

Rhetoric & Public Affairs

A publication of Michigan State University Press

MS#

Comments to the author(s):

I think this study has a lot to offer, but at present, the focus of this analysis is a little askew. The primary contribution of this article is the insight it offers on how China is attempting to rhetorically negotiate unfamiliar territory in its burgeoning role in international affairs. The real productive rhetorical tension Chinese officials are facing is between the familiar domestic rhetorical realm and the foreign international rhetorical realm, in which they have considerably less experience and less control.

Rather than grounding this study in organizational/public relations/soft power, I think the parts on page 9, about metaphor and local interpretation provide a much more solid framework. In the meat of the analysis, organizational communication/soft power/public relations aren't even mentioned, and they don't need to be. It would be best summarized as a contribution to rhetorical studies of international political culture and how China, as a new political player, is trying to navigate this tricky territory by switching up their repertoire.

A problem inherent to studies of ambiguity is how to identify ambiguous statements as strategic. How does the researcher identify intention? This is particularly important when studying a government as an organization because misidentification of strategy could lead to misidentification of, and disregard of, other important kinds of political communication. For example, you note how organizational research has accounted for the productive use of strategic ambiguity to stimulate creativity among the stakeholders. In the political arena, a rhetorical analysis might see the ambiguity as the result of an unknown/contentious situation for which the leaders have no precedents, and the people (the stakeholders) become innovative in response to the social demands of the exigency. In terms of rhetoric, both strategy and ambiguity are necessarily born of tension.

If the focus is to stay on strategic ambiguity, I think it is necessary to explain how you are able to distinguish between a rhetor engaging in strategic ambiguity and a rhetor who lacks the knowledge/the ability for judging and strategizing (rhetorically inventing). Likewise, I think you should try to clearly illustrate the process of communication as you see it happening early on in the essay.

Also, if the focus is to stay on strategic ambiguity, what about literature on strategic ambiguity in the more obvious discipline, political communication? The analogy comparing an organization (in the sense of a business with stakeholders) to a nation with publics shouldn't be assumed as obvious, or definitely helpful. It is true that more and more crossover is happening between public relations research and political communication research, especially since the mass media boom. However, I don't believe the crossover has reached such a thorough point of blending that explanation of the

analogy or its benefit is somehow unnecessary. More importantly, one cannot side-step the more obviously connected body of literature. At the least, a short explanation should be given for why you believe it is not well-suited for your project.

I think you should say who the six parties are (which nations) in the introduction.

More attention should go to the point on page 6 (that this involvement is a new experience for China).

Again, (top of page 7) how do you tell the difference between strategic ambiguity and lack of knowledge/ability for judging and strategizing (rhetorically inventing)?

(Page 7 bottom) You need to provide some evidence of strategy.

(Page 8 top) Change “organization” to “organizational” and insert the word in parenthesis: “Attribute (to) any given goal.”

Is there a consensus on what strategic ambiguity does for hierarchy (p. 8 top)? I don’t quite understand if the explanation is contradictory or not.

Where does unwanted (bad ambiguity) originate (on page 8)?

In reference to the list (page 8 bottom) of when strategic ambiguity is “more appropriate,” is there literature on the ethics of strategic ambiguity? Is that relevant here?

In reference to the top of page 10, I think it would be beneficial to bear in mind how strategy is often wrapped up with issues of power and know-how. If you are speaking of Burke’s conception of motive, it might be helpful to also think about Burke’s conception of agency.

“Rhetorical posturing” mentioned on page 10 might be a profitable way of approaching the topic in more detail.

The paragraph on page 10 that discusses rhetorical analyses notes ways rhetorical ambiguity has been explored in rhetorical criticism → However, what differs between the text of the studies you mention and the text in the present study? What differs between the authors of these texts? I think there are a lot of important differences.

(top page 13) “public affair” should be “public affairs”

I think the bottom quote (page 14) is important. It illustrates the importance of official/structured forums in international affairs... “cause harm to the framework” makes me think of a safety net or safety structure—perhaps “scaffolding” would be a good metaphor.

Separate subheadings from the start of paragraphs.

