

## PROPAGANDA AND PERSUASION IN IMPERIAL AND CONTEMPORARY CHINA

by *Arthur F. Wright*

I begin with a quotation from Ross Terrill, a recent journalist-traveler to China:

Though force remains the ultimate basis of any state, control of the people in China is more nearly psychological than by physical coercion. Its extent would be hard to overstate.

The first question which will engage us is this: Have the Chinese as a people been traditionally more susceptible than other people to psychological mechanisms of control by their rulers? And if I can show that they have, the second question presents itself: Is this true of contemporary China? If I can show that the answer to the second question is affirmative, then we shall have isolated one characteristic of imperial China that continues to affect public and private behavior under a Communist government.<sup>1</sup>

China specialists have been grappling with the relationship between the imperial order and that of the People's Republic ever since 1950. Not only have we tried out innumerable hypotheses, often with inadequate data; we also have had to do so in a hostile climate of opinion where gross simplifications of striking absurdity commanded public attention. I give you two examples: "Mao Tse-tung is just founding another dynasty," and Dean Rusk's characterization of the People's Republic of China in the 1950s as a "Slavic Manchukuo." Hopefully such absurdities are a thing of the past. The China specialists are older, sadder, perhaps less ambitious for *comprehensive* answers to the question of new China's relation to the old. We are content to establish continuities of specific traditions—specific strands of culture, habit, behavior—from the imperial order into the new China. I choose one of these strands as the theme of this essay. Before turning to the evidence in the case we are considering, let me say a few things about China as a whole which set the stage, and, in setting the stage, bear directly on our theme.

We begin with the geographical fact that the Chinese empire was sub-continental in extent, covering latitudes the equivalent of Maine to Cuba and

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longitudes the equivalent of New York to Oregon. That this empire, growing in extent and population over a period of 2100 years, survived—with longer and longer periods of uninterrupted unity—is one of the miracles of human history. For the empire was far too large and diverse in climate and customs, far too broken up by great river systems, lakes, and mountain ranges to be held together by the intensive use of force. Garrisons at all the fifteen hundred or two thousand walled cities that were the centers of administration could not have held the empire together in the absence of consent. The oft-quoted remark of a Confucian to the founder of the Han Dynasty, ca. 206 B.C., has become a proverbial way of making this obvious point: “Your majesty may have conquered the empire on horseback, but can you indeed rule it on horseback?”<sup>2</sup>

The system that was developed for governing the empire became, over the centuries, very sophisticated. But if we look for its essentials we find them in an alliance between a hereditary ruler whose dynasty was invariably established by force, and a literate landed elite. The emperor relied on the literate elite for the ideas, the symbols, the skills necessary to maintain social harmony. And the elite relied on the emperor to govern in such a way as to protect their interests and to use force whenever necessary against attack from outside or armed dissidence within. It was not the emperors but the literate elite who rationalized this division of power and developed the system of morality which they spread throughout the land, where it served as a common system of values, a social cement for the society as a whole. This system, which I call imperial Confucianism, was a variegated and flexible system, resilient yet durable. I do not want to describe the system as a whole but rather to point to certain of its tenets that are clearly connected with our central theme of social control by indoctrination and persuasion.

Perhaps the most fundamental of these tenets of imperial Confucianism is the belief that man could, by the teaching and example of his moral superiors, be changed for the better. This is reiterated in the Chinese Classics, graven on countless stones commemorating the founding of schools, expressed in prose and poetry and in the epitaphs of notable men. A second fundamental tenet is that ideally the social order should be an ordered hierarchy with those above treating those below with benevolence and those below responding with obedience and acceptance of their lot. A woman, for example, was expected, in the course of her life, to follow three patterns of submission: in youth to submit to her parents; in maturity to submit to her husband; and in old age to submit to the wishes of her son. A third belief was in what we might call the familial model or pattern for all human arrangements. To learn and practice the way of filial duty and submissiveness, it was maintained, qualifies one, in the public sphere, to serve his prince with loyalty. Officials were often referred to as “fathers and mothers” of the people under their jurisdiction, and the emperors were spoken of as “emperor-fathers” of

their subjects. The net effect of this constellation of tenets (and of other basic attitudes I have not mentioned) was profoundly conservative. Imperial Confucianism tended to subordinate the individual to the family, to perpetuate time-honored ways and respect both for the aged and for the past, to exalt social harmony at all costs. We should keep this general picture of imperial Confucianism in mind when we come to consider patterns of propaganda and persuasion.

