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Metaphor in/and/of the Four Modernizations: the discourse of pencil sharpeners in Chinese politics

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"China" is a process of cultural revolutions that have dotted—sometimes with blood—its history. These cultural revolutions have been various attempts to establish a harmony in the Chinese world. Since the Opium Wars of the 1840s, the west has become a major ingredient in this harmony. This essay seeks to examine one of China's latest stabs at harmony—the Four Modernizations Campaign.

Before June 1989 many western intellectuals liked to read these economic reforms as signs of a radical break in Chinese history and policies—

1. The may Fourth Movement of 1919 is the first modern cultural revolution recognized, and resulted in major cultural reforms: the written Chinese language was changed to be the same as the vernacular; western ideas of both bourgeois democracy (e.g. John Dewey's and Bertrand Russell's tour of China) and marxism were sought out. Perhaps the first historical cultural revolution occurred with the unification of the Empire under Qin Shi Huang Di in 221 B.C.E. which also resulted in a standardization of language and other methods of measurement and control. For a historical telling see Jean Chesneaux, China from the 1911 Revolution to Liberation (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977) and Charles O. Hucker, China's Imperial Past (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975).
that China was buying into capitalist Modernity with "westernization" rather than "modernization." After the June 4th massacre, the Bush administration's foreign policy towards China certainly tried to keep this dream of a "new China" alive.

The idea is that once the Chinese get a taste of what westerners might call "the good life," presumably in the form of televisions and refrigerators, then capitalism and Modernity will overwhelm China - all states have to be either capitalist or communist according to this story. Indeed, since the changes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, the notion of a singular global economy ruled by capitalism is very strong. In this essay then, I question this new figuration of the cold war metaphor (that capitalism "won," that is) and suggest a different one that tells the story of Chinese history and politics better - - for at present China blurs the standard cold war dualist distinctions: it is both "capitalist" and "communist" with China's "socialist market economy."

Indeed, the Chinese government does not like the cold war metaphors, and gives us some hints on how to create a new metaphor with the Four Modernizations. Throughout the 1980s, and more intensely since June 1989, Chinese newspaper reports and policy statements repeatedly stated that the current reforms are for modernization, not westernization. Many Chinese leaders and intellectuals feel very confident in their culture -- going so far as calling it "Chinese civilization" -- and hence generally do not think it needs western embellishment. 2 It is my argument then that the Chinese government in the 1980s sponsored projects of what could be called "postmodern modernization" where western technology is utilized to further Chinese cultural aims - - thus trying to separate modernization from westernization.

2. These are generally the people who are in power including those in power in American academics. Others who are in exile, like Yan Jiaqi, think that Chinese Culture needs radical reforms and westernization. For two sides of this debate see Yan Jiaqi, Toward a Democratic China: the Intellectual Autobiography of Yan Jiaqi, Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1992) and Tu Wei-ming, "Cultural China: The Periphery as the Center" (Daedalus (Spring 1991) 120:2), pp. 1-32.
The Four Modernizations and Chinese Tradition

The rhetoric of Chinese history over the past, 2500 years frames the Four Modernizations Campaign within a recurrent revolutionary metaphor. Enumerated, the Four Modernizations are the modernization of industry, agriculture, national defense, and science and technology -- the characters for this are gong, nong, bing, shi, which also stand for the traditional Chinese class divisions: workers (artisans), peasants, soldiers, scholar-officials. This basic metaphor of society can be found in the writings of both Confucians like Mencius and Marxists like Mao Zatong, both of whom the Four Modernizations are said to be making a radical departure from.

What is new is the positioning of the metaphor in which these four classes are involved. It is another cultural revolution where China again tries to harmonize, or disharmonize, its traditional culture with the “modern world.” The trend of this particular movement is shown in that the scholar-officials are now involved in embellishing -- for wen-culture in Chinese also embellishment -- with “science and technology,” not Tang dynasty poetry.

3. This basic metaphor of society is found as far back as the Spring and Autumn Annals (Chun Qiu), a work from the beginning of the classical period in China, said to be edited by Confucius: “In ancient times, there were four kinds of people; there were scholar-officials, there were merchants. [shang], there were peasants, and there were artisans.” [Shisan Jing, (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1963), p. 2417] This is also corroborated in the Xun Zi, a text which comes form the end of the classical period: “Peasants farming, scholar-officials administering, artisans working and merchants trading are all integrated into one [society.]” [Harvard Yenching Concordance Series, 28/9/691] I cite Mencius because revered wisdom tells us that he was the first revolutionary philosopher in China.

The difference between the above classical conceptions of society and that contained in the Four Modernizations is slight, and easily explainable: bing has replaced shang: the army has replaced merchants in modern China as a consequence of a violent revolutionary struggle against the bourgeoisie. The metaphor is basically the same with various groups struggling to be included in it. Even though it is included new, the intelligentsia has also been excluded at various times in modern Chinese history. It is also interesting to note that during political campaigns the intellectuals are faced with political suppression, and during the latest economic campaign they face economic suppression -- the Beijing Spring Movement started out to protest the poor economic conditions of the intelligentsia.
In this way the Four Modernizations resembles another Chinese stab at modernization without westernization that occurred in the late nineteenth century as one of the last reform movements of the Qing dynasty. The Ti-yong School of reformers tried to bridge the gap between Chinese civilization and the modern western imperialists by taking the "best" of both worlds: Chinese culture and western technology. These two elements were to be combined in a certain way: ti as "essence" was Chinese, and yong was the "functionality" of western science and technology.

The Ti-yong School worked to save Chinese face by "emphasizing not that western science was more valuable than Chinese science but that western science was less valuable than Chinese morals and aesthetics." Yet this reform movement failed in the nineteenth century mostly because the traditionalists did not see the value in giving up their position of power as literati in dynastic China to westernized technocrats. But now in the late twentieth century there is a different historical situation in China where very similar methods and explanations are being used under the sponsorship of the elites in the Four Modernizations Campaign.

