

Shi-xu. (2014) *Chinese Discourse Studies*. London and New York: Palgrave MacMillan. 223 pp.

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Because of China's rapidly-changing economic, geopolitical, and international position, recent years have seen an increasing interest in Chinese culture. The study of Chinese cultural and political discourse also has received much attention from international scholars (Wu 2008). However, such studies are, more often than not, dependent upon Western-centric theories or methodologies which tend to obscure or silence the voices and meanings of China's indigenous culture. In *Chinese Discourse Studies*, Shi-xu, a pioneer in the field of discourse studies in China, presents an innovative and systematic approach to contemporary Chinese discourse and communication which proposes the new methodology of Chinese Discourse Studies (CNDS) as an extension and enhancement of the prevailing academic approach of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). In the author's words, CNDS is a "locally-grounded and globally-minded framework for discourse research" (p. 17). Because of its timely focus on the evolution of discourse studies in contemporary China, this book is a much welcomed addition to the existing literature on discourse and communication research.

The book comprises an Introduction with six chapters organized in two parts. Part I, comprised of three chapters, sets forth the paradigmatic framework for CNDS from general concepts to specifics in order to construct a theoretical foundation for the three empirical case studies presented in Part II. Chapter 1 discusses the rationality and significance of a new research paradigm, Cultural Discourse Studies (CDS), which has emerged from the cultural and intellectual crises – and resulting alienation – of the twenty-first century. The CDS paradigm assumes that the realm of human discourse is where significant acts of cultural contestation, cooperation, and transformation take place. It follows that discourses manifested by developing societies are essentially different than those of developed societies. In this opening chapter, Shi-xu underscores that culturally-cognizant scholars and researchers, regardless of their respective paradigmatic traditions, should make concerted efforts to support the cultural and political goals of CDS in this era of globalization.

Chapter 2 narrows down the broad concept of CDS into Eastern Discourse Studies (EDS), a more specific framework for investigating cultural realities in the developing societies of Asia, as well as in Africa and Latin America. It further identifies the unique properties of Eastern discourse in terms of its diverse cultural and intellectual accomplishments, as well as the shared historical, cultural, and linguistic qualities which form the basis for construction of the EDS framework. This chapter then outlines the basic principles and corresponding strategies of paradigmatic construction that will be employed in subsequent discussions.

As the core of the book, Chapter 3 presents a comprehensive, systematic, and Chinese-culture-oriented framework (CNDS) for studying contemporary Chinese discourse. The author first elaborates on the specific principles that underlie CNDS in terms of objectives, standards, and strategies. Moreover, the author provides practical examples of the great influence that Chinese traditional culture and scholarship exert upon Chinese discursive practices. Shi-xu characterizes CNDS as a paradigm construction based on Chinese holistic philosophy, harmony-oriented theory, and an all-encompassing and multifaceted methodology. The chapter concludes with a detailed list of relevant research topics and sources.

In Part II, Chapters 4, 5, and 6 present empirical case studies based on the broad concept of Chinese Discourse Studies (CDS). More specifically, it closely examines three salient domains of contemporary Chinese life – human rights, international trade, and urban development – with the goal of illuminating uniquely Chinese discursive practices. Chapter 4 argues in favor of a new approach to discourse theory that is both historically grounded and interculturally aware. Proceeding from this perspective, Chinese political discourse, which is characterized as “dynamic,” “critical-creative,” and “cultural-hegemony-resistant,” is distinguished from the negative notions typically constructed by international scholars: “deviant,” “unchanging,” and “totalitarian” (p.119). It is for this important reason that the new framework for Contemporary Chinese Political Discourse (CCPD) be constructed. In an investigation of the issue of human rights in China based on data retrieved from diverse Chinese news agencies and public domains, Shi-xu presents a fine-grained analysis and critical appraisal of CCPD. His findings indicate that discourse on this subject has progressed significantly since the beginning of the country’s period of economic reform and opening-up (1978), as evidenced by the growing participation of diverse speakers, the broadening concept of human rights, and the formalization of related discourse. The author asserts that the rapid development of CCPD since 1978 now constitutes an effective and urgently-needed countervailing force to the imbalances prevalent in contemporary international communication and western political discourse.

Chapter 5 draws the reader’s attention to the subject of China’s trade disputes with the European Union (EU) over footwear exports from 2005 through 2010. As

in the previous chapter, the author takes a cultural-discursive position in his analysis of business practices. Using data obtained from public communications during this five-year period, Shi-xu identifies several problematic issues related to the footwear trade, including insufficient participation of China-based export businesses, evasive or conflictive attitudes of Chinese businessmen towards trade disputes, and the failure of media to make China's voice heard in the context of such disputes. The concluding section of Chapter 5 highlights the implications of these findings in terms of the historical and intercultural aspects of international trade and suggests related topics of interest for future studies on intercultural discourse.

In the final chapter, Shi-xu again takes a cultural-discursive approach to the interpretation of a local case study – the urban development of Hangzhou, a thriving historical city located on China's east coast. Through in-depth analysis of data on the city's urban affairs and practices, the author reveals particular characteristics and problems of Hangzhou which tend to impede its sustained development while also emphasizing its progress and future potential as evidenced by growing citizen participation in urban affairs, the proliferation of scenic spots, and the marked acceleration of Hangzhou's socio-economic development over the past three decades.

While Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) remains pervasive in current global research on discursive practices, this book challenges the fundamental assumption of Western universalism and argues the potential benefits of a more culturally-conscious approach to discourse studies and, more specifically, of the Chinese Discourse Studies (CNDS) framework, which assumes an historical and culture-centric perspective in the study of cultural discourse as it has evolved over the course of China's period of reform and opening up. Tian (2009) makes an analogy between discourse studies and angles in geometry, stating that while most discourse theoretical approaches offer a 'reflex angle' on the subject, the CDA approach is more of an 'acute angle.' Continuing this analogy, Shi-xu claims that in order to re-contextualize CDA in a Chinese context, an 'obtuse angle' approach should be taken. In this sense, the author forms a similar conceptualization while offering a critique of West-centrism in discourse analysis and advocating the use of CNDS. In addition, the case studies presented in Part II are designed to give readers a better idea of how CNDS can contribute to a more rational and accurate understanding of Chinese discursive practices. Shi-xu adds that because these empirical studies rely heavily on official data and literature, they may in some respects fail to reveal many of the internal complexities of Chinese discourse. Wu and Jiang (2009) have claimed that the essence of culture is conveyed through non-essentialist discourse. Therefore, in order to achieve a more comprehensive interpretation, it will be necessary to incorporate data obtained from common people and in more private and diversified settings.

In terms of its organization, the book's overall structure is highly effective: an informative Introduction, three chapters of theoretical foundation in Part I, three chapters presenting empirical studies in Part II, an insightful Epilogue, and a well-researched References list. As to its theoretical construction, the author progressively narrows the framework from a global to a regional perspective, and finally, to a local level – that of Chinese Discourse Studies (CNDS). In the process, Shi-xu provides readers with a wealth of insights into the discourse of contemporary China.

In summary, Shi-xu's *Chinese Discourse Studies* presents a ground-breaking theoretical and practical model which argues convincingly on the benefits of a non-Western paradigm for discourse studies. Because this book is “locally grounded” yet “globally minded,” it is an invaluable resource that will appeal not only to scholars of Chinese culture, but also to lay readers interested in discourse analysis, media studies, and intercultural communication.

References

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