 (use tenderness to break the hard), 良言逆耳 (good advice is unpleasant to the ear) and 塞翁失马，焉知祸福 (misfortune may turn out to be a blessing) (cf. 汪风炎, 郑红, 2005). The ancient concepts and practices of 阴阳 (ying yang), 五行 (five elements) and 八卦 (eight diagrams), too, are reflections of this way of seeing, acting and meaning.

Today, in communication to dissolve crises, conflicts, complications, setbacks, faux pas or other difficulties, the Chinese would point to possible interconnections, interpenetration, complications, oppositions or transformations (Shi-xu & Feng-Being, 2013). Thus, for example, they may speak of interrelation, interconnection, interpenetration, interchange, interdependence, opposition, etc. between or among things or people; mutual complementation between legal and moral governance, dynamics between planned economy and socialism on the one side and between market economy and capitalism on the other side; and coordination between domestic circulation and international circulation. CPC’s proposals for formulating the *14th Five-Year Plan (2021–2025) National Economic and Social Development and the Long-Range Objectives through the Year 2035* points to the relations of Chinese and foreign, short-term and long-term, part and whole, trunk and branch, construction and demolition.⁴ As the world is too long trapped in the old order of division and domination but beginning to see multi-polarisation, China puts forward the new concept of “profound changes unseen in a century”, and the new initiative of “One Belt and One Road”.

In studying present-day Chinese discourse, it will be imperative then to examine whether, which and how possible complex, multiple and dynamic relations are discursively sought, constructed and used. This also implies that attention should be paid to the social change that such uses of dialectic discourse may bring about. For empirical research, this means specifically that researchers should direct their attention to the ways in which the dialectic strategy operates in contemporary Chinese discourse: how it is constructed and formulated, under what circumstances, in what type of social domain (e.g. politics, business, science, conversation), for what, and by whom.

In global communication, we may apply this dynamic way of thinking to the tackling of such world problems as poverty, climate change, racism, neoliberalism, protectionism, populism, hegemony, anti-globalization and the Cold War mentality. Similarly, practitioners of global communication can also initiate multilateral dialogue and encourage society to embrace polarisation, multiculturalism, win-win-for-all and so on and so forth.

The principle of balanced harmony of contemporary Chinese discourse

In Western culture in general and in mainstream communication theory (including that of rhetoric and media) in particular, the communicator is taken to be autonomous and to communicate is to achieve one’s own goal and get the interlocutor under control. Consequently, learning, teaching and evaluation of communicative practice revolve round the realisation of the speaker’s interests and intentions, through manipulation of audience and expression, or in professional parlance, persuasion. The majority of published analyses of text/discourse/communication/rhetoric focus on the functions, intentions, ideologies or ‘meanings’ of utterances produced by the speaking/writing agent (Miike, 2007).

For the Chinese, in contrast, the overarching concern of action and communication is to seek, create or maintain harmony (cf. Chen, 2001; Wang & Chen, 2010) or, more precisely, balanced

harmony or equilibrium (Shi-xu, 2014, pp. 83–89). That is, to engage in discourse today is to achieve peaceful, amicable and egalitarian social relationship between interlocutors. More specifically, Chinese discourse may be seen as tending to take great store by the Other, the relational and the collective. This would also imply the moral obligation to exercise mutual respect, politeness and rapport and so also to practice opposition or resistance to hierarchy and hegemony. This kind of Chinese communicative ethics may be traced back to the Confucian teachings more than two thousand years ago: 礼之用, 和为贵 (harmony is the most important in the use of rites), 和而不同 (unity in diversity), 中庸 (the mean, or avoiding going to extremes) and 仁 (benevolence) (cf. Zhang, 2002).

This communicative norm can be observed in a slew of contemporary Chinese discursive practices. At home, there has emerged a sustained discourse of building harmonious society (和谐社会). Thus, the mainstream media have continuously drawn attention to disadvantaged groups and increased discussion over the poverty, social inequality, etc.; more recently, they embark on a campaign for common prosperity (共同富裕) as a way to combat economic disparity. Abroad, the Chinese official discourse has repeatedly proclaimed peaceful development (和平发展) as national strategy on the one hand and called for building a harmonious world (和谐世界) on the other hand.

It should be cautioned, however, that the use of the principle is not absolute but may be layered so to speak, that is, when a conflict of fundamental interest arises, counter measures may be taken in order to reach harmony ultimately. One such measure for example is 先礼后兵 (to be courteous first before becoming adversarial) (Chen, 2004).

For research, one may study whether and how equilibrium is sought after, achieved, consolidated, maintained, etc.; similarly, one can look at how cooperation, peace or reconciliation between individuals, groups, communities or countries are brought about, maintained or deepened; likewise, one may examine how distance, differences or disparities are avoided, diverted or abridged. By the same token, one can examine how harmony is reduced, jeopardised, damaged or any way the principle is flaunted; similarly, one can investigate into the ways that friction, conflicts, contradictions and the like are created, enlarged, intensified or prolonged. All such questions are particularly important, not just in relation to the “China threat” theory, but also to the global hegemony that the world powers are striving to retain.