First I will discuss another cultural factor which bears on our theme: language. I assume there is no way of assigning different specific gravities to words—especially written words—as these figure in different cultures. But if there were, I believe that the weight of the written word—its assumed efficacy in affecting events—would be greater in Chinese civilization than in others. The obvious reasons for this are briefly stated. A single symbol system has been in continuous use for more than 3,500 years. The written symbols were viewed with awe (as indeed they were in many early societies) because they were thought to evoke the potency of whatever they denominated. Some of this attitude carried over into the culture of imperial China, where the mass of illiterates looked up to the tiny elite above them—an elite differentiated by its mastery of the written word. Further, the individual symbols did not change; they (particularly those with value connotations) accumulated with the passage of time a tremendous weight of contextual reference and allusive meaning. It was the solemn obligation of the ruler to confer appropriate and auspicious names, and we find, in the early months of any new dynasty, innumerable decrees giving new names to things. A respected classic of imperial Confucianism speaks of the Yellow Emperor (the mythological founder of the Chinese order), and it says: “The Yellow Emperor gave correct names to the myriad things and thereby enlightened the people as to the sharing of resources.”<sup>3</sup> Thus the respect for words, the belief in their power, is something quite different from what we find in the Western world. The line from *Romeo and Juliet*, “What’s in a name? A rose by any other name would smell as sweet,” would have seemed the most arrant nonsense to almost anyone in imperial China.

The first communications I shall consider are the formal communications from the emperor to his subjects. How was this done, what was the “target audience” and what effects were expected? Imperial edicts are by far the most common writings in this group, and thousands upon thousands of them survive. In China’s middle ages (which are my special interest), imperial edicts were handled as follows: they were drafted in response to the emperor’s wishes; when approved they were read in a stentorian voice by an official from the gate tower in the center of the south wall of the palace compound; officials and residents of the capital might be gathered below and thus hear the edict at first hand. But the people thus affected were only a fraction of the population. The edict was therefore copied and sent by fast imperial post

(using horses in relays) to all the prefectures of the vast empire. And how was the edict then brought to the attention of the people? Fortunately we have an eyewitness account written by a ninth-century Japanese traveler who gives full details:

An Imperial Edict by the new Emperor has arrived from the capital. Two carpets were spread in the courtyard in front of the gate of the official residence inside the city walls, and above the steps on the north side of the great gate was placed a stand, on which was spread a purple cloth, and on this was placed the Imperial Edict, written on yellow paper. The Administrative Officers and Secretaries of the prefecture . . . the military officials, the common people, and the monks, nuns, and Taoist priests stood in ranks according to their posts on the east side of the court facing west. The Magistrate emerged from his residence, preceded by twenty military officers, ten each leading the way on the left and the right. When the Secretaries, the subprefectural officials, and the others saw the Magistrate come out, they bowed their heads almost to the ground.

The Magistrate called out, "The common people," and they chanted a response all together. The Magistrate stood on one of the carpets and an Administrative Officer stood on the other, both of them facing west (the direction of the T'ang capital). Then a military officer called out the titles of the various officials, and the row of Secretaries and subprefectural officials chanted their response in unison. Next he called out to the row of Military Guard Officers, Generals, and Commissioners of Troops, and the row of military men chanted their response in unison. He also said, "The various guests," and the official guests and clients chanted their response together. Then he said, "The monks and Taoist priests," and the monks, nuns, and Taoist priests chanted their response all together.

