Book Review


When I first agreed to review this book, I was quite nervous. I thought that the book dealt with the rhetoric of Chinese Americans, a community that I, a non-resident alien, still do not identify with myself. I had known little about Chinese Americans beyond Amy Tan’s The Joy Luck Club. However, as I had long admired LuMing Mao as a comparative rhetorician, I trusted that he would have interesting things to say about Chinese Americans’s rhetorical practices. Once I embarked on my reading, I was pleasantly surprised that my preconception of the book was wrong. The book deals with not only the rhetoric of Chinese Americans but also key issues that have concerned comparative rhetoricians for a long time.

Mao uses “Chinese-American rhetoric” as an umbrella term to theorize the rhetorical practices of border residents in our increasingly globalizing society. The practice of this particular rhetoric serves as “an example of togetherness brought about by two different rhetorical traditions coming in contact with each other” (3). Therefore, Chinese, Chinese Americans, and European Americans can all participate in the making of this hybrid rhetoric. The book title, “Reading Chinese Fortune Cookie,” for instance, exemplifies such a rhetorical practice in the borderland. While message-stuffed pastry is a covert means of communication in ancient China, serving fortune cookies as dessert, only seen in American restaurants, reflects a European-American practice. Reading the stuffed message while enjoying the cookies at the end of a Chinese meal therefore constitutes a hybridized rhetorical practice.

Interestingly, Mao practices the hybrid rhetoric when structuring his book. The book consists of six chapters. In the first chapter, Mao describes both the context and the content for articulating Chinese-American rhetoric as an ethnic rhetoric. In the next four chapters, he presents four instances in which he engages and negotiates between Chinese and European-American rhetorical concepts and practices. The last chapter reflects on the importance and implications of his study. Although written in English, according to Mao, the six chapters embody a preferred syntactic and paragraphic scheme in
Chinese language, that is, the topic-comment structure. The first five chapters cover interconnected topics, which establish a causal frame for the final chapter to complete the discourse on the making of Chinese-American rhetoric.

So what is Chinese-American rhetoric exactly? Mao opens the discussion by pointing out a growing paradox in the global context. On the one hand, technological advancements have made this world increasingly interconnected and interdependent. On the other hand, people remain skeptical and resistant toward the universal tendency of integration and unification. Mao defines Chinese-American rhetoric as a viable response to this paradox and its discourse as “a creative, dialectical form of communication that practices togetherness-in-differences without any ‘exaggerated notions of uniqueness and incommensurability’” (3). He emphasizes that this hybrid rhetoric is in constant motion, a process of making and becoming.

Mao further explains this hybrid rhetoric in chapter one, “Opening Topics: Reading Chinese Fortune Cookie.” First, he aligns Chinese-American rhetoric with other alternative, transformative rhetorics that have challenged and subverted the dominant European-American rhetorical tradition. Second, Mao suggests that unlike African-American or Native-American rhetorics, Chinese-American rhetoric lacks uniqueness because it is always in a process of adjusting and becoming, negotiating between its “native” (Chinese) identity and its “adopted” American residency. Third, situated in rhetorical borderlands, it entertains a generative space for new forms of expression and new structures of authority. It can serve to “infuse or synthesize differences” (25) in both Chinese and European-American rhetorical traditions and to blur rhetorical hierarchies and discursive boundaries.

To participate in the making of this new rhetoric, Mao advocates “reflective encounters,” or actively reflecting on and imagining what it is like from the other tradition’s perspective when the two traditions are entangled in the borderland. More specifically, as he suggests, “we should seize such encounters or moments of co-presence as an opportunity to trace the complex past that has informed their respective experiences, and to recover the different paths each has traveled to arrive at this borderland destination” (28). It is only through reflective encounters that we can develop an in-between subjectivity conducive to the co-existence of two traditions despite their differences. However, Mao distances the making of Chinese-American rhetoric from the practice of multicultural rhetorics. He argues that the latter has entertained a “rhetorical fantasy” (33), believing that the celebration of rhetorical diversity can solve the challenges of togetherness-in-difference. In fact, the promotion of rhetorical diversity does not alter the asymmetrical
power relations that exist between the dominant and other emergent ethnic rhetorics.

