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**Adaptation of Traditional Story-telling
To Political Propaganda in Communist China**

Alan Ping-lin Liu

**Center for International Studies
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, Massachusetts**

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Although the Chinese Communists have built a modern mass media system, they have not neglected daily face-to-face contact between the masses and representatives of the Party. This emphasis on face-to-face propaganda has been more pronounced since 1962. That year the Chinese Communists started actively adapting the traditional institution of story-telling to Communist propaganda. As a result, thousands of story-tellers were trained in a short span and were sent to all corners of the nation to tell revolutionary stories.

This article¹ is an analysis of two aspects of this phenomenon: the intensification of propaganda in China since 1962 as indicated by the massive use of story-tellers and the characteristics of story-telling as a unique channel of mass communication.

To begin our analysis a brief historical review of story-telling in China is in order.

Story-telling in Traditional China

Though scattered references suggest a much earlier birth date, direct and documentary references to story-telling in China begin in the Tang Dynasty (618-906 A.D.) The practice originated from the

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Buddhist monks¹ relating scriptures to the lay public. To attract their audience, the monks began their public recitals each time with an anecdote of human interest, not always relevant to the scriptures. This practice proved to be very popular among the people. Soon enterprising persons started non-religious story-telling as a profession.²

Traditional story-telling in China usually was held in tea houses which also served as gossip and information exchange centers in a village, town or city. The stories told could be classified into four categories: morality tales, novels of human interest (on love, ghosts, adventure), popular dynastic histories, and Buddhist scripture.

The style of telling varied with the type of story: narration without singing for historical stories, narration with singing for novels and singing without narration for ballads.

The popularity of story-telling was such that it survived political persecutions at one time or another. It eventually became the single most important mass medium in traditional China.

There are several reasons for story-telling's persistent popularity. Primary among them are the human interest content of the stories and the artistic skill of the tellers.

However, traditional story-telling did more than merely entertain the people. It also performed vital social functions.

First, through the telling of dynastic history, popular novels and even current events, norms of the literate elite were transmitted to millions of illiterates who would not have otherwise gotten that

²Chen Erh-hun, Shou Su Shih Hua (History of Story Telling) Peking, Writers' Publishing House, 1958, p.7.

knowledge. Story-telling thus helped bridge the gap between the elite and the masses in traditional China.

Second, story-tellers operated in tea houses where people of diverse backgrounds congregated. Appealing to all of them, story-tellers helped provide a common frame of reference among all social classes.

Third, some of the most popular stories like San Kuo (Romance of the Three Kingdoms) or Shui Hu Chuan (All Men Are Brothers) are about bloodshed, violence and rebellions.³ These plots seem to be incompatible with the norms sanctioned by the culture of traditional China. But in reality these depictions of violence and rebellions may not be disruptive culturally. David Riesman, after noting the common phenomenon of depiction of violence in folk tales, comments:

The rebellious note struck in these tales indicates that even in a society depending on tradition-direction there still remain strivings which are not completely socialized. While people accept the harness of their culture, and can hardly conceive of another, they are not unaware of constraint: their stories, as frequently their dreams, are the refuge and succor of this awareness and help make it possible to go on with daily life.⁴

Communist Transformation of Story-telling

Given such a social and historical background, it is surprising that the Peking regime did not actively adapt traditional story-telling

³ San Kuo is a historical novel, in 120 chapters, written by Lo Kuan-chung of the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368 A.D.). It is about the struggles among three rival groups who contended for power to rule China after the fall of the Han Dynasty (206-220 A.D.) Shui Hu Chuan is about the adventures of a hundred and eight brigands who in Robin Hood style harassed central China in the late Sung Dynasty (907-1279 A.D.)

⁴ David Riesman, et al., The Lonely Crowd, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1961) p. 86.

to Communist propaganda or agitation until 1962. That year traditional story-telling suddenly became one of the most prominent media of Communist propaganda on the Chinese mainland.

For example, in Soochow Special District, there was an average of one tea house featuring story-telling every three miles in 1963.⁵ In Chengchow County, Kiangsu Province, 813 story-tellers were trained from 1962 to 1963. If Chengchow County was close to the average in population for a Chinese county, which was 300,000, then with 813 story-tellers, one story teller would serve 368 persons. The same county was reported to have 60 or 70 story-telling tea houses. There was at least one story-telling house in every commune. In Chengchow, it was calculated, an average story-telling which lasted about one and a half hours had an audience of about 300.⁶

However, these story-tellings are different from the old ones. The Communists have made several fundamental changes.

