

The Editorial Commentaries of the 2004 Referendum Issue in Taiwan: A Fantasy Theme Analysis

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Abstract

This paper, based on fantasy theme analysis, discusses editorial contents that relate to the 2004 referendum issue in Taiwan. The main purposes are to investigate: (1) What kind of fantasy themes are created in these three Taiwanese newspapers? (2) How and why do these newspapers shape rhetorical visions? (3) How do different rhetorical visions of the referendum issue and the independence-unification controversy in Taiwan influence each other? Editorials from three major Taiwanese newspapers, *United Daily News*, *China Times*, and *Liberty Times*, were chosen to be analyzed.

Introduction

Taiwan, an island near the southeast coast of China, is one area that may break out warfare in the world. The political conflict between China and Taiwan has continued more than 50 years, and the diplomatic, economic, and arms races have never stopped. Since 1949, the PRC (the People's Republic of China) and the ROC (the Republic of China) governments have competed over the legal sovereignty of China. In 1971, the PRC government replaced the ROC's representation at United Nations, and most countries of the world have recognized the PRC's sovereignty of China since then. The independent-unification controversy in Taiwan has come into public notice and caused conflicts among different sub-cultural groups after the previous ruling party, Kuomintang (KMT), lifted the martial law in 1987.

After the former president of ROC, Lee Teng-Hui, announced the "special state-to-state" theory in 1999, the 2004 referendum in Taiwan was another political event that created the possibility of armed conflict and caused tension in the China-Taiwan relationship. The referendum issue attracted a lot of attention because it was the first time that the ROC government held a referendum. Also, the PRC government suspected that the 2004 referendum was the first step for some Taiwanese politicians to seek Taiwan's future independence.

In Taiwan, when media report political news, they usually present their political tendencies. Therefore, this paper, based on fantasy theme analysis, discusses editorial contents in three major Taiwanese newspapers that relate to the 2004 referendum issue in Taiwan. The main purposes of this paper are to investigate: (1) What kind of fantasy themes are created in these three Taiwanese newspapers? (2) How and why do these newspapers shape rhetorical visions? (3) How do different rhetorical visions of the referendum issue and the independence-unification controversy in Taiwan influence each other? Editorials from three

major Taiwanese newspapers, *United Daily News*, *China Times*, and *Liberty Times*, were chosen to be analyzed.

The Controversial Sovereignty Argument in the China-Taiwan Relationship

After World War II, the Chinese mainland started its second civil war. The result of the civil war caused the controversy of the sovereignty of China that has been continued more than 50 years. In 1949, Mao Ze-Dong and the Chinese Communist Party established the People's Republic of China in Peking, and the PRC government ruled most of the Chinese mainland. The original ruling party, Kuomintang (KMT), lost the war and retreated to Taiwan. In the point of view of the KMT, the original Chinese government, the Republic of China, practically governed Taiwan and other little islands around Taiwan and still kept the sovereignty of Chinese mainland.

Before 1988, both governments insisted the "One China" policy and claimed to be unified in the future. However, both of them claimed that it was the only representation of legal regime in China. Therefore, the armed conflicts between these two governments have never stopped. The last warfare between China and Taiwan happened in the 1960s. Since then, China and Taiwan have maintained a peaceful balance but have transferred attention to diplomatic and economic competition. Also, the armament race has continued.

During his second presidency (1996-2000), the former ROC President, Lee Teng-Hui, presented his intention to change the "One China" policy. In July 1999, Lee declared the "special state-to-state" theory and claimed that the political status between China and Taiwan should be an equal state-to-state rather than a center-local governmental relationship. Since the early 1990s, the controversy among different sub-cultural groups in Taiwan has increased. There are many different views about the future of Taiwan, such as seeking a future independence, seeking a future unification, maintaining the status quo, or establishing a "Chinese Union" ("Da xuan," 2003).

The 10th and current ROC President, Chen Shui-bian, belongs to a political party that works for the independence from China movement ("Taiwan qian tu," n.d.). Therefore, when Chen announced the first referendum would be held concurrently with the presidential election of 2004 in Taiwan, the PRC government suspected this referendum was Chen's first step to seek the future independence of Taiwan (Wang, 2004). Chen identified this referendum as a "peace referendum," and the purpose of this referendum was to seek a peaceful future across the Taiwan Strait ("Bian," 2004).