For practice in global communication, one should actively advocate and resolutely uphold the principle of peace, harmony and cooperation. This means that one should on the one hand try to deconstruct, diffuse or divert conflict and domination and on the other hand construct, support and encourage words and deeds of rapport, harmony and collaboration. In the process, one ought to learn to be tolerant, modest and moderate.

The meaning-beyond-form rule of contemporary Chinese discourse

Mainstream Western scholarship has been guided by a weaker or stronger version of the conduit-metaphor of expression and meaning, viz. meaning is contained in the semiotic forms in some implicit or explicit, direct or indirect way; the implicitness or indirectness of meaning may therefore be inferred from the observable forms (i.e. structures and contents). Consequently, the researcher’s task and method are to discover meanings from those forms.

To the Chinese, this is over-simplistic. They take communication and meaning, not as bounded by semiotic forms, but as creative processes of social interaction in which communicators are responsive, creative and imaginative. So they do not wholly depend on observable language or other ostensible symbols to convey and consume meaning; besides, they expect interlocutors to be imaginative and creative. In this particular cultural milieu, (meaning of) discourse is taken to

be fluid, open and dialogical, i.e. subject to reconstruction and transformation. Since meaning is not carried in ‘transparent’ vehicles, the recipient or respondent’s interpretation becomes critically important (as well as the researcher’s perspective). Consequently the Chinese have a profound wariness with regard to language. Functionally, they practise this fashion of communication as an artistic way to overcome the tension between the form and meaning, and this art is often realised through imageries, proverbs, fables, poetic lines and even brevity and silence (cf. Medubi, 2010).

In fact the Chinese have been making, and making sense of, meaning by what might be called the rule of meaning-beyond-form, or form-meaning discrepancy, since antiquity. The Daoist philosophy, as represented by Laozi and Zhuangzi, is arguably the foundation of the Chinese cultural conception, experience and practice of the relation between meaning and communication. *The Book of Changes* says, “书不尽言, 言不尽意” (Text does not exhaust speech, speech does not exhaust meaning), which exposes the insurmountable chasm between text/talk and meaning. Similarly, Laozi says, “道可道, 非常道; 名可名, 非常名” (The Way that can be spoken of is not the eternal Way; the Name that can be given is the not the eternal Name). Zhuangzi advises, “言者所以在意, 得意而忘言” (Language is to mean, but forget it once you have attained the meaning). Liu Xie writes in *Dragon-Carving and the Literary Mind*, “文外之重旨者也” (meaning as arising outside of the text and 思接千载 meaning as thousands of miles away from the text). This view of language and meaning is also crystalised in a host of Chinese proverbial sayings: 言有尽而意无穷 (words are finite, meaning is infinite), 弦外之音 (sounds off the cords), 沉默是金 (silence is gold) and 微言大义 (to say little to mean much). Because of this ‘mismatch’ between forms and meaning, many tactics have been created to overcome the difficulty: 依象尽意 (to mean by imagery) and 听其言而察其行 (listen to his/her words and watch his/her deeds) (曹顺庆, 2001).

All that is not to say that the meaning-form discrepancy rule applies invariably across all domains and situations. Scientific or legal settings, for example, may require different ways of applying this rule. But the point is still that it remains a law-like rule underlying discursive practice at a fundamental level.

For empirical research, then, students of contemporary Chinese discourse will have to forsake the conventional, mechanical, restricted, biased and simplistic approaches to meaning and discourse and adopt instead a multi-perspectival methodology in the study of contemporary Chinese discourse. For instance, they may have to extend the analytic focus from the forms of text/talk to the entire communicative event, where all relevant components (whether the hearers/readers, their social statuses, mediums of communication or consequences of communication), their relations and the totality of the event, if relevant, are looked into. It would also mean that the goal of research must not be to monopolise truth and ethics, but to produce tentative, suggestive and dialogical interpretations and evaluations. This implies, too, that research conclusions are temporary and that researchers should continue searching for new meanings.

For global communication, then, one of the crucial tasks is to explicate the Chinese way of meaning-making and more broadly the cultural diversity of speaking, acting and meaning. Beyond that, practitioners must continue to recreate this culturally special way of seeing and speaking that should not only help exert Chinese voice and identity but also engender the need for reflection and conversation. More particularly, they should exploit this technique to neutralise tensions, stimulate imaginations and press for continued dialogue.

There are still many other cultural characteristics in contemporary Chinese communication, which manifest in different social domains and at different levels of specificity, if one takes an intracultural, intercultural or multicultural perspective (Barnett, 1979; De Burgh, 2000; Lee, 2000; Jia, Lu & Heisey, 2002). In and through communication Chinese people are relatively more

patriotic, face-oriented and authority-minded, for example. Love of the motherland would play a major role in communication when, for example, a Chinese scientist has made a discovery, whereas the situation would be different for a Western counterpart. A Chinese would be prepared to endure any hardships for the sake of saving face (死要面子活受罪), whereas a Westerner would try to maintain a positive face but not at the expense of one's well-being. A Chinese with an important social position would be taken as an authority on knowledge and truths, whereas in the Western tradition of Enlightenment logic and facts would be the sole criteria. Chinese expressions often contain parallel structures, rhythmic speech, melodious sounds and rich imagery, not only in formal settings but in everyday settings as well.