Next, two military officers brought the stand with the Imperial Edict and placed it in front of the Magistrate, who bowed once and then picked up the Imperial Edict in his hand and lowered his head, touching it to his forehead. A military officer knelt and received the Imperial Edict on his sleeve and, holding it up, went into the courtyard and, standing facing north, chanted, "An Imperial order has arrived." The magistrate, Administrative Officers, Secretaries, and the military, all together bowed again. A military officer called out, "Let the common people bow," and the people bowed again, but the monks, nuns, and Taoist priests did not bow. . . . Two . . . Assistant Judges read the Edict alternating with each other. Their voices were loud, as when government decisions are announced in our country (i.e., Japan). The Imperial Edict was some four or five sheets of paper long, and it took quite a long time to read, while no one sat down. . . . Finally, a military officer called out, "You may leave," and they all chanted their response in unison. The officials, the military, the monks and Taoist priests, and the common people thereupon dispersed.<sup>4</sup>

It would seem from this example that the edict was listened to with awe and respect. In later periods, imperial edicts were simply posted at a conspicuous point outside the local government office. Generally speaking, edicts transmit the day-to-day policy decisions of the emperor and his high officials to the populace. They cover the whole range of things from the momentous proclamation of a new dynasty or an empire-wide amnesty down to the regulation of minor matters such as the marketing of Buddhist images or the local observances of the death anniversary of a member of the imperial house. But, whatever their subject, they were the law and they were binding on all.

But let us turn to other means by which the emperors sought the consent of their subjects and their acceptance of the status quo. One of the most important was the establishment of an empire-wide system of schools in which a standard curriculum was taught. Most of the learning was memorization, and the texts memorized drummed into the eyes and ears of the young the values of imperial Confucianism, such things as the five constant virtues: benevolence, righteousness, decorum, understanding, and faithfulness. In many periods, local governments had a special commissioner of education appointed from the capital; he supervised the schools, awarded public recognition and prizes to particularly apt pupils. Whenever a locality was fortunate enough to have a successful candidate in the imperial civil service examinations, his return home was the occasion for great public celebration: a banquet at the magistrate's expense to which the local aged and notables were invited, the awarding of prizes and, in some cases, the erection in the town of a festive arch with high-sounding words suited to the occasion. Thus the whole system, with its public recognition—as well as rewards—at the end was superbly calculated to keep young people at their books and conforming to the accepted social norms of imperial Confucianism.

But in times of stress, for example during the consolidation of a new dynasty or when a dynasty's power was threatened, special measures of all kinds were devised. One emperor of two thousand years ago was uncertain of his dynasty's hold on power. He ordered that a set of moral injunctions he had written for his own sons should be added to the curriculum of all schools—thus elevating himself to the level of those sages who had written the Classics already being memorized.<sup>5</sup> Nearly fifteen hundred years later the founder of the Ming dynasty—a harsh and despotic ruler—expressed disappointment that, for all the laws and ordinances promulgated by imperial edict, the number of criminals was still enormous. He then went on to announce that he himself had written a Ta-kao, or “Great Announcement,” “to be made known to the people, to enable them to know the ways of pursuing good fortune and avoiding calamity.”<sup>6</sup> Actually written by the emperor, the Ta-kao was intended to acquaint people—not just officials—throughout his vast empire with the harsh laws that were to guide their lives. It was circulated among officials and commoners alike; special masters were appointed to teach it in village schools. Article 74 states an unusual proviso:

We have issued this announcement to make perfectly clear the roots of fortune and misfortune. Among all the officials and among the common people, if in their households they have a copy of this book and if they are convicted of a crime calling for the bastinado or for banishment, they may have their sentences reduced one degree of punishment per crime. If they don't have a copy, their sentence is to be raised one degree per crime. . . .<sup>7</sup>

By the time this was issued, 1397, printing had long been in use and literacy was far more widespread than in earlier times. These developments made

it possible for an emperor to demand that his people actually *possess* his book of rules and in some cases be able to read and memorize it. These conditions prevailed under the last two dynasties of imperial China, 1369–1912, during which time there was also a vast increase in population and a steadily rising state budget. All this made possible measures of propaganda and indoctrination on a scale unknown in earlier periods.