This campaign is much more than a simple policy statement formulated by elites and passed down the line of cadres to the villages. It is a twisting of metaphors in discursive space. As a discourse then the Four Modernizations Campaign touches and is touched by forces throughout Chinese society. One way to measure the impact of the Campaign is to see how its conceptual mission is expressed in popular culture.

The subject of this essay is an examination of the workings of the Four Modernizations in the popular culture of pencil sharpeners. Indeed, there was

4. The tiyong formulation is actually from the Song dynasty Neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi, and modernized to address the challenge of the west.
an explosion in the production of pencil sharpeners which coincided with the economic liberalization of the Four Modernizations Campaign. Furthermore, the elaborate and complex designs of these seemingly trivial household objects are a focus of mainland Chinese (cultural and material) production. Pencil sharpeners warrant examination then not just because they happen to be plentiful in China proper, but, perhaps more importantly because they are so scarce and bland in two other centers of Chinese cultural and material productions: Hong Kong and Taiwan. Thus though pencil sharpeners are not vital to the Chinese cultural tradition they are consuming considerable time and resources in China proper -- which makes them remarkable.

In this essay, I am interested in a semiotic reading of the popular culture of pencil sharpeners in terms of postmodern aesthetics to see how Chinese mix -- seemingly incommensurable -- metaphors to construct, another metaphor, an ironic harmonious metaphor of postmodern modernization in the Four Modernizations Campaign.

**Chinese philosophy**

A brief view of the history of Chinese philosophy enables us to examine its similarities and differences with postmodernism, and why Modernity will perhaps not overwhelm China. Formulating cosmogonies was not an important topic in Chinese philosophical literature until after the classical period which produced the schools of thought with which we are now familiar: Confucians, Daoists, Mohists, Legalist, and so on. 7 Hence, there is no presupposition of a transcendent force creating the universe out of nothing as in the Judeo-Christian and Greek traditions. There is no “unmoved nover,” no single

7. This is a now common point in Chinese though, for an argument in terms of philosophy see Roget T. Ames and David Hall, *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987). For an argument in terms of history see Michael Loewe, *Chinese Ideas of Life and Death* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1982). Research on recently unearthed texts suggests that there was a school which was transcendent, rather than immanent, but this is still a topic of vigorous debate.
creation according to a single transcendent standard -- God, Nature, History -- a standard, story or metaphor against which all things are measured.  

The attitude of Chinese philosophy then is much different from that of western traditions: philosophy is not the quest for an ultimate Truth, but for a way of better interrelating within one's environment through pragmatic truth. Classical Chinese philosophy is not preoccupied with metaphysics, but with social and political thought. Its presupposition is of multiple discourses co-existing in tension -- in an ironic harmony.

When one has a multiplicity of discourses or ingredients, harmonizing them becomes a major focus. Chinese views of harmony are often written in terms of culinary metaphors, of making a stew by mixing the various ingredients in such a way as to enhance all of their particular flavors, but often deferring to one particular ingredient which is "in season." The idea is that the ingredient will in time go out of season and defer to some other. No ingredients are continually "in season," so there can be no totalization either of stews, or of discourses in a political-cultural system.

Perhaps the best social example of this harmony is expressed in the Chinese folk saying "The Three Teachings Combine into One: san jiao he yi." The three teaching are Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism -- in China, each person can concurrently hold each of these outwardly contradictory beliefs using whichever one is most appropriate at the time.

8. For a linguistic argument of China's a-foundationalism, see Chad Hansen, "Chinese Language, Chinese Philosophy and "Truth" (Journal of Asian Studies, 44:3, 1985), pp. 49-64.
Postmodernism

Postmodernism also contests western Modernity with its single master narrative. Indeed, Rey Chow argues that the European postmodern urge was facilitated by China. Yet Postmodernism itself is not a single narrative, and as a term is often thrown onto very diverse, and sometimes contesting texts. To write within this complexity, I will look at postmodernism in terms of two specific texts: those of Charles Jencks and Donna Haraway.

Both Jencks and Haraway are involved in a struggle against the grounding of a totalizing single coding of Modernism, e.g. western rationality. Both respond to this with multi-coding and eclecticism. Haraway writes “One is too few, two is just one possibility.” This multi-coding is in ironic tensions: 

*Ir**ony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true.*

Jencks, as a practicing postmodern architect, expands upon this multi-coding in terms of style and technique which are relevant to the reading of pencil

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10. In a section called “Chinese lesson,” Chow argues that "First post-structuralism’s dismantling of the sign ... began in an era when Western intellectuals ... ‘turned east’ for philosophical and political alternatives’” and used Chinese characters as signs. Secondly, the feminist, revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s drew on Chinese Communists’ practice of encouraging peasants, especially women, to “speak bitterness” (suku) against an oppressive patriarchal system. The various methods of “consciousness-raising” owe their origins to the Chinese “revolution” as described in William Hinton’s *Fanshen*. Third, the field of cultural subaltern studies comes from issues central to Communist, Party ideology and 20th century Chinese struggles. *[regular, Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1993),p. 18.]*


sharpeners: postmodernism is both professionally/ideologically based and popular; it uses new techniques with old patterns.\(^\text{13}\)

Yet the differences between the postmodernism of Jencks and Chinese politics are suggested by this passage:

*Modernists and Late-Modernists tend to emphasize technical and economic solutions to problems, whereas Post-Modernists tend to emphasise contextual and cultural additions to their inventions.*\(^\text{14}\)

Jencks here is still preoccupied with the technology: culture is still but an addition to inventions. Conversely, Chinese culture is the (temporay) ground, and foreign technology is the addition to enhance it. When there have been doubts within the party leadership about, the “cultural utility” of western technologies and methods, it was the Chinese culture that has prevailed, and the "foreign” influences that were expunged: e.g., the “Spiritual Pollution” political campaign of 1963, and the “anti-bourgeois liberalism” movements of 1986-87 and post-1989.