Conclusion

We started this chapter by observing that the world is under severe turbulence, and while the old crises of degeneration, division and domination continue to threaten humanity new catastrophes come in tandem to shock the world. In times of such instability and uncertainty, we asked the overlooked and obscured questions of whether and how the contemporary Chinese discourse might possibly serve as a positive and constructive response. They are obscured and overlooked because, as is argued, mainstream communication studies has been Westcentric and consequently fails to appreciate the underlying cultural potentials of the present-day Chinese discourse.

We then suggested that a cultural discourse studies perspective be adopted for a more comprehensive and culturally more appropriate study of the contemporary Chinese discourse system. Parallel to mainstream communication studies, it defines human communication as social interaction in which actors use language and other semiotic means purposefully and consequentially through technological or other channels in particular historical and cultural context. But beyond the mainstream's Westcentricism, it views human communication as a conglomeration of diversified and competing cultural discourses and so advocates the deconstruction of hegemonic discourses on the one hand and the reconstruction of especially unfamiliar or otherwise disadvantaged discourses on the other hand by taking a locally-grounded and globally-minded, culturally conscious and critical approach. Ultimately, it aims at enhancing cultural harmony and prosperity.

Accordingly, we showed, first of all, that the contemporary Chinese community has a holistic vision of the universe and tends to take into account all aspects and all dimensions of things in communication, unlike the nuclear view characteristic of Western culture, for example. Second, today's China as a cultural speech community has a dialectic way of thinking, as opposed to Westerners' habit of binary thinking. Third, the emerging Chinese community is guided by the principle of achieving unity in diversity, in contradistinction to egocentrism and dominance seen in the incumbent global powers. Finally, the historically evolved ethnic society of present-day China generally follows the rule of making meaning beyond symbolic forms, in contrast to the formal, explicit, meaning construction as required by Western communication.

With regard to each of these Chinese communication properties, strategies for both empirical research and practical action were also suggested. Thus, given the holism of Chinese discourse, the researcher may look into how and why comprehensiveness and interconnections are achieved in and through communication; the policy-maker as global power may make use of this inclusive view to attend to the interests and concerns of all parties in the global village, whether in the domains of the environment, security or socio-economic development. With regard to the dialectic way of thinking, the researcher may examine and evaluate how and why relations of linkage, interpenetration, interdependence, transformation and oppositions, as well as possibilities of change, are communicated; in global communication practice, one may encourage visionary, balanced and sanguine

ways of thinking, acting and meaning, which are badly needed today especially when neoliberalism, populism, nationalism, racism and the Cold War mentality divide the world. As to the Chinese communication norm of creating or consolidating harmonious-but-independent relation with the Other, the researcher may investigate into how relations of harmony as well as independence are accomplished or harmed or otherwise compromised discursively; the global communication practitioner should attempt to reach the goal of international rapprochement and equilibrium while keeping cultural identity. Regarding the rule of meaning-beyond-form, the researcher may pay attention to what and how meanings are rendered present in and through communication and how they are received and responded to; in and for global communication efforts should be made to exploit this rule in appropriate contexts in order to prevent conflict and achieve maximum win-win outcome.

Notes

- 1 See: Xinhua www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-03/20/c_136142216.htm: the Chinese concept of building “a human community with shared destiny” was on incorporated into a U.N. Security Council resolution for the first time. Accessed March 3, 2018.
- 2 www.cctb.net/bygz/zywxsy/201504/t20150427_321849.htm. Accessed July 30, 2018.
- 3 <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2019/0423/c164113-31045369.html>; www.xinhuanet.com/mrdx/2021-04/24/c_139902211.htm; http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzA4OTIyMjUyOQ==&mid=2654668919&idx=1&sn=03d9c7c8693b466fcc21e42c3737d559&chksm=8bd19499bca61d8f8f8057ae64bfeefd6a1c9e8ef4dc6d2c3828cd45372ab00c6764339f8b3&mpshare=1&scene=23&srcid=0413jZg6xHiz422zLjt3rsGX&sharer_sharetime=1649820024751&sharer_shareid=597f3af7baace1c2d4331665b326020d#rd; http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MjM5NzI3NDg4MA==&mid=2658742921&idx=1&sn=cca72a9786f8bf5a5239ee78fb7d8790&chksm=bd51e6e68a266ff08a72c0872a5fad463dc680b0fb9bee145e30ef20572738ac1eed5b2113a2&mpshare=1&scene=23&srcid=0413LXCVoHd7wfwWrGhfMHKq&sharer_sharetime=1649820487736&sharer_shareid=597f3af7baace1c2d4331665b326020d#rd; www.xinhuanet.com/mrdx/2020-11/21/c_139532066.htm; www.xinhuanet.com/mrdx/2020-11/21/c_139532066.htm; <https://baike.so.com/doc/24249021-25191505.html>. Accessed April 14, 2022.
- 4 <http://en.people.cn/n3/2020/1103/c90000-9776034.html>.

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