After laying out the context and content for Chinese-American rhetoric, Mao then demonstrates the making of this rhetoric in the next four chapters. In chapter two, “Face to Face: Chinese and American Rhetoric,” Mao focuses on instances of “face work” in cross-cultural contexts. He first identifies different conceptualizations of face in both traditions. Then he discusses how he and others have moved between Western notions of positive and negative face and the Chinese notions of face involving both “lian” (dignity and respect gained by a moral character) and “mianzi” (prestige and reputation) in various contexts. The tensions between these different notions of face tend to give rise to a new subjectivity when all parties involved are willing to understand each other’s cultural histories. However, when there exists an unequal power relation, or when both parties cling to their own notions of face, a third face or a hybrid rhetoric may fail to emerge. Such a rhetorical failure has been clearly illustrated by the discursive exchanges between the Chinese and U.S. governments after an American spy plane collided with a Chinese jet fighter over the South China Sea in the Spring of 2001.

Chapter three, “Indirection versus Directness: A Relation of Complementarity,” brings into dialogue binary traits commonly attributed to Chinese and Anglo-American writing. Contrastive rhetoricians tend to describe Chinese discourse by referring to its non-transparent organization style. Mao argues that the Chinese indirection should be best seen as part of an ever-expanding effort to establish a field of conditions and contingencies. The relationship between Chinese indirection and Anglo-American directness can be viewed in a yin-yang fashion; that is, they complement rather than oppose each other. Mao illustrates the complementary relationship between the two rhetorical styles in both Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* and his own personal narrative.

Mao continues his reflective encounters in chapter four, “Terms of Contact Reconfigured: *Shu* (“Reciprocity”) Encountering Individualism.” I find this chapter the most illuminating on how to engage reflective encounters in non-Western rhetoric studies. When studying Chinese expository writing, many Western scholars have noted a wide use of maxims, analogies, and historical quotations, and they attribute these stylistic traits to the lack of Western individualism in Chinese society. The discourse of deficiency, as Mao contends, originates from an Orientalist ideology. Under its influence, scholars utilize Western terms, such as directness and individualism, to frame non-Western rhetorical practices. To examine Chinese rhetoric, such as the discourse of human relationship, on its own terms, Mao proceeds to
study “how a group of related terms cluster around to find resonance in each other and define and disseminate the discourse of shu, and on how personalized and situated actions enable, and accord symbolic power to, such discourse” (101). By examining shu in relation to other Confucian terms, by critiquing traditional gender biases in the discourse of shu, and by comparing the term with the Greek notion of ethos, Mao achieves “heterogeneous dissonance” in his reflective encounters.

Chapter five, “From Classroom to Community: Chinese American Rhetoric on the Ground,” offers an example of how Chinese-American rhetoric was evoked in a speech event on racial issues. A few years ago, a development consultant reportedly demonized Chinese Americans when he addressed political and business leaders in Cincinnati. The news report enraged the local Chinese community. To fight for social justice and racial harmony, community members mobilized both Chinese and European-American rhetorical traditions in their open letters to the mayor and a councilman and in their speeches delivered before the City Council. By implicating notions of face work, direction and indirection, shu, and individualism in their discursive activities, the Chinese community succeeded in pressing the city authorities to accept their suggestions for improving racial relations. This particular event shows that Chinese-American rhetoric is a viable construct for analyzing border residents’ social activism.

As promised at the outset of the book, Mao concludes his exposition of Chinese-American rhetoric with a comment, a reflection, in the final chapter. He reiterates the nature of the hybrid rhetoric. He also states confidently that the in-between subjectivity and the sense of togetherness-in-difference furnished by the hybrid rhetoric offer a promising future for border residents straddling two or more cultures.

The greatest contribution of Mao’s book, in my opinion, is that it offers us a powerful theoretical construct for understanding discursive activities on rhetorical borderlands. First, the construct of Chinese-American rhetoric is very inclusive. As Mao suggests, not only Chinese Americans but also Chinese and European-Americans practice it when they have to negotiate between two rhetorical traditions. Second, theoretical terms, such as reflective encounters, in-between subjectivity, and heterogeneous dissonance, which Mao uses to theorize Chinese-American rhetoric, are also valuable for studying and practicing other ethnic rhetorics.

Xiaoye You
The Pennsylvania State University