Haraway’s work also has similarities and differences with Chinese politics. Like the Chinese, for her the “cosmogony” and “apocalypse” tropes of the western tradition are not useful or interesting topics. Haraway understands things in terms of a “world without genesis, but maybe also a world without end The cyborg\(^\text{15}\) incarnation is outside salvation history.”\(^\text{16}\)

Haraway is much more political than Jencks, and her discussion of personal politics has much to add in understanding China’s state strategies. She writes:

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15. Haraway’s argument uses the cyborg--cybernetic organism-- as its guiding metaphor of the ironic mix between “man and Machine.

people are not afraid of permanently partial identities, and contradictory standpoints. The political struggle is to see from both perspectives at once because each reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point. Single vision produces worse illusions than double vision or many headed monsters.  

Contradictory standpoints and using multiple perspectives to view a situation accord well with Chinese harmony and the "socialist market economy." Yet Chinese philosophy tends to look to the positive side of this. Rather than "partial identities," "fragmentation." or "schizophrenia," what the Chinese philosophy is not afraid of is permanently multiple identities, e.g. the Three Teachings.

Since Chinese politics is working within a hegemonic culture where multiplicity is the norm, identity need not be defined in the negative terms of a fragmented whole and through metaphors such as "oppositional consciousness" which still perhaps suggest a lost unity. Indeed, the cultural politics of the Four Modernizations comes at the question from the opposite side than Haraway and the projects of multiculturalism. The Four Modernizations is a state sponsored campaign, not the struggle for liberation from such manipulation. It can be in many ways repressive, multiply repressive, rather than multiplicity constituting a method of possible resistance as Haraway argues.

The main theme that Chinese philosophy and postmodernism have in common is multi-coding in irony. But the irony is used by different groups with different purposes in mind. The tension with the Four Modernizations is between the codes of China and the west. Ironic harmony seeks to maintain the tension and their coexistence, rather than cut the tension and solve the problem of modernization as westernization.

17. Haraway, p. 72.
Metaphor

To understand the politics of the Four Modernizations in terms of postmodernism, elaborating the concept of "metaphor" is useful. The traditional notion of metaphor describes it as joining together two images to transfer meaning. For example, in the metaphorical cliche "she is a rose" the beauty/danger of the rose is transferred onto "she." To understand a metaphor, Aristotle tells us to track down the meaning of "she" and the "rose" to see how meaning is transferred. As such, metaphor is traditionally seen as an embellishment on the text, as extraordinary language rather than ordinary language, as obscuring "pure clear" literal language.18 Yet as Jonathan Culler argues:

The deconstruction of the opposition between the literal and the metaphorical accords greater importance to the study of figures, which become the norm rather than the exception, the basis of linguistic effects rather than a special case.19

Metaphors do not simply transfer meaning, they construct meaning. So rather than doing as Aristotle instructs and tracking down the two ends of the metaphor to discover meaning, we must focus on the figure, the relationship between the two codes in the story that is being told. In this way, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson are correct in saying that metaphors are not just extraneous embellishments but are essential to everyday speech and action20 Likewise, Jacques Derride writes that "Metaphor is less in the philosophic text, than the philosophic text is within metaphor."21

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21 Derrida, p. 258.
Indeed, etymologically the term metaphor is multi-coded, opening it up to meanings other than a simple transfer. As a Greek-English lexicon tells us: "Metaphero can also mean 'to change or alter, even to pervert.'" As such, metaphors make meaning by joining (often "incommensurable") codes together by twisting them into a new figure.

Metaphors as "figures of speech" are very evident in the *chengyu* of the Chinese language. *Chengyu*, which is often translated as "idiom" can also be seen in terms of this kind of metaphor. Structurally a *chengyu* is characteristically a four character phrase which in itself (i.e. literally) is not understandable -- it often sums up a lesson from the context of a (usually classical) story. This pushes one step further Paul Ricoeur's presentation of Max Black's argument that "The bearer of the metaphorical meaning is no longer the word but the sentence as a whole." It is now in the story as a whole.

The modern Chinese word for "contradiction" -- maodun -- is a representative example of an extended contextual notion of metaphor which uses contradictions. Alone the character *mao* means "spear" and *dun* means "shield." The two characters come together in a story in the *Han Fei Zi* which talks of an arms dealer who advertises both "spears which can penetrate anything" and "shields that can withstand any blow" -- hence the contradiction. Yet surely by following Aristotle's advice we could not get this meaning by tracking down the spear and the shield in the construction.

Metaphors as figure does not simply describe something, it creates meaning for an argument. As Paul Ricoeur writes: "Metaphor, then, has to be described as a deviant predication rather then a deviant denomination." Metaphors as arguments are not totalizing, but always partial. They are self-

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consciously constructed. Metaphors with their partial argument highlight certain aspects while hiding others. And in this way they are creators and guiders of value -- a political act.

The Four Modernizations is a metaphor that combines things Chinese with things western -- which many see as contradictory -- into a new program. What is highlighted is Chinese culture and western science/technology. What is hidden, or deemphasized”, is western culture (again, note the campaigns against “spiritual pollution” and “bourgeois liberalism,”) and Chinese methods and technologies -- as well as hiding contemporary Chinese history which is a history of metaphor shifts and cultural revolutions. But since the metaphors are not totalizing, the things that are usually hidden sometimes crop up. The shadow of the metaphor is always present.

The Four Modernizations argued for a particular socio-economic development plan emphasizing “economic modernization” according to technocracy, capital intensive development, and privatization in an export economy. (Notice the spin put on the discourse that refers to “development” rather than “change.”) What is being hidden are the alternative strategies, metaphors, which have been tried within the Chinese cultural world, both according to a linear (western) economic development scheme, and to schemes of more comprehensive “social change”: the Taiwan/Hong Kong models which are more global laissez-faire capitalist, and the “Maoist” plans which are more political and cultural in an effect to create a new Socialist Person, not just new economic opportunities.