Instead of telling human interest stories, current Communist stories are steeped with political propaganda. A Communist report states:

Today they (story-tellers) sing about the people's communes, the astounding grain crops, the makers of steel. Those in the cities whose former lot was to recite romances and chronicles for tea-house idlers and leisured bourgeois now visit factories, mills and building sites, or go out to the nearby fields to work by day and give performances in the evenings. And they too sing of the present, of the builders of the Hwei River project, of the heroic People's Volunteers now returned from Korea, of model workers who have completed five

⁵ Jen-Min Jih-Pao (People's Daily) December 20, 1963.

⁶ Kuang-Min Jih-Pao (Kuang-Ming Daily), February 5, 1964.

years' work in twelve months.⁷

Since the content of the stories has been changed, the qualification of the tellers has also been changed. Thus one Communist report says:

Story-tellers are the back-bone elements of the Party, good in ideology, labor ... For instance, over 60% of those attending the story-telling training class in Chinshan County (Jiangsu) are Party and League (Young Communist League) members.....the story-tellers have basically become a proletarian army of amateur literary and art propagandists.⁸

Changed too are the tea houses. The following report describes a village tea house in suburban Shanghai:

In Shanyang Town in the Shanghai municipality, the main tea house seats 200. Any nonhour finds it filled to capacity. Its physical appearance has changed from the old days -- gone are the blaring music, vulgar exchanges and tobacco company "beauties" which once adorned the walls. Today it is clean white-washed, and sanitation-conscious. The pictures and posters on the walls reflect the life, tastes and campaigns of its patrons at its neat tables: sun-browned commune peasants. There is the buzz of talk, jokes and laughter between old friends and new acquaintances. In an inner room seating another hundred people, a story-teller with a hand-clapper tells a new story of how a farm brigade changed the face of their land from poor to prosperous.⁹

⁷ Shih Hwa-fu, "Old Bards Sing New Themes," China Reconstructs, Peking, February 1959, Vol. VIII, #2, p. 15.

⁸ Kuang-Ming Jih-Pao (Kuang-Ming Daily) March 18, 1964.

⁹ Peking Review, No 38. September 18, 1964, p.30.

New Social Functions of Story-telling

Now the interesting question is why all these measures were taken or intensified in and after 1962. We find three internal developments in Communist China around 1962 that seem to account for this.

First, the disaster of the failure of the Great Leap Forward movement in 1958 was aggravated further by natural calamities on the Chinese mainland from 1959 to 1961. Recently released intelligence reports show that the regime was in danger of serious internal turmoils in 1961.¹⁰ There was a prevailing mood of disaffection among the people toward the regime in this period of 1961-1962.

Second, with this mood of disaffection came a wave of rumors that were hostile to the regime. On July 4, 1962, Nan-Fang Jih-Pao (Southern Daily, Canton) published two reports on the cracking of a rumor-generating spy ring. The reports said that the main duty of this spy ring was to listen to broadcasts from Taiwan and Voice of America and then spread the news in group meetings and teahouses.

Third, the top leaders of the Chinese Communist Party have increasingly shown their concern over the ideological purity of the young generation in China. This concern was made more clear after 1962 when the Sino-Soviet conflict came to the open.

To cope with this situation, more propaganda and indoctrination were called for, and more effective means of propaganda were sought by the regime. Story-telling was picked as a way to reach the people.

¹⁰ See the Chinese Communist classified Kun-Tso Tung-Hsun (Bulletin of Activities) released for public uses by the U.S. State Department in 1963.

One report describes how story-telling was used to boost morale:

During June and July, 1962, after our country had been hit by natural calamities for three consecutive years, some employees and workers (in Shanghai) showed little confidence in overcoming difficulties. The Municipal Cultural Bureau (Shanghai) organized story-tellers to go to the factories to tell the story Red Rock¹¹ vigorously to educate the workers in the spirit of our revolutionary martyrs who made sacrifices without hesitation, defied difficulties, disregarded personal gain or loss, had faith in the Party and in the cause of revolution.¹¹

Story-telling was used to dampen the circulation of rumor. Story-tellers were sent to teahouses to tell revolutionary stories to distract people from gossiping. For instance, in Sunchiang County near Shanghai in 1964 there were 76 teahouses which regularly featured story-telling. In that year 54 of the teahouses were taken over by Communist "amateur story-tellers who told stories about revolution."¹²

Gossiping could occur wherever groups gathered. Story-telling was also used to prevent that from happening. For example, in Shanghai during the summer, people used to go outdoors in the evenings to public squares or parks to enjoy cool air and friendly conversation. In 1964 the Communist authorities in the city dispatched story-tellers to these informal gatherings.¹³

Since 1962 story-telling has also been used as a powerful means of socializing the younger generation into the Communist society. One re-

¹¹Kung-Jen Jih-Pao (Workers' Daily), March 24, 1964.

