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LOCAL THEORIES OF ARGUMENT

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CHINESE ARGUMENTATION IN WAR RHETORIC

A Case Study of Soong Meiling's Speech at the U.S. Congress on February 18th, 1943

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On February 18, 1943, Soong Meiling, also known as Madam Chiang Kai-shek, became the third woman and the first Chinese person to speak to the U.S. Congress. As an unconventional speech made by an unconventional rhetor in an unconventional historical scenario, Soong's congressional address presents a unique vantage point for seeing the application of Chinese argumentation in the context of war rhetoric.

Soong was known as the First Lady of the Chinese Nationalist Party (also known as the KMT party) and an active female political leader in China. Officially invited by Eleanor Roosevelt, she toured the United States from November 1942 to May 1943. Her personal charisma and influence on U.S.-China diplomatic relations reached a pivotal point with her speeches to both chambers of Congress, which were believed to "provoke American congressmen and media people wild with enthusiasm" (Song, 1999, p. 128). Her speech to the legislature was regarded as the most profound speech to a western audience representing modern China up to the mid-twentieth century (Yang, 2016). Studies have revealed the dichotomy between her public persona as the Joan of Arc for China and her private persona as the Dragon Lady before and during her 1943 US trip and how her personas influenced American public opinions (Lintin, 2001). Rhetorical analysis has focused on her speech as an example of public diplomacy to establish a new image of China (Yang, 2016). Soong's speech was not only a remarkable piece of public diplomacy and rhetoric, but also provides a revealing case to study traditional Chinese argument in war rhetoric.

In what follows, I first describe the Chinese tradition of argumentation in classical works like *The Art of War* (Minford, 2002) and then analyze Soong's speech in terms of this Chinese argumentation tradition. My analysis focuses on the paradoxical view in Daoism and how it shapes Soong's argumentative discourse in her congressional speech. I argue that in order to overcome political, racial, and gender barriers, she builds an argument of paradoxical reversibility as well as a system of interdependent commonality to achieve her goal of persuasion.

The Paradoxical View and the Power of Reversibility in Daoism

The most well-known Chinese classical work on war strategies is *The Art of War* by Sunzi during the Warring State Period (403 BCE-221 BCE). The book contains thirty-six strategies of war, covering topics from laying plans and waging war to terrains or the use of spies. Underlying the analysis of war is a unique Chinese theory of argument that was influenced by the principles of Daoism (Combs, 2000), namely the paradoxical and oxymoronic rhetorical views. Lu (1997) has described the strategy and its functions: "This rhetorical strategy, which Laozi called *zheng yan mo fan*, or using language in such a way that it seems paradoxical or oxymoronic, served the purpose of bridging seemingly oppositional elements and reaching a dialectical truth" (p. 236). In other words, the idea of paradox underlying Chinese argument focuses on avoiding the need for war. The paradoxical argument strategy of Daoism contends that two things that are seemingly contradictory, like eloquence and silence, beauty and ugliness, could interact with each other and be interchangeable when the timing or condition permits. Laozi contends that things that seem to be weak have the inner strength that might produce "the reverse possibilities" (Lu, 1998, p. 237). The emphasis of reversibility is put on the negative meanings or phrases instead of the affirmative because "the negative and weak were unlimited and without boundaries, while the positive and strong were limited and restricting" (Lu, 1997, p. 237). In accordance with this classical Chinese world view, Sunzi emphasized that the best strategy of war is no war, and the best commander is one who could defeat the enemies without battles. The Daoism mode of inquiry has had far-reaching influence in the traditional Chinese pattern of thinking, as proverbs of paradox exist widely in Chinese culture: an ant hole could cause the collapse of a great dike; the water that bears the boat is the same that swallows it up.

The reversal strategy of the "soft and weak overcome hard and strong" (Hinton, 2015, p. 69) has implicit but important implications for understanding Chinese modes of argumentation. The philosophy of argumentative reversibility works in a confrontational situation in which the arguer representing the weak side in a conflict or a war seeks external help to counter the strong or the aggressive side, whose strength significantly outweighs that of the weak. The burden of proof for the arguer is often enormously difficult, that he or she needs to respond to multiple exigencies brought by the urgency of war. This creates a situation where the persuader, although rhetorically weak because of a lack of resources for bargaining, needs to create an argumentatively strong case to maximize the effect of persuasion in getting support from external parties. To achieve the goal of reversibility, the arguer usually needs to create a system of interdependent commonality with his or her audience, like the identification of a common enemy, or the establishment of a common identity with shared vision of postwar peace and prosperity.

Soong's speech presented a unique opportunity to understand reversibility embedded in the ancient Chinese mode of argument. In the following section, I examine Soong's speech to solve the critical puzzle and explain why her speech shifted her western audience's perception of China from being the weakest to the strongest in defeating Japanese fascism during World War II.