The politics of metaphor, or the metaphor of politics, then, is not so concerned with what is being represented.

*What is at issue is not the truth or falsity of a metaphor, but the perceptions and inference that follow from it and the actions that are sanctioned by it.*  

25. Lakoff and Johnson.

26. Lakoff and Johnson, p. 158.
We should be concerned with what is not being said, as well as how it is excluded. The politics is found in the relations of how what is highlighted and what is hidden are negotiated -- in the struggles to put forth one's favorite metaphor as hegemonic. Metaphors set the tone of an argument, and the alternate views have dance to the song, if they are to be heard at all. For as Lakoff and Johnson write:

Metaphors may create realities for us, especially social realities.
A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action. Such action will, of course, reinforce the power of the metaphor to make experience coherent. In this sense metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophesies.27

Semiotios

Semiotics, as the study of signs, is an interpretive strategy that looks to how meaning is created by analyzing how signs are related and exchanged. In talking of metaphors as "figures of speech" which are produced by the twisting together of various elements, we have already entered into the discussion of semiotics. Here, I will examine a few more of the presuppositions of this interpretive practice, and then use it to analyse Chinese pencil sharpeners.

Taking part in the postmodern condition, semiotics does not look to a core meaning, a soul. Rather, it looks to surface, the skin, to create meaning. In terms of literature, and by extension society and politics this means shifting from figuring things as "works" to "texts." As Roland Barthes explains:

The difference is as follows: the work is concrete, occupying a portion of book-space (in a library, for example): the Text, on the other hand is a methodological field. This opposition recalls the distinction proposed by Lacan between "reality" and the "real": the one is displayed, the other is demonstrated... While the work is

27. Lakoff and Johnson, p. 156.
held in hand, the text is held in languages: it exists only as discourse.28

Looking at a text -- a pencil sharpener -- in terms of its interrelationship with the world is what semiotics does when it aims to sort out the codes that are being exchanged, and the meanings that are being produced in the relations between signs.

Hence with semiotics we do not appeal to the “author” and their intention to discover the “true” meaning of the text -- a difficult thing to do with pencil sharpeners are mass produced. Meaning are produced by the reader in their reinscribing of the text on their lives. This can be empowering, for it is the reader who creates meaning. As Umberto Eco writes (in a more optimistic time):

The battle for the survival of man as a responsible being in the Communications Era is not to be won where the communication originates, but where it arrives.29

Political Semiotics of Pencil Sharpeners

In the remainder of this essay, I will do a semiotic reading of Chinese pencil sharpeners in terms of the network of western and Chinese codes that are being constructed into a metaphoric argument for the Four Modernizations Campaign.30


30. I have been immeasurably aided in my readings by Chinese friends both in Honolulu and in the PRC.
Pencil sharpeners, according to Charles Sanders Pierce's semiotic schema, are classified as iconic signs. With iconic signs the signifier structurally represents the signified in a metonymy. Iconic signs are intensely cultural, for "We must learn to recognize this resemblance" in the cultural context to make meaning.\(^\text{31}\)

Though semiotics usually deals with cultural artifacts and qualitative analysis, the mass culture of pencil sharpeners also makes quantitative analysis useful. The numerical representation of pencil sharpeners is another useful system of signs when used with a critical stance: recognizing that numbers are not objective and separate from the political economic contexts that produce both them and their power of analysis. Numbers are not natural, but another system of signs which tends to hide its own production.

Actually in Chinese language and society numbers take on symbolic meaning: one way to signify "the people" is to write "bai xing-100 surnames," and a large number of animals or objects are signified with the number 1000: "qian jin-1000 kilograms" means a very heavy load or responsibility. And "Wanwu-10,000 things" refers to all of Nature.

Before getting to counting the pencil sharpeners a word about the data is in order. From September 1985 to July 1986 I amassed a collection of 205 different pencil sharpeners, each of which was manufactured and purchased in China. I acquired every pencil sharpener encountered in research trips through both the urban areas and the countryside, noting where and when the artifacts were purchased. I also had agents out buying pencil sharpeners.

There are three main genres of pencil sharpeners as determined by their materials and manufacture: plastic [151], ceramic [36] and wood [18]. The semiotic analysis only reads the plastic pencil sharpeners because they are the most numerous (both in my collection and in their availability in China, a point

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that I will return to below), and because they are the most diverse in their tropes. I have coded the 161 plastic pencil sharpeners according to their major tropes:

- 45 Chinese (4 color variations)
- 39 western (2 color variations)
- 12 Chinese/western crossover
- 41 animals: uncodable as either Chinese or western
- 14 toys: uncodable as a either Chinese or western
- 151 total

I will examine the metaphors of “Chinese” and “western” in pencil sharpeners to demonstrate how they are used in the Four Modernizations, and look at the Chinese/western crossover more specifically as a constructed metonymy of the Four Modernizations metaphor.

In some ways this Chinese/western distinction is problematic. It is one thing to abstractly theorize about “East” and “west,” but another to try to apply these broad interpretive categories to artifacts. Indeed, the pencil sharpeners show how East and West are not mutually exclusive categories, but, how they bleed into each other. For example although there should be no arguments that Pandas are “Chinese,” should automobiles be coded as “western.” In one sense, this brings in the historical dimension to the argument: in 1985-86 cars were still new in China and read as western technology. They were seen as foreign because they were imported.

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32. By default one could code these animals as Chinese, since they are common in the environment, and most are actually part of the set of 12 horoscope animals.