I don't think the sub-sub headings are necessary... like "stability and peace in Northeast Asia." It would be better to turn them into topic sentences.

I am not satisfied with the explanation for why "the six party talks" and "da ju" were chosen but "common interest" and "constructive role" were not. At face value, the latter two seem relevant to the questions "what is it" and "why is it" too. Explain why they are not chosen.

Granted, this is an over-generalization, but the process of naming political initiatives in China seems to always be at least somewhat ambiguous, perhaps strategically so and perhaps not. Is this example atypical in form? Is it different simply because it is international rather than domestic?

What are we learning about, strategic ambiguity or the state of Chinese international rhetoric? The intent seems to be to learn about strategic ambiguity as a rhetorical device, but the first half of the paper, on strategic ambiguity, is the weaker of the two.

Perhaps this is a demonstration of China's inexperience as an international mediator. Officials tried to do things as they are done domestically and found that the domestic strategy didn't work so well on the international mediation stage.

Okay, here it is! You get to this on bottom of page 19... This should be brought out up front!

Page 20 top paragraph "such (an) appeal hardly works"

Toward the end you hit on the real interesting and productive part of the study. Now, I would suggest you pull it out, up front and center, and get rid of the extraneous parts that currently clutter up the first half of the essay.

Rhetoric & Public Affairs

A publication of Michigan State University Press

Martin J. Medhurst, Editor
Box 97000
Baylor University
Waco, TX 76798

MS# # removed for privacy
Title: Title removed for privacy.

Reviewer Rya Butterfield

Please return your comments by _____

Recommendation:

- Accept
 Accept after minor revision
 Resubmit after major revision
 Reject

Comments to the Editor:

Please indicate in the space below your candid assessment of this manuscript. What is its contribution to the literature, and how significant is that contribution? Your comments to the editor will not be returned to the author. Use the attached page to address your remarks to the author.

The primary contribution of this article is the insight it offers on how China is attempting to rhetorically negotiate unfamiliar territory in its burgeoning role in international affairs

However, I think the focus of this analysis is a little askew. The real productive rhetorical tension is between the familiar domestic rhetorical realm and the foreign international rhetorical realm, in which the Chinese government has considerably less experience and less control.

If the focus is to stay on strategic ambiguity, I think it is necessary for the author to explain how he/she is able to distinguish between a rhetor engaging in strategic ambiguity and a rhetor who lacks the knowledge/the ability for judging and strategizing (rhetorically inventing). Likewise, I think the author should try to clearly illustrate the process of communication as he/she sees it occurring early on.

One would hope the author plans to address these issues with the questions he/she poses: "are there inherent tensions..." "What are the underlying dynamics of such tension..." Yet, one must wonder if this research is best served by this approach because, in terms of rhetoric, both strategy and ambiguity are necessarily born of tension. To explain my reasoning, I've included some of the explanation I addressed to the author below.

Rather than grounding this study in organizational/public relations/soft power, I think the parts on page 9, about metaphor and local interpretation provide a much more solid framework. In the meat of the analysis, organizational communication/soft power/public relations aren't even mentioned, and they don't need to be. I get the feeling that they are thrown in because the crossover between public relations and political communication is currently fashionable among Chinese communication scholars (and with reason because sometimes these approaches are very helpful). These things are only mentioned when the author says what the study can contribute to. I think this study can contribute to a lot, just not on those topics. It would be best summarized as a contribution to rhetorical studies of international political culture and how China, as a new political player, is trying to navigate this tricky territory by switching up their repertoire.

A problem inherent to studies of ambiguity is how to identify ambiguous statements as strategic. How does the researcher identify intention? This is particularly important when studying a government as an organization because misidentification of strategy could lead to misidentification of, and disregard of, other important kinds of political communication. For example, the author notes how organizational research has accounted for the productive use of strategic ambiguity to stimulate creativity among the stakeholders. In the political arena, a rhetorical analysis might see the ambiguity as the result of an unknown/contentious situation for which the leaders have no precedents, and the people (the stakeholders) become innovative in response to the social demands of the exigency.

Date 4/5/12

Signature