Red Rock is a Communist novel about the struggle of Communist secret agents in a Kuomintang controlled area.

¹²Chung-Kuo Ching-Nien Pao (China Youth Daily), March 19, 1964.

¹³Jen-Min Jih-Pao (People's Daily), July 23, 1964.

port from Honan province illustrates this:

During the socialist education campaign in Honan, special emphasis was given to the retelling of personal experiences of old workers and old poor, lower and middle peasants. The spoken words of those aggrieved under the old society was a monument of convincing truth.

Through the person-to-person approach, all questions which the youth may have could be immediately answered with illustrations from first-hand experiences. This matter-of-fact approach proved to be most effective...¹⁴

Story-telling as a Unique Mass Medium

Let us quote a Communist explanation of the advantages of this specific channel of propaganda:

Why is story-telling so popular among the masses? Through analysis, we can at least find the following reasons. First, it is economical. No costume, setting, lights, scene or musical accompaniment is needed. It is not restricted by time, location or by the number of people attending. Stories can be told at any time or place, and the technique of story-telling is comparatively easy to learn. Everybody knows how to tell stories. Second, story-telling uses common language and is easy to understand. People who do not have the benefit of high education can acquire knowledge from books by listening to stories. Third, story-telling is quick and lively. Stories can be told as soon as they are written.¹⁵

A most obvious advantage of story-telling over most mass media is its flexibility in persuading people. Thus one Communist report says that story-tellers are "quick to respond to wishes and aspirations of

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Chung-Kuo Ching-Nien Pao (China Youth Daily) November 30, 1963.

¹⁵

Kung-Jen Jih-Pao (Workers' Daily) March 24, 1964.

their hearers...¹⁶ This point about person-to-person persuasion has often been noted in Western literature too. The authors of The People's

Choice comment:

In propaganda as much as in other things, one man's meat is another man's poison. This may lead to boomerang effects, when arguments aimed at "average" audiences with "average" reactions fail with Mr. X. The formal media produced several boomerangs upon people who resented what they read or heard and moved in the opposite direction from that intended. But among 58 respondents who mentioned personal contacts as concretely influential, there was only one boomerang. The flexibility of the face-to-face situation undoubtedly accounted for their absence.¹⁷

To the Chinese Communists story-telling's greatest advantage of all was the fact that originally it was a people's art. It stemmed from and existed for the masses. As a Communist report says, story-tellers "come from the people and the closest ties exist between them and their audiences."¹⁸ Such a medium is not only highly effective itself in directly persuading people but also can help other formal media to be effective. As Daniel Lerner points out,

The villager needs a sympathetic personal intermediary to bridge the gap between his traditional communications--colloquial narratives of familiar content told by a visible narrator--and the heavy new demand for empathy by media that report varied events far beyond the range of village experience...¹⁹

¹⁶ Shih Hwa-fu, op. cit., p. 15.

¹⁷ Paul F. Lazarsfeld, et. al., The People's Choice, New York: Columbia University Press, 1948, p. 154.

¹⁸ Shih Hwa-fu, op. cit., p. 15.

¹⁹ Daniel Lerner, The Passing of Traditional Society, New York: The Free Press, 1964, p. 190.

Story-tellers are the ones who are best suited to be this "sympathetic personal intermediary."

But to achieve this final advantage of story-telling as a mass medium -- the fact of its being a people's art-- means that people must enjoy the content of the stories, understand them, and find therein characters with whom they can identify and topics that bear on their own lives. Traditional story-telling was popular because it had this basic qualitative advantage. Does the present story-telling on the Chinese mainland appear to have this qualitative advantage?

Conclusion

We see that the Chinese Communists have politicized and Communized traditional Chinese story-telling. The stories now told are no longer of human interest and the story-tellers today are not skillful artists. Instead of being a people's art, contemporary story-telling in Communist China is one of the ruling elite's means of social control. Thus the nature of story-telling has fundamentally changed. Hence we can not assume that contemporary story-telling achieves the effect that it once did. If the story is of no human interest, then no matter how flexible the presentation, no identification between the people and the story-teller is possible.

While we may question the possibility that contemporary story-telling will produce positive effects like boosting morale or socializing the young, still we expect it to produce the negative effect of preventing rumor from circulating in teahouses and informal group gatherings. Their mere presence of Communist story-tellers is enough to silence anyone. This

negative effect also testifies to the ironic fact that the uniqueness of story-telling as an effective mass medium -- being a people's art -- is destroyed by the very authority which sought originally to utilize this uniqueness.