Let me illustrate: In 1670 the K'ang-hsi emperor promulgated the "Sacred Edict" (Sheng-yü), an elaborate set of moral maxims drawn from imperial Confucianism. The edict of promulgation decreed that a lecturer was to be appointed in every locality to be assisted by three or four "honest and prudent persons," that lectures on the edict were to be given semi-monthly at fixed locations, that all school children in the empire were to attend the lectures and memorize the edict. It was further decreed that no one, no matter what his other qualifications, could take the civil service examinations unless he could write the text of the Sacred Edict from memory. The system of lectures had, to say the least, uneven results, but it was vigorously revived in the late nineteenth century in an effort to restore social morale. Even at that late date, new ways of indoctrinating the people with these maxims of approved morality were tried. Lecturers were ordered to use local dialects to ensure that people understood; exposition of the maxims was made part of the opening ceremony for rural markets; roadside lectures were attempted in some areas. With the help of the local gentry, meeting halls were built where the Sacred Edict was kept and lectures regularly held. And the T'ung-chih Emperor who reigned 1862–1874 and presided over the last effort to make the old imperial machinery work in the face of threats from within and without, expressed his conviction that the "deterioration of the people's hearts and customs" during the mid-century was because of the local officials' neglect of the system of lectures on the Sacred Edict.<sup>8</sup>

In what I have said thus far, I have drawn on only some of the devices which the established order used to elicit consent. There is a whole range of other devices that were used by rebels: manifestoes, a wide variety of slogans promising more land and a better day, liturgies intoned to generate self-confidence within a rebel band—all these and many more. Underlying both were certain attitudes and beliefs which persisted down the centuries. To conclude this section on imperial China let me itemize these attitudes, whose workings I have to some extent illustrated:

1. Respect for the written word.
2. The belief that certain collections of words, Classics or creeds, if made known by teachers in the school or—in shortened form—by slogans or popular rhymes, would effect a desired change in people's behavior.
3. Respect for the *authority* of such statements, whether issued by the established order or by rebel leaders.
4. The conviction that memorization was the most effective means of get-

ting people fully indoctrinated with the desired moral outlook or set of reactions.

5. The belief in examples—whether men in the flesh or paragons in books—as having real force in effecting desired changes in behavior.

With this summary itemization, let us turn from imperial China to the People's Republic and see whether evidence for the persistence of such basic attitudes can be found.

The formal level of communicating decisions of the leadership to the public is infinitely more sophisticated than it was in imperial China, but similar assumptions underlie it: that the leadership speaks with unquestionable authority and that the populace must acquiesce in the orders that are given it. The nationwide network of Party units takes decisions which appear in the official newspapers or on the official radio (there are no others) and translates them into working terms in all the rural villages and in all the wards of the cities. Thus theoretically no one can escape orders given by the leadership, and in fact almost no one does. At the same time regional and local Party leaders have the latitude to present such orders in locally familiar terms and by reference to the local situation. Cracks appeared in this system during the Cultural Revolution, but it is now fairly well reconstituted with soldiers of the People's Liberation Army sharing power and responsibility with Party cadres.

The nationwide network of schools—reaching as it does to nearly all the youth of the land—is unprecedented in China's history. The schools are used for two purposes: first, to assure a population with basic literacy combined with practical experience at work, *and* a small number of highly trained specialists in the technical subjects relevant to China's modernization; second, to indoctrinate the population from kindergarten up with a common social and political creed built upon the teaching of Marxism-Leninism as interpreted by Mao Tse-tung. The school system was rocked to its foundations by Mao's effort to make the schools more political, more continuously "revolutionary," but the recent trend is back towards a balance between the two functions of imparting knowledge *and* indoctrination. The government is unambiguous in its pronouncements on this point, and the Party workers see to its implementation at all levels.

