

Mandate of Heaven and Serving the People in Chinese Political Rhetoric: An Evolving Discourse System across Three Thousand Years

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Abstract : This paper describes Mandate of Heaven as a source of justification for the ruling regime from ancient China approximately three thousand years ago. Initially, the kings of Shang dynasty simply nominated themselves as the sons of Heaven sent to Earth to rule the common people. As the last generation of the kings became corrupted and ruled with brutal force and cruelty which directly caused their destruction, the successive kings of Zhou dynasty realised the importance of virtue and the provision of goods to the people. Legitimacy of the ruling regimes became rested not entirely on random allocation of the throne by an unknown supernatural force but on a foundation comprising morality and the ability to provide goods. The latter composite was picked up by the current ruling regime, the Chinese Communist Party, and became the cornerstone of its political legitimacy, also known as 'performance legitimacy' where economic development accounts for the satisfaction of the people in place of election and other democratic means of providing legal-rational legitimacy. Under this circumstance, it becomes important as well for the ruling party to use political rhetoric to convince people of the good performance of the government in the economy, morality, and foreign policy. Thus, we see a lot of propaganda materials in both government policy statements and international press conference announcements. The former consists mainly of important speeches made by prominent figures in Party conferences which are not only made publicly available on the government websites but also become obligatory reading materials for university entrance examinations. The later consists of announcements about foreign policies and strategies and actions taken by the government regarding foreign affairs made in international conferences and offered in Chinese-English bilingual versions on official websites. This documentation strategy creates an impressive image of the Chinese Communist Party that is domestically competent and internationally strong, taking care of the people it governs in terms of economic needs and defending the country against any foreign interference and global adversities. This political discourse system comprising reading materials fully extractable from government websites also becomes excellent repertoire for teaching and researching in contemporary Chinese language, discourse and rhetoric, Chinese culture and tradition, Chinese political ideology, and Chinese-English translation. This paper aims to provide a detailed and comprehensive description of the current Chinese political discourse system, arguing about its lineage from the rhetorical convention of Mandate of Heaven in ancient China and its current concentration on serving the people in place of election, human rights, and freedom of speech. The paper will also provide guidelines as to how this discourse system and the manifestation of official documents created under this system can become excellent research and teaching materials in applied linguistics.

Keywords : mandate of heaven, Chinese communist party, performance legitimacy, serving the people, political discourse

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