33. Levenson charts how the new railroads were coded as “western” in the nineteenth century. (p. 73) Now these same railroads with their steam engines are seen as uniquely Chinese.
Hence the China/west distinction is written according to a Chinese rendering of the self/order dynamic which is very strong in this society and culture which has a history of isolation, and an ethnic homogeneity of some 94% (we will return to this point below). This self/other dynamic constructs both “China” and the “west” in certain very powerful ways that can be seen in the pencil sharpeners.

But this importation of commodities and ideas brings up still other questions. Where did they come from? Actually most of the consumer products such as the refrigerators which became icons of the Four Modernizations Campaign were not imported from the “west” in terms of coming from Euro-America. They are imported from Japan. So what does western mean here? Is there a contradiction?

This Japanese dynamic demonstrates how “west” is not a geographic place so much as a discursive space. The commodities of western technology are being filtered through Japan. And this is nothing new. Many “western” ideas have also come to China through a Japanese interpretation. Much of the language that is now commonplace in Chinese actually came from western concepts which were translated through Japanese. For example, beyond scientific terms, most of the political, economic and social vocabulary -- words like “politics-zhengzhi”, “society-shihui,” “economics-jingji,” and even “philosophy-zhexue” -- are not found in the (Confucian) Chinese vocabulary. This language came into China in the nineteenth century via Chinese students returning from Japan. Still these concepts are not taken to be Japanese, but are construed into the metaphor of “west.” And this reading of the discourse of the “west” is borne out by the pencil sharpeners: there are no pencil sharpeners which could be coded as “Japanese.”

Looking at the pencil sharpeners themselves, it is important to note that they are a working part of the metaphor of the Four Modernizations. As an instrumental devise they sharpen pencils and thus represent efficiency, technocracy, economic calculation over political relations. They demonstrate a preference for accountability (and re-accountability since pencil writing can be erased) of pencils rather than artistic brush strokes which characterize traditional Chinese writing where calligraphic style was often even more important than the
content. Thus pencil sharpeners could be said to represent western notions of Modernity.

Being made in China, they are Chinese artifacts and represent in some sense Chinese interpretations of the (rational) act of sharpening pencils. In this way, all the pencil sharpeners here are metonymies, or better synecdoches, of the broader metaphors of “west” and “China” that we create.

Many of the artifacts represent both discourses at the same time through technological means: the stereographic or dual images. This popular effect where one or the other image is displayed shows the “double-coding” of artifacts. It also demonstrates how meaning, especially contradictory meaning, is constructed from a specific point of view since it is the angle of viewing these stereographic pencil sharpeners which determines which image is seen.

## Synchronic Analysis

The analysis begins with an examination of the artifacts of what Chinese people take for granted, and celebrate as uniquely CHINESE:

**signifier:**

- panda: in bamboo forest habitat
- panda: stereographic images with
  - (a) rooster
  - (b) goose
  - (c) ball
  - (d) waving to the “public”
- Chinese lion
- Mongolian pony
- water buffalo
- mule, black
- caged bird
- peacock and huge tail
- lotus flowers: stereographic image; flower opening/closing
signified: the uniqueness and vibrancy of the Chinese environment in terms of plants and animals that are considered to be characteristically Chinese -- for example, the panda. The lotus flower is also taken to be characteristically Chinese, signifying "auspiciousness" with Buddhist overtones. The lion is the Chinese interpretation of that animal, statues of which are usually seen guarding official and cultural monuments. The Mongolian pony, water buffalo, and mule are the only examples of regionalism in pencil sharpeners that I could find: the pony comes from Hohot, the capital of Inner Mongolia; the water buffalo was purchased in Guilin, Guizhou province where water buffalo work in the rice paddies of the South; the mule is an important work animal in northern China.

signifier:

Laughing Buddha, brown color
Laughing Buddha, gold color
vases: flower images, ornate
  (a) pink
  (b) yellow
  (c) blue
  (d) light green
  (e) dark green
pagodas:
  (a) blue, simple design
  (b) green, simple round design
  (c) green, ornate octagonal design
  (d) red, ornate square design
  (e) red, simple hexagonal design

stereographic images of cultural-historical monuments: pagodas, parks, shrines
band fan, ornate designs
red lantern
Mao Tai rice liquor bottle
ping pong paddle, orange
thermos bottle, pink
signified: Again the uniqueness, continuity and vibrancy of Chinese traditional culture is shown through this second set of artifacts. They appeal to "high culture" in terms of recognizable monuments and elite achievements such as Ming vases. They also appeal to popular culture the red lantern signifies the Spring Festival, the National Day, and holidays in general. Chinese used the ping pong paddle to gain world recognition, and Mao Tai rice liquor is a code for Chinese male virility. In the shadow of this construction of Chinese civilization is a single instance of what is taken to be "Chinese technology" the ubiquitous thermos bottle that everyone has acquired since Liberation.

General coments: Putting Chinese culture, especially sacred things such as the Buddha, into the form of popular culture as pencil sharpeners is a way of commodifying and controlling the images. This serves to domesticate past cultural constructs such as the Buddha whose mystical power is effaced with the daily sharpening of a pencil up his back side.

Jencks' argument about the double-coding of artifacts in terms of high culture and popular culture is also useful here. These artifacts utilize cultural icons at a mass level in certain ways. All the themes are part of the myth of traditional Chinese culture and history -- there are no references to contemporary history or politics. But there is a shift from how these icons were used in the Cultural Revolution, where culture and history were directly politicized through movements such as the Criticize Confucius campaign of 1973-74. Yet the politics is still present in the pencil sharpeners because to construct the metaphor of the Four Modernizations, only certain aspects of Chinese culture are being used -- certain things are highlighted, while others are hidden.

34. One should also note that many of the Chinese films from the Fifth Generation that have won international awards do not deal with the present, but only the mythical pasts. This note worthy because the novels which inspired these movies often serve to connect the past -- before ation-- with the present.
There are also pencil sharpeners which one can code as WESTERN. These are more than just “non-Chinese” pencil sharpeners (e.g. Japenese) because they are referring to European culture and Euro-American “progress” and “development” -- while often ignoring “civilization.”