Political, Racial, and Gender Exigencies of Soong's Speech

Born and raised in a wealthy and prestigious family in China, graduated from Wellesley, and married Chiang Kai-Shek, the leader of the China Nationalist Party, Soong played a unique diplomatic role for the KMT party. Nonetheless, her burden of persuasion to portray China as an equal and powerful ally against Japan was immense given the historical context and exigencies she faced in 1943.

The first exigency facing Soong was that by the time of her speech, the focus of the US was largely on Hitler and Europe instead of the Asia-Pacific area. The United States and Britain declared war on Japan after the Pearl Harbor attack on December 8, 1941 (Stuckey, 2017). The Soviet Union, with its major military forces combating with Hitler's troops in Europe instead of the Pacific, officially declared war on Japan much later in August 1945. Compared with the other major Allied powers, China's war with Japan began earlier as Todd (2013) described it to be "the longest" and "among the bloodiest" (para. 1) parts of the World War II. Soong (1943) specified that the Chinese had "bled and borne unflinchingly the burden of war" (para. 3) against Japan for five years by 1943. These five years referred to the second phase of the anti-Japan war of China, which started on September 18, 1931, when Japan invaded Manchuria in northeastern China and, in 1932, established a puppet Manchurian government. In 1937, the warfare escalated as Japan launched attacks on other parts of China. The years from 1937 to 1943 constituted a catastrophic period in modern China. China's overall military strength was far below that of Japan. Dai (2013) states:

taking 1937 as an example ... Japan was able to produce 744 large caliber cannons, 330 tanks, 9500 cars, and up to 52400 tons of naval vessels on an annual basis, while the Chinese military capacity to produce similar weaponry amounted from minimal to almost zero.

para. 2

Moreover, from December 1937 to January 1938, the Japanese army committed the Rape of Nanjing. While the precise death toll of the Nanjing Massacre is difficult to know, Chinese scholars have estimated more than 300,000 (Chang, 1998). Soong (1943) described Japan as the "predatory neighbor" and called the aggression of Japan against China an "orgy of blood" (para. 22). According to Mishra (2013), during China's anti-fascism war from 1937–1945, it is estimated that "as many as twenty million Chinese people were killed, a hundred million were made homeless, and China's rudimentary infrastructure—roads, railways, and factories—was destroyed" (para. 5).

The second aspect of Soong's argumentative situation was racism against China exemplified by the Chinese Exclusion Act (CEA), which was enacted in 1882 and prohibited Chinese immigrants from entering the United States for more than half a century. Many Americans had negative attitudes towards China and were skeptical of a U.S.-China coalition to fight Japan. As the first Asian immigrants to enter the United States, the Chinese were once stereotyped as "coolie slaves," "uncivilized unassimilators" (Kil, 2012, p. 675), or "the yellow peril" (Odijie, 2018, p. 359). The racist perceptions were salient in American society as the CEA was still in force during Soong's visit to the U.S.

The third exigency Soong faced was general discrimination against women in the American and Chinese political systems. Because she was a woman acting in politics by influencing her husband Chiang Kai-shek, domestic critics likened Soong to the two infamous female figures in Chinese history whose participation in politics brought negative consequences to their dynasties (Yang, 2016). Moreover, the fact that Soong was only the third woman and second foreign female leader to speak to Congress was indicative of how little opportunity woman had in the political arena.

The Chinese Argumentative Strategy in Soong's Speech

Soong faced unprecedented difficulty as a diplomatic envoy, a national icon, and a woman representing a weak nation in the abyss of a devastating war. When Soong spoke to audiences in

Washington, D.C., New York City, Chicago, San Francisco, Wellesley, Massachusetts, and even Hollywood, her general purpose was to rally support from the United States for China in the war against Japan (Lintin, 2001). Nonetheless, Soong explicated that her purpose was not to beg for help, but to request assistance and seek alliance. The specific goal of her seventeen-minute speech to the U.S. Senate on February 17, 1943, was to persuade her audience that Japan was as threatening an enemy as Hitler to humanity and that China was as important an ally to the United States as other nations like Great Britain or Soviet Union. To prove China's strategic importance and achieve reversibility from the weak to the strong, Soong adopted the paradoxical strategy of argumentation in two ways: to build her central argument directly upon the paradoxical dynamics in the war and to establish the concept of interdependent commonality between the United States and China on the basis of internationalism.