On January 16, 2004, President Chen announced two topics of the peace referendum:

- (1) The people of Taiwan demand that the Taiwan Strait issue be resolved through peaceful means. Should mainland China refuse to withdraw the missiles it has targeted at Taiwan and to openly renounce the use of force against us, would you agree that the government should acquire more advanced anti-missile weapons to strengthen Taiwan's self-defense capabilities?
- (2) Would you agree that our government should engage in negotiation with mainland China on the establishment of a "peace and stability" framework for cross-strait interactions in order to build consensus and for the welfare of the peoples on both sides?

On March 20, 2004, Taiwan held the 11th presidential election and the first "peace referendum." The result of the election showed that political views in Taiwan have separated into two obvious sides: seeking independence in the future versus maintaining the status quo and seeking possible unification with China. In addition, the result of the referendum showed that the majority of voters did not support both topics.

Research Method

Current Studies on Fantasy Theme Analysis

In his article "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: The Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality," Bormann (1972) developed a critical method drawn from both the social sciences and the humanities that he called a fantasy theme analysis. Bormann (1972) indicated that fantasy theme analysis came from Bales' work of the "dynamic process of group fantasizing" (p. 398). As Bormann expressed, Bales' most important discovery was the process by which "a zero-history group used fantasy chains to develop a common culture" (p.397). Bales noticed that some people in a group reduced group tension through telling stories. He called these stories "fantasy chains" (Bales, 1970). According to Bormann's (1972) explanation, Bales found that stories consist of characters, whether real or unreal, "Playing out a dramatic situation in a setting removed in time and space from the here-and-now transactions of the group" (p.397).

Based on Bales' research, Bormann used the idea of fantasy in speaker-audience fantasizing and suggested that composite dramas were formed that "catch up a large group of people in a symbolic reality" (Bormann, 1972, p.398). Within a group, fantasy themes could be jokes, stories, or metaphors that happened in the past or will occur in the future. When the same set of fantasy theme is used repeatedly across many groups, it can create a new view of reality, which is called a rhetorical vision (Brock, Scott, & Chesebro, 1990). Bormann called this process symbolic convergence. Bormann indicated that people in such a transaction process might create subjective views of general expectations and meaning. Also, the rhetorical vision of a group was presented as a "coping function for those who participate in the drama" (Bormann, 1972, p.400).

Since 1982, Bormann and other scholars have named symbolic convergence theory as a theoretical approach, and the fantasy theme analysis has become one method of rhetorical criticism. According to Foss (1989), "The fantasy-theme method of rhetorical criticism...is designed to provide insights into the shared world view of groups of rhetors" (p. 289). Since Bormann's development of fantasy theme analysis in 1972, many scholars have started to use it for analyzing many different phenomena of human communication. For instance, Hensley (1975) used fantasy theme analysis in religious speaking; Chesebro (1980) applied the analysis to homosexual studies; Kroll (1983) used it for considering women's social movements; and Hubbard (1985) applied it to romance novels. In the field of political communication, Arsenault (2005) adopted fantasy theme analysis to analyze rhetorical vision of the independent nation of Hawaii via analyzing two rhetorical artifacts—the Proclamation of Restoration and the Hawaiian Constitution. Also, Benoit, Klyukovski, McHale, and Airne (2001) used the same rhetorical method to discuss different rhetorical visions of political cartoons about the Clinton-Lewinsky-Starr Affair.

Rhetorical Artifacts

Time Frame. The referendum issue is a highly controversial political topic in Taiwan. Some Taiwanese politicians argue that holding a referendum represents the advancement of democracy and civil rights in a country. However, the PRC government suspected the 2004 referendum in Taiwan was the first step for President Chen Shui-bian to work for the independence from China movement, even though Chen clarified that the 2004 referendum would not relate to any independence issue.

The time frame in this paper is from November 28, 2003 to March 21, 2004. On November 28, 2003, the Legislative Yuan of the ROC passed the “Referendum Law.” This law legalizes the referendum issue and frames all essentials about how to hold a referendum in Taiwan. On December 3, 2003, President Chen stated officially that the first referendum in Taiwan would be held together with the 11th presidential election—March 20, 2004—and he identified the first referendum in the ROC history as a “peace referendum.”

On January 16, 2004, two topics of the first referendum in Taiwan were announced by President Chen. On March 20, 2004, the result of the 11th presidential election showed that Chen won the election, and the result of the referendum also showed that neither topic gained enough support from people; therefore, the first referendum in Taiwan was defeated. Because the result of the presidential election was controversial and caused a series of resistances and demonstrations, the failure of the first referendum did not attract people’s attention anymore after few days of the presidential election. Since the *United Daily News*, *China Times*, and *Liberty Times* are daily newspapers, the ending of the timeframe in this paper is March 21, 2004, a day after the presidential election.