**signifier:**

- soccer ball
- grand piano:
  - (a) green
  - (b) pink
- violin:
  - (a) green
  - (b) pink
- white winking, smiling man in black top hat.
- brandy bottle: labeled in both Chinese and English

**singified:** The European culture that is signified here in specific. It is an editing of a European culture that China would like to Sinicize. Indeed, in China a brandy bottle -- even an empty one - was taken as a sign of prestige. This again is a shift from the use of the same tropes during the Cultural Revolution. Western musical instruments which were signs of being a “capitalist roader” during the Cultural Revolution are here reproduced in popular culture. The winking white man with a top hat perhaps signifies a decadent and crafty bourgeoise -- the source of Spiritual Pollution.

**signifier:**

- table fan: green with revolving white blades
- automobile: sedan, red undercarriage and transluscent yellow chassis
- speed boat: red hull, blue interior, clear windshield
- handgun: red
- dairy cow/horse stereographic image: both animals red
- iron: red with black handle and white bottom
- refrigerator-freezer: green with image of Minnie Mouse
signified: These are the commodities that western technology can bring you. The refrigerator became an icon of economic progress in the 80s. Perhaps the car and boat were a promise of the wealth of the 90s: that is what the story of modernization and economic progress tells us. Agritech, the second modernization, is signified in the dairy cow. Traditionally Chinese agriculture and diet does not include dairy cattle and milk. But in the 1980s dairy cattle began to be imported from Canada and the United States.

The color red serves a dual purpose in contemporary China. In addition to signifying revolution and communism, e.g. the “Red Army,” in traditional Chinese iconography it signifies wealth and prosperity and fertility, e.g. brides were red at traditional weddings. Indeed, another definition of hong-red is “success, prosperity.” Most of these commodities would otherwise rarely, if ever, be red. Hence “red” is part of the metaphor construction: the color red is attached to foreign commodities to emphasize their value in Chinese terms.

signifier:

- mirror: revolving on a frame
- mirror: hand held
- book: western-styles “Pencil sharpener” written on it in English
- magnifying glass
- trophy, gold
- trophy, silver with crossed rackets
- combination of eraser, brush, mirror as well as the pencil sharpener:
  - image of young girl with blonde hair in blue shirt with “pencil set” written in English
- clocks:
  - (a) blue
  - (b) green
- calendar: sliding piece which names the day: 31 day month calendar:
  - image of a cock crowing at sunrise in the foreground
- adding machine: colored image of the keyboard pasted on
- pocket calculator: stereographic image of numbers on the screen:
  - depressible keys
signified: This set of pencil sharpeners signifies the efficiency of western rationality and the calculation aspects of technology. The clocks and calendar stress the importance of measuring time, of managing time, of progressive time rather than cyclical seasons. The trophies represent success in the linear western sense of a state to achieve -- of winners and losers -- rather than the constant renegotiation of a harmony which is attentive to a multiplicity of needs.

The pencil set, adding machine and pocket calculator point to calculation -- ratios, the root of rationality, means calculation -- and the certainty of science. The calculator itself is a sign of the technology of technological artifacts. Having two “special effects” -- the dual image and the depressible keys -- it is one of the most sophisticated of the pencil sharpeners in the collection.\(^{35}\) The mirrors, magnifying glass and book stress the rigor of this rational method of analysis.\(^{36}\)

signifier:

- cassette player: photographic image of front of tape player on green body
- television: blue chassis
- televisions with stereographic images:
  - (a) distressed Cinderella: green chassis
  - (b) yelling women with ornate hatred/rust chassis
  - (c) smiling man in black top hat: green chassis

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35. The book-pencil sharpener is also particularly interesting because it has so many codes. It is “western” in the sense that the spine on the left, which Chinese books have the spine on the right. The captioning “pencil sharpener” on an artifact which appears to be a book is ironic is it a book or pencil sharpener? Was there any doubt?

(d) confused grey haired and grey bearded man wearing knit hat: red chassis
televisions with stereographic images:
   (a) vulnerable young girl, blonde/brown hair red chassis
   (b) boy kicking soccer ball/anthropomorphic apple holding soccer ball: red chassis
telephones:
   (a) green
   (b) pink
   (c) Pinnochio with nose big/small: red chassis

revolving globe marked politically: labeled in Chinese; China high lighted

video telephones: screen with stereographic image: receiver; touch-tone dialing
   (a) Snow White talking to Doc: yellow chassis
   (b) space scene: skylab/rocket: orange chassis

signified: The promise of the communication aspects of technology come out in this group of artifacts. Televisions -- which in 1985 were still rare in people's homes -- and videophones signify a sense of bringing everything and everyone closer and more efficient through communication technology. The globe signifies China entering onto the world scene after nearly 30 years of isolation, and serves to instruct people of China's (central) place in the world, and its prospects for telecommunication and outerspace.

Yet in the television pencil sharpeners, as well as in the Four Modernizations, electronics are still technical means to convey culture, and here western culture written in Chinese forms. Chinese informants suggested that perhaps all white women can signify Cinderella, even though Cinderella typically has dark hair. The stereographic televisions are a popular style.

The color red, is again used to sinicize the artifacts, and western technology is also put into the context of Chinese culture through the captioning
of brand names such as “Great Wall” and “Da Peng.” Da Peng is a huge mythical bird that flies long distances which was originally cited in the literary classic Zhuangzi. The “Da Peng” mark on the telephones is conspicuously placed in the center of the telephone’s dialing ring marked with arabic numbers – Chinese culture, with its large “wing span,” is central to the long distance communication through western technology whose signification is enhanced by the focus on numbers.