Building an Argument of Paradoxical Reversibility

Soong (1943) utilized Chinese argumentation theory when she claimed that "in the sum total the weakest link is the strongest" (para. 4). In the first part of her speech to the U.S. Senate, Soong asked her audience to pay special attention to the weakest instead of the strongest link in the war. Here, "the weakest link" (para. 4) referred to the millions of U.S. fighting men, who were not in combat on the frontline but instead stayed behind to support the battlegrounds with tedious daily routines like supplies or logistics. Soong described them as the "unsung heroes" (para. 5) and urged the U.S. government to raise the morale of their soldiers in "far-flung" and "out-of-the-way" locations (para. 3). The logic behind the argument of the weakest being the strongest situates well in the context of the war, as the frontline and the rear-area work are closely linked. The rear-area work is hidden but critical to the fighting capacity of the frontline troops. Furthermore, military formidability usually relies on the power and strength of a nation with millions of military personnel working behind the scenes.

By focusing on the anonymous fighting men who had been making continuous but inconspicuous contributions behind the scene, Soong took an implicit and typically Chinese argumentative approach to advocate for supporting China in the war effort. By putting the invisible but more important section of the war under the limelight, Soong argued that the success or failure of the war may depend upon seemingly minor factors that were strategically crucial but might be easily overlooked. Soong's metaphor of "unsung heroes" applied not only to those laboring in the war effort in the United States, but also helped the audience to understand China's crucial role in the war. Although millions of Chinese nationals sacrificed in the war against Japan, China was never in the limelight but nevertheless played a crucial role in the anti-fascist war in the Asia-Pacific region. Soong's use of traditional Chinese argumentation theory highlighted that point.

Building a System of Interdependent Commonality

The burden of proof for Soong was twofold in shifting her audience's perception of China from one part of the paradox to the other. First, she needed to persuade her audience that Japan was as major a threat against humanity as Hitler. Second, she must show that China was potentially the most strategic force to defeat the Japanese threat.

To address the first issue, Soong raised the awareness among her audience about the threat of the Japanese military. She urged a sober, serious, and subjective knowledge of Japan's military prowess and ambition. Soong (1943) refuted the perception that Japan was considered "as of relative unimportance and that Hitler is our first concern" (para. 12). She described Japan

as “a vital potential threat” like “a waiting sword of Damocles” with “greater resources at her command than Germany” (para. 12). Meanwhile, Soong reminded her audience of Japan’s “perfidious attack on Pearl Harbor, Malaya, and lands in and around the China Sea” (para. 11) as well as the “victories won by the United States Navy at Midway and the Coral Sea” (para. 16) to reinforce the image of Japan as a common enemy.

To fulfill the second burden of proof, Soong constructed a common identity and a common vision of a postwar world based on the idea of interdependent internationalism. Soong’s vision of the war transcended beyond fighting for the welfare of one nation or one people, but for all nations and all people as she promoted internationalism throughout her 1943 speech tour. In essence, Soong’s vision of internationalism resembled her contemporary Wendell Willkie’s concept of “One World” with “globally interdependent postwar peace” (Stengrim, 2018, p. 201). One of the most vivid metaphors in her speech to the Senate revealed this belief of interdependent unity among all nations:

The term “hands and feet” is often used in China to signify the relationship between brothers. Since international interdependence is now so universally recognized, can we not also say that all nations should become members of one corporate body?

Soong, 1943, para. 20

This passage entailed two important messages about the logic behind Soong’s strategy of reversibility. First, like the “hands” and “feet,” each nation was an indispensable and complementary part to the entirety of international society. Hence, China should be treated as an equal and respected member by the United States—like a “brother” instead of a secondary ally in the anti-fascism war. Second, all nations were bonded with same interests and goal in winning the war. Therefore, China’s sacrifice and victory were not for its own sake, but for the victory of all members in the corporate body. During the years of bearing “Japan’s sadistic fury unaided and alone” (Soong, 1943, para. 15), China was able to detain the majority of Japanese military so that Japan was not able to expand its aggression to other parts of the world. Confining Japan’s troops in the Asian-Pacific region was “the part China has played in our united effort to free mankind from brutality and violence” (para. 2). Without stretching their lines too far from the European battleground, Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union were able to focus on defeating Hitler. Therefore, to assist China was essentially to assist the United States as well as other Allied Powers to win the final victory of the war.

Conclusion

Within one month following the speech, Soong had received over \$310,000 in donations for China from the American public (Lintin, 2001). Nine months later, the Chiang couple was invited to present at the Cairo Conference along with Great Britain and the U.S. to discuss a joint military scheme in countering Japan. Later in the same year, the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed. Two and half years after Soong’s speech tour, Japan was defeated. China gradually moved from the weakest to the strongest side in the paradox of its war against Japan after Soong Meiling delivered her speech to Congress. The argumentation strategy in the speech coincided with the discourse of war. The speech presented a unique demonstration of China’s reaching out to the world for support and understanding in the last century. Moreover, the speech facilitates understanding of Chinese forms of argument embedded in the ancient wisdom of Daoism as an exemplification of the paradoxical strategy of reversibility.

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