Data collection. This paper analyzes 36 editorials in the *United Daily News*, 29 editorials in the *China Times*, and 42 editorials in the *Liberty Times*. The main subject of these select editorials relates to the 2004 Taiwanese referendum issue. From analyzing fantasy themes that were created in these three Taiwanese newspapers, this paper expands rhetorical visions of the 2004 referendum in three major Taiwanese newspapers. Also, this paper would like to investigate the relationship between different rhetorical visions of the referendum issue and the independence-unification controversy in Taiwan.

Fantasy Themes in Three Major Taiwanese Newspapers’ Editorials

Setting

As Arsenault (2005) indicated, “Setting in fantasy themes refers to where the fantasy takes place, be it in a real or imaginary place” (p. 62). Foss (1989) also explained that “setting themes not only names the scene of the action but also may describe the characteristics of that scene” (p. 291). In these select editorials, the *United Daily News*, *China Times*, and *Liberty Times* presented a similar setting theme: all of them did not treat the Taiwan island as a land that is ruled by the PRC government. In other words, three major Taiwanese newspapers, no matter if they supported or opposed the referendum, recognized that Taiwan is governed by the Republic of China, which owns its land, president, government, and citizens.

However, editorials from different presses still presented different characteristics of setting themes. The standpoint of the *Liberty Times* was close to the former President Lee’s “special state-to-state” theory. The *Liberty Times* treated China as a different country from Taiwan; also, it indicated that the Chinese government has no right to influence a “domestic” issue (the 2004 referendum) in Taiwan. This kind of setting theme in the *Liberty Times* provided the ground for its argumentation and rhetorical vision. The argumentation of asking Taiwanese people and other international forces to support the 2004 referendum was based on the assumption that Taiwan is an independent nation and is not a part of China. However, the *United Daily News* and *China Times* chose not to present a strong view on the “one side, one country” controversy. They argued that Taiwan and China are currently governed by different “regimes”; these two regimes (the PRC government and the ROC government) are two sides of the Taiwan Strait. Therefore, editorials in the *United Daily News* and *China Times* did not

use words such as “China” or “the Chinese government.” They usually called the other side “Zhong Gong,” which means the Chinese Communist Party.

Dramatis Personae

Dramatis personae can also be called characters; they can be any agent or actor that can be personified, such as individuals, groups, stories, or myths (Arsenault, 2005). Foss (1989) also expressed that “some characters are portrayed as heroes, while others are villains; some are major characters, while others are supporting players” (p. 291). After analyzing these select editorials, the result indicates that the *United Daily News*, *China Times*, and *Liberty Times* present different character themes.

United Daily News. Character themes in the *United Daily News*, *China Times*, and *Liberty Times* can be depicted as heroes or villains. One lawyer, Wang Chin-Feng, was portrayed as a heroine in the *United Daily News*’ editorials because she was against the 2004 referendum and resigned from the Central Election Commission. The *United Daily News* described her as a “positive public role” and her political view as “a guiding principle in the society” (“She lun,” 2004, p. A2). From late February, editorials in the *United Daily News* started to praise people who claimed not to vote for the 2004 referendum. From late November to late February, the *United Daily News*’ editorials did not portray another president candidate, Lian Chan, as a hero, but these editorials emphasized the importance of legitimacy of the 2004 referendum. However, in the editorial on February 28, the *United Daily News* described Lian as a politician whose key value was “the principle of constitutionalism and legitimacy.” This kind of statement delineated heroic character themes against villains on the referendum issue.

It is obvious that President Chen, politicians who supported holding the referendum, and the Central Election Commission of the ROC were depicted as villains by the *United Daily News*. All of these editorials in the *United Daily News* described President Chen as an irresponsible politician who only cared about the presidential election and used the referendum issue as a tool to win the election. From late January, the *United Daily News*’ editorials started to censure the Central Election Commission because it insisted on holding the presidential election and the referendum on the same day; also, the design of the ballot and voting route might have confuse voters, and this kind of confusion might influence the result of the presidential election.

Liberty Times. Character themes in the *Liberty Times*’ editorials were completely different from the *United Daily News*. In the *Liberty Times*, the 2004 referendum, Taiwanese people, and President Chen were depicted as heroes. The *Liberty Times* repeatedly described the referendum as an event that represented the true spirit of civil rights and democracy, expressed the sovereignty of Taiwan, and strengthened people’s determination against the Chinese government. These editorials also portrayed President Chen as a politician who represented the best intention by holding a peace referendum but was blamed by villains. In addition, Taiwanese people were depicted as kindhearted people who were not afraid of armed threats from China and who insisted on achieving a real development of democracy.