**General comments:** The “western” coded pencil sharpeners signify an enculturation of commodities and technology. For example, communication technologies are usually seen as conduits of culture, not artifacts in and of themselves. A television is valued for the image it produces more than as an object d’art or even a piece of furniture. Making an artifact of both the TV and the image changes this dynamic, and makes such things as the (red) color of the TV chassis an important issue. As with the Chinese culture domesticating the old -- the Buddha -- pencil sharpeners are here used to sinicize and thus domesticate and argue for the new -- technology.

**CHINA / WEST**

The mixed metaphor of the Four Modernization is implicitly present in the artifacts that I have coded as “Chinese and “western” -- the “Chinese” pencil sharpeners are made of plastic, a synthetic form from western technology; the “western” pencil sharpeners are made in China, and thus show a Chinese representation of the west, e.g. Cinderella with blonde hair. This section addresses the more overt mixing of metaphor, where both codes are more explicitly reproduced in a single pencil sharpener.

**signifier:**

- playing card: Joker with image of the Monkey King in action pose
- televisions with stereographic image
  - (a) crane/fox: red chassis
  - (b) tiger/Pekinese dog: red chassis
(c) tropical fish indigenous to China: red chassis
(d) winking court-jester: red chassis
(e) young minority woman with hand drum: red chassis
(f) girl turning brown and white: red chassis
(g) boy in spacesuit/boy and dog in rocket: red chassis
(h) Three Haired Orphan in city: red chassis
(i) Monkey King opening and closing mouth, shifting eyes: bursts of spirit alternating: red chassis
   video-phones with stereographic image
(a) elephant/rabbit: yellow chassis
(b) fox is bow tie/panda in forest: yellow chassis
(c) white woman, biode hair, day time/Chinese woman, night time
   (i) yellow chassis
   (ii) orange chassis

signified: Televisions (a) and (b) establish links between the two worlds: the crafty (western) fox and the crane of longevity: the wild leopard and the domesticated (Chinese) dog.

The method of combining the codes and linking the worlds is important -- the western technology as a means to express Chinese culture. Joker figure of playing cards is appropriated as a conduit for expressing a central figure in Chinese culture, Sun Wukong the Monkey King. The Monkey King is a character from the Ming dynasty novel *Xi You Ji - Journey to the West.* In this story, the Monkey King is the clever trickster, employed to escort a Buddhist monk to India. His job is to use his mind and magic to get around the problems that are encountered in the journey. The magic of the Monkey King is further demonstrated in television (i) with the bursts of energy that surround him, and his clever grin.

The televisions do two things: (c) through (i) again use the western medium to express Chinese culture. They are directed at a certain audience: all of them except for (c) are scenes from widely distributed cartoons -- now seen on television as well as in print. The Three Haired Orphan perhaps has outward political significance as well, it tells the tale of an country boy, orphaned before Liberation, who is forced into the city to survive and all of the situations that he has survival. Such stories were common among people in pre-1949 China, and the Three Haired Orphan is instantly recognized with a laugh by most Chinese. Politics through laughter is its most powerful form.

The video-phones show the communication link more clearly, and this is a communication across cultures. The (western) fox talks to the (Chinese) panda. The western woman talks to the Chinese woman -- they are talking to each other from different sides of the world (remember the globe), for it is light out for the western woman and it is a dark starry night for the Chinese woman.

General comments: With their cross-over and exchange of signs these pencil sharpeners are most effective in their construction of the Four Modernizations metaphor. These pencil sharpeners argue for a multicentered simultaneous construction of the world which highlights western science and technology as a conduit for Chinese culture.

Diachronic Analysis

The history of Chinese pencil sharpeners is not one to be found in books. But still it is intimately tied to the Four Modernizations. For example, the Tianjin No. 11 Stationary Goods Factory started to organize production of pencil sharpeners in 1979 -- the same year that the Four Modernizations were presented.38 Production itself began in 1980. From 1980 to 1983 pencil sharpeners were manufactured according to “common designs” -- meaning that they were plain circles or squares.

38. This information was gathered from a response to a letter sent to factories in Shanghai, Beijing, as well as Tianjin. (12 June 1988).
Since 1983 -- the year that the Four Modernizations Campaign came to the factories -- there has been significant development in the production of pencil sharpeners, with on the average half being produced for domestic markets and half for export. (see table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Output (thousands of pieces)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>533.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>1001.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>4323.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>3467.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>2736.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>5414.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>10316.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: 1981-1987 Production figures from Tianjin No. 11 Stationary Goods Factory

With the shift in the early 1980s from production-oriented to management-oriented techniques and the introduction of market competition the design of the pencil sharpeners shifted as well. Starting in 1983, pencil sharpener factories responded to the “intense competition” by diversifying their pencil sharpener line to include “artistic designs.” A member of the “technical section” in the factory reports that

largest proportion of the artistic designs stress copying various animals and daily articles of use. There are also some which have guidance and educational value, as well as some which are toys and for entertainment. There are also some which could be seen as decorative articles.... the great majority of designs are things and scenes taken from the market and from life which are completed when added to the creative thoughts of the designers.
This report reconfirms that pencil sharpeners are a new thrust of the Four Modernizations Campaign, and that one of their explicit purposes is the “guide and educate” the consumer.

**Distribution**

One way to see where the pencil sharpeners fit into the discourse of Chinese society and therefore Chinese politics, is to think about where we find pencil sharpeners. As the relations of production are important in political economics, then according to Eco’s reasoning the relations of distribution are important in the politics of culture.

Distribution makes the differences between plastic pencil sharpeners and wooden/ceramic pencil sharpeners a bit clearer. Wooden and ceramic pencil sharpeners are sold in different places from the plastic ones. Wooden/ceramic pencil sharpeners were sold in arts and crafts shops, on the street, and at bus stops near tourist attractions -- generally not places you go to with the stated aim of buying pencil sharpeners.