Here is a classic statement of the point by the Minister of Education:

We insist that education must be in the service of proletarian politics and that all undertakings must be combined with political thought, because only in this way can we train the type of personnel who are both red and expert. . . . the soul of all school work [is] the political education of Marxism-Leninism and the political task of the Party.<sup>9</sup>

Underlying this policy of intensive education-indoctrination, and underlying the vast propaganda apparatus we shall turn to next, is an assumption that we found in the ideology of imperial China: Man can, by the guidance and

example of his superiors, be changed for the better. This old belief is held with more fervor in the People's Republic than it ever was before or, I believe, than it ever has been in the history of any people anywhere. What other regime in world history, having captured the last "Baby emperor" of China who had then served as a puppet emperor of the Japanese in Manchukuo, would proceed to devote years to re-educating him, to changing his outlook, thought patterns, etc., so that he finally lived out his life as a gardener in Peking and wrote his memoirs! And if—as seems very probable—the Chinese Communist revolution cost far fewer lives than the successive phases of the Russian, this can be attributable, in part, to this belief in man's capacity for being changed for the better.

The propaganda apparatus, by which Peking augments the effectiveness of both the state system of transmitting orders and the educational network, is truly formidable. Though it draws certain techniques from the Russian system of agit-prop, it is both fueled and colored by many of the age-old assumptions we have discussed, not the least of which is the idea of the perfectibility of man. There is neither time, nor indeed much utility, in discussing the formal structure of the propaganda apparatus. We can only take up certain aspects, and these we shall try to relate where possible to underlying assumptions persisting from the past.

The Party workers, or cadres, who carry on this program are committed to one body of doctrine—Marxism-Leninism as interpreted by Mao. They, in time, master great sections of the *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung* and use them in their upper level propaganda. Here is surely something that resembles the old belief in a single authoritative body of writing (the Classics) and in an elite which could spread and itself transmit messages to others—with net gain to the recipient and to the society as a whole. But the *Selected Works*, like the Classics before them, were too complex for ordinary people. Hence one finds, in the People's Republic as in the Empire, a variety of short texts, pithy digests of the same authoritative truths but meant for mass consumption. In earlier years Liu Shao-ch'i's *How to be a Good Communist* served some of this purpose, and more recently Mao's *Yü-lu*, or "Sayings" (the little red book) has been used not only as a handbook of Maoist wisdom but as a religious amulet. We should note in passing that the title of the book is the same as that of the collected sayings of the twelfth-century reformulator of neo-Confucianism, Chu Hsi, and that that title was in turn a calculated echo of the title of Confucius's *Lun-yü* (Analects), the oldest and most venerated of Confucian texts. In one province with a population of 21 million, Mao's writings are said to have sold a hundred million copies!<sup>10</sup> Every school, every commune, every factory has its periods devoted to the study of Mao's thought. Perhaps this is enough to show that respect for the written word, and the written word of a constituted authority, has not disappeared from the Chinese scene.



Slogans constitute perhaps the ultimate in simplification of verbal propaganda. In new China, as in the old, slogans are used as reminders or as pithy communications to the barely literate. I remarked earlier that in imperial China rebels made particular use of slogans because their potential audience was barely literate, if that. But they were more widely used. I remember living as an "enemy alien" in Japanese-occupied Peking. If I went out in the morning I would often see written on a house wall the slogan *Huan-wo shan-shui*, "Give us back our mountains and our rivers"—a phrase coined by a military hero who resisted invaders in the twelfth century.<sup>11</sup> The Japanese would have it rubbed out, and a day or two later it would be back again. Visitors to today's China report the wide use of slogans, many spread across the fronts of buildings or on walls. The most common are salutes to the nation's leader, for example: "Long live our great teacher, leader, commander and helmsman Chairman Mao." But others are meant to be spurs to action. For example: "Learn from Ta-chai," which is a model commune. "Hold the spirit of Yen-an forever bright," which is a reminder to keep up the revolutionary drive and self-sacrifice that characterized the Communist Party's long struggle for power. Still another type is the shorthand reference in the form of a slogan to one nation-wide campaign or another. For example *i-ta san-fan*, "one crush, three oppose," which refers to the campaign to *crush* counter-revolution and *oppose*: 1) corruption and graft, 2) speculation, 3) waste.