The PRC government, Taiwanese politicians of the “Blue” side (“Blue” here refers to the KMT and the People First Party), and some Taiwanese media that opposed the 2004 referendum were portrayed as villains by the *Liberty Times*. The PRC government was the main villain that aimed missiles toward Taiwan, refused to recognize Taiwan as an independent nation, and obstructed international forces to support Taiwan. Politicians of the

Blue side were described as partners of the Chinese government and irresponsible politicians. The *Liberty Times* also portrayed some media that opposed the 2004 referendum as forces that supported the unification with China and misled public opinions in Taiwan.

China Times. There were no real heroes in the *China Times*' editorials. When the Legislative Yuan of the ROC passed the Referendum Law on November 28, 2003, two editorials on November 28 and 29 commended the victory of democracy in Taiwan for the action of passing the Referendum Law. However, when President Chen and the Executive Yuan announced that the government planned to hold the first referendum on the same day as the presidential election, the *China Time* criticized the action of holding a referendum. In December, editorials in the *China Times* mainly discussed the legitimacy of holding a referendum; however, from January 2004, the *China Times* started to question if President Chen treated the referendum as a tool to gain benefits of the election. In the *China Times*, politicians of both candidates' sides were described as villains because these politicians were only concerned about the outcome of the presidential election.

Actions

According to Foss (1989), action themes "deal with the action of the drama. The actions in which the characters engage comprise action themes" (p. 291). In the *United Daily News*, it claimed that the 2004 referendum should not be held; therefore, the heroic characters they portrayed in select editorials were Taiwanese people who opposed the referendum and refused to vote for the 2004 referendum, and the villains were politicians who insisted on holding a referendum.

In the *China Times*, the editorials emphasized the legitimacy of the 2004 referendum; it claimed that the Referendum Law should be applied to the Council of Grand Justices of the Judicial Yuan for interpreting its legitimacy. Therefore, when President Chen and the government announced that the first referendum would definitely be held on the same day as the presidential election, these politicians were depicted as villains. The *China Times* did not directly encourage readers to vote or not vote the 2004 referendum; however, it claimed that it is the civil right for voters who choose not to vote for the referendum.

In the *Liberty Times*, it required readers to support the 2004 referendum in order to present an image that Taiwan is an independent nation. Therefore, President Chen and the government were portrayed as heroes because they insisted on holding the referendum; on the other hand, the other presidential candidate, politicians of the Blue sides, and some media that questioned the referendum were described as supporting villains because they had similar views with the main villain—China.

Rhetorical Visions

A rhetorical vision, as Bormann, Cragan, and Shields' (1994) explained, is a "unified putting-together of the various themes and types that gives the participants a broader view of things" (p. 281). From analyzing fantasy themes of editorials that relate to the 2004 referendum in three major Taiwanese newspapers, the result indicates that three newspapers offered different rhetorical visions; rhetorical visions presented in the *United Daily News* and *China Times* were similar in some aspects but different in details. The rhetorical vision of the *Liberty Times* was obviously different from others.

The rhetorical vision in the *United Daily News* strongly opposed the Referendum Law and the action of holding a referendum together with the presidential election. It treated

the Referendum Law as a law that overstepped the Constitution; it also questioned that the action of passing the Referendum Law was the first step for seeking a future independence of Taiwan. The *United Daily News* also opposed the action of holding the first referendum; it argued that the 2004 referendum was just an elective tool for President Chen to win the presidential election. In addition, it claimed that the 2004 referendum issue was not only a domestic issue but also an international event. Therefore, the *United Daily News* largely quoted other foreign political leaders' statements, especially the President of the United States, when these leaders presented their suspicions on the 2004 Taiwanese referendum issue. The *United Daily News* expressed that the 2004 referendum issue would raise unnecessary conflicts with China, the United States, and other countries, and it claimed that President Chen had to face the consequence of holding this referendum.

In contrast, the rhetorical vision in the *Liberty Times* was totally different from the *United Daily News*. In its view, as an independent nation, the imaginary enemy of Taiwan is China because the Chinese government advocates that Taiwan is not an independent nation and the Republic of China is not a legal regime. Accordingly, the *Liberty Times* treated the 2004 referendum as a highly positive political action that demonstrated against armed threats from China and represented the advancement of democracy in Taiwan. Therefore, editorials in the *Liberty Times* demanded readers to vote for the 2004 referendum in order to resist threats from China and the partners of the Chinese government in Taiwan. When the President of the United States and other foreign political leaders stated their suspicions about the referendum, the *Liberty Times* argued that these foreign leaders were misled by other Taiwanese media and then asked for support from international forces.