Wooden/ceramic pencil sharpeners are more like folk art objects. They are made out of organic materials. They are individually crafted by artisans who carve, mold and paint them. They are things that are appropriate to give as gifts. They are suitable as gifts for at least two reasons: they are too expensive for most to buy for regular use, and such expense can show generosity in the giving of a small gift.

Plastic pencil sharpeners, on the other hand, are found in different places, and attend to different needs. One is most likely to find plastic pencil sharpeners in the stationary section of a department store, wedged between the pencils and paper. This shows the utility of plastic pencil sharpeners, one buys them to use in sharpening pencils, and chooses whichever one catches the eye. Yet the dual cultural need that the pencil sharpeners fulfill is reinforced by the literal translation of the name of one of factories where they are produced: “The Eleventh Cultural and Educational Implements Facotry.” In this factory they are mass produced by machines out of synthetic materials; there is no “author” in
the sense that they are carved or painted by hand. They are mass consumed just as they are mass produced.

Pencil sharpeners then are mass culture. Mass culture is for the masses, not by the masses, and is part of the political and economic discourse (which are often hard to separate in China) for a particular project, for the current cultural revolution. The politics here is the choosing and manipulation of the vantage points -- which metaphors to mix to achieve the current project.

The national distribution of pencil sharpeners shows where the argument for the Four Modernizations is needed most -- in the countryside and in non-Han Chinese areas. The pencil sharpeners in the 1980s were produced in factories in China's three main industrial cities: Shanghai, Beijing and Tianjin. Yet they were hard to find in these cities, especially in the center of these cities. Small cities far from the coast, were richest in pencil sharpeners both in terms of quantity and diversity. In Shanghai, where most of the pencil sharpeners are produced, I could not find them in any of the major downtown department stores. Shanghai is doing fine with the Four Modernizations, and does not need pencil sharpeners: there they are only to be found in toy shops.

In the countryside, away from the centers of industry and control, pencil sharpeners are plentiful. Things change much more slowly in the countryside; they have different needs. It is harder to convince a peasant to alter their life for a city sponsored policy of modernization. (Witness the comparative success of the one-child policy in the city, and its failure in the country.) But as the population of the rural areas still constitutes nearly 80% of China, it is crucial to convince them. Pencil sharpeners are one way to propagandize the Four Modernizations.

The focus on the countryside is a shift from the political campaigns of the Cultural Revolution which took place mostly in the cities. People went, and were sent, to the countryside to learn from the peasants. On the other hand, the Four Modernization reforms were first instituted in the countryside, only coming to the city since 1983. The Four Modernizations send pencil sharpeners, as well as many other cultural forms, to the countryside as part of the ideological system employed to convince the peasants.
It also should be noted that the pencil sharpeners are consumed mostly by children -- although they are plentiful in university stores. Children are particularly receptive to many of the metonyms -- the cartoon characters. The next generation of Chinese is being raised on these metaphors, constructing a new reality, and children are also conduits to their parents and family.

Another group that needs the special attention of the argument for the Four Modernizations is those who are not Han Chinese -- the national minorities such as Tibetans and Mongolians. The “Chinese culture“ of the Four Modernizations are one more way argue for the assimilation of the non-Han into the Chinese cultural system. There are very few variations from the traditional Chinese themes; the only ones that I could name were the Mongolian pony (bought in Hohot, the capital of Inner Mongolia) and the national minority woman on the stereographic television. There were no Tibertan themes in the pencil sharpeners of Lhasa, Gyantze, and Shigatze -- the three main Tibetan towns -- or in the largely Tibetan city of Xining, which is the capital of Qinghai province. Conversely, Hohot, Lhasa and Xining were gold mines for pencil sharpeners with the (Han) Chinese and western tropes -- in Xining 26 artifacts were bought in one afternoon. They included artifacts ranging the vases to videophones: extreme examples of Han culture and western technology.

**Conclusion**

Though a similar mixing of metaphors failed in the nineteenth century, it is still hard to say whether this construction of China-west in the Four Modernizations Campaign will “work” in China. But what is clear is that the Chinese again have embarked on a different path of “development” that challenges familiar models, this time with postmodern modernization. And it challenges them not just in the halls of power where policy is made, but through the discursive workings of popular culture.

These pencil sharpeners are surely entertaining. What makes them interesting is how they dance with the discourses of “China” and the “west.” Looking back at these pencil sharpeners from the mid-1980s historicizes the
concepts of East and West, and testifies to how they are not "essential categories" but self-consciously produced political discourses: automobiles are no longer coded as western, but as a universal sign. Furthermore, the "China" that is scripted in these "educational and cultural implements" is not the familiar traditional China of Confucianism. Rather it is a domesticated tradition of Pandas and vases. Likewise, the discourse of the "west" centers on technology and its commodities -- refrigerators and televisions -- rather than the social technology of "democracy" and "human rights."

The pencil sharpeners show how these particular scriptings of "China" and the "west" can be combined into a harmonious text which has definite political use. These multi-coded pencil sharpeners also begin to explain the success of Chinese policies like the "socialist market economy" which mix political economic discourses in an expanded notion of ironic metaphor where modernization is not necessarily westernization.

Pencil sharpeners then are a site where cultural and material/industrial production overlap. Hence it is imperative to consider not only at the relations of production and authorship, but the relations of production and consumption in popular culture. Indeed, much has been written lately about political resistance through cultural modes. Yet the place of pencil sharpeners in the discourse of the Four Modernization shows has cultural production is a weapon that can be used for repression as well as resistance.

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39. The political nature of the elaborate pencil sharpeners is highlighted by the fact that in the mid-1980s such pencil sharpeners were notoriously missing from Hong Kong, which is otherwise a veritable kingdom of kitsch. The pencil sharpeners of Taiwan were also scarce and uninteresting -- "common designs" of unembellished circles and squares prevail.