But books, even simple books, and words, even in the form of slogans, do not reach all people at all levels of awareness and literacy. One of the devices most widely used in propaganda is example—the holding up before ordinary folk of models who acted according to all the Maoist imperatives, put country before self, sacrificed themselves for their fellow workers, overfulfilled their production quotas and so forth. Capsule biographies of these heroes and heroines are printed in the local papers and broadcast on the national radio, and photographs are widely distributed showing them receiving the personal congratulations of Chairman Mao. Then, in some cases, the local party workers will call people's attention to one of these figures and start a program to "emulate (or learn from) Comrade so and so." This is far, far more intensive and far-reaching than anything in the old order, but we found in that order a deeply held belief in the power of example, and the practice of public rewards and public celebrations honoring those who had learned a Classic well or came out first in the state examinations. The use of example as propaganda is then another continuity from imperial to the People's China.

In imperial China, the governing class was constantly concerned with the songs people sang in the fields—whether they were properly elevated in tone or possibly subversive. Dramatic troupes which toured the cities and countryside were closely watched for the same reason. But the Chinese Communist Party in its propaganda operations takes a somewhat different view of such things. It destroyed many of the traditional forms of drama because they were

seen as subversive, i.e., perpetuating nostalgia for the past. But it went on to harness music, ballet, drama, and cinema to the revolutionary purpose. The new tunes do not strike us as remarkable, but the message is clear: "The East is Red," "Sailing the Seas Depends on the Helmsman." Eight approved ballet-dramas, each with its revolutionary message, have criss-crossed the land, and travelling drama-groups have gone on tour to the villages. It is estimated that one of the ballet-dramas, "Red Detachment of Women," has been seen by five hundred million people (including President Nixon). The cinema fare, with goodies and baddies (counter-revolutionaries) much like our westerns, has a yearly audience of four billion.<sup>12</sup>

Much more could be said, but I hope I have convinced you that certain assumptions and beliefs regarding human behavior and ways to influence it have continued from the Confucian imperial order into the Communist People's Republic of China. I hope too that I have dissipated any lingering beliefs that The People's Republic is a police state where people are held in line by the massive use of force and terror. The psychological means of control I have described are far more effective, far less costly than the use of brute force would ever be.

#### NOTES

1. Large parts of this paper are based on my essay "Propaganda and Persuasion in Imperial China," to appear in Lasswell, Lerner, Speier, eds., *Communication and Propaganda in World History* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1973).

2. A remark first made by the Confucian Lu Chia to the founding Emperor of the Han, in 196 B.C. Cf. Burton Watson, tr., *Records of the Grand Historian* (New York, 1961), Vol. I, pp. 277-278.

3. *Li Chi (Records of Rites)*, Ch. 46, James Legge, tr., (New York: Universe Books, 1967), Vol. II, p. 208.

4. Edwin O. Reischauer, tr., *Ennin's Diary* (New York, 1955) pp. 180-182. Some minor verbal changes.

5. This was Wang Mang, who attempted to found a new dynasty in the years A.D. 6-24. Cf. H. H. Dubs, tr., *History of the Former Han Dynasty* (Baltimore, 1955), Vol. III, p. 183.

6. *Ming-shih (Standard History of the Ming Dynasty)* Ch. 93, Palace Edition of the Ch'ien-lung period (Shanghai, 1884), p. 6<sup>a</sup>.

7. The complete text has recently been reconstructed. Cf. *Ming-ch'ao K'ai-kuo Wen-hsien (Documents on the founding of the Ming Dynasty)* (Taipei, 1966), p. 82.

8. For full details on this system cf. Hsiao Kung-ch'uan, *Rural China: Imperial Control in the Nineteenth Century* (Seattle, 1967), pp. 185-186, 196, 241, and passim.

9. Quoted in C. T. Hu's essay in the collection *China Under Mao: Politics Takes Command*, R. McFarquar, ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), p. 249.

10. Ross Terrill, *800,000,000—The Real China* (Boston, 1972), p. 61.

11. This was Yüeh Fei (1103-1141). Cf. Hellmut Wilhelm, "From Myth to Myth: The Case of Yüeh Fei's Biography," in Wright and Twitchett, eds., *Confucian Personalities* (Stanford, 1962), pp. 146-161.

12. On theater in the People's Republic of China, cf. Terrill, *800,000,000*, pp. 79-94.