The rhetorical vision in the *China Times* was partly similar to the *United Daily News*. Both of them represented a counterforce against the 2004 referendum. However, the *China Times* argued that the action of passing the Referendum Law was a victory for Taiwanese democracy. The *China Times* offered a rhetorical vision that enforced the legitimacy of the referendum issue; accordingly, it was against the action of holding a referendum together with the presidential election because this action did not tally with requirements of the Referendum Law. As same as the *United Daily News*, the *China Times* also suspected that the 2004 referendum was a tool for the ruling party to remain in power. Also, it treated the referendum issue as not solely a domestic issue in Taiwan, because it had caused tensions to the diplomatic relationships with the United States, Japan, and other countries.

Discussion

The relationship between the referendum issue and the independence-unification controversy is one interesting topic that has attracted a lot of attention. The *Liberty Times* presented a rhetorical vision that divided Taiwanese people, politicians, and media into two sides: people who believe that Taiwan is an independent nation and should support the referendum in order to represent a progressive achievement of democracy and defend the threat from China; on the contrary, people and media that do not support the referendum and therefore indicate that they support the future unification with China. This kind of division is controversial because, for instance, the *United Daily News* and *China Times* had never presented any statement of seeking the unification in select editorials, but both of them opposed the action of holding the 2004 referendum. However, readers cannot assert that the argumentation of the *Liberty Times* supports a future or instant independence from China. In fact, the *Liberty Times* claimed that the peace referendum is a political action to declare the

national sovereignty of Taiwan and is the best event to maintain the status quo in the China-Taiwan relationship.

The rhetorical visions in the *United Daily News* and *China Times* did not show a direct relationship with the independence-unification controversy in Taiwan. In other words, when the *United Daily News* and *China Times* clarified that they were against the 2004 referendum, it did not mean that these two newspapers support the future unification with China. However, both of them indicated anxiety with the establishment of a new Taiwanese Constitution in the future. This kind of statement implies that both of them oppose seeking Taiwan's future independence.

The relationship between the 2004 referendum and the 11th presidential election in Taiwan is another interesting topic. The *United Daily News* and *China Times* claimed that the action of holding the referendum was a kind of interference that intended to disturb the process of voting for president and influence the result of the president election. They clarified their argumentations against the 2004 referendum, but neither of them encouraged their readers to support any particular candidate. However, compared to the *China Times*, the *United Daily News* presented a clearer tendency to support Lian Chan because it tended to use more positive words to describe Lian and other politicians who supported Lian.

In contrast with the *United Daily News* and *China Times*, statements in the *Liberty Times* were more strong and explicit. The select editorials in the *Liberty Times* encouraged its readers to support the referendum but did not ask readers to vote for any particular candidate. However, because of the image of villains that the *Liberty Times* portrayed in its editorials, it already presented enough cues about its tendency for supporting one particular presidential candidate.

From analyzing editorial commentaries of the 2004 referendum issue, three major Taiwanese newspapers declared their arguments for advocating or opposing the referendum and implied their tendencies for supporting one presidential candidate. The *United Daily News* and *Liberty Times* had different views of the referendum issue, but both of them expressed strong arguments. The *China Times* claimed the legitimacy of the referendum and indicated that the 2004 referendum should be interpreted by the Council of Grand Justices; however, when the government insisted on holding the referendum together with the presidential election, the *China Times* started to make stronger arguments against the 2004 referendum. The similarity of these major newspapers is that all of them did not indicate the presidential candidate they tended to support, but offered enough clues by portraying villains in fantasies.

In short, different fantasy themes of the 2004 referendum issue in Taiwan were discovered from analyzing the editorials in three major Taiwanese newspapers. This paper also discussed the differences and similarities of rhetorical visions that were created in the *United Daily News*, *China Times* and *Liberty Times*. In addition, this paper tried to analyze the relationship between different rhetorical visions of the referendum issue and the independence-unification controversy in Taiwan. However, this paper still raises questions to current limitations. First, editorials in three major Taiwanese newspapers did not indicate their tendencies regarding the independence-unification controversy directly, even though readers can find some clues from their statements; therefore, it cannot provide enough evidence to link the relationship between the 2004 referendum and the independence-unification controversy. In the future, we can try to select other political events and analyze editorials in these newspapers in order to discover different standpoints of major Taiwanese newspapers

about the independence-unification issue. Also, this paper is simply a qualitative approach, and the process of analysis might be influenced by the author's political tendency. Accordingly, quantitative research might valuably study the same topic in order to offer a more comprehensive result in the future.

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