

Public Aspirations in the New Year Couplets

A comparative study between
the People's Republic and Taiwan

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From Peachwood Charms to New Year Couplets

The immensely popular New Year couplets—known in Chinese as *chūn-lián* 春聯—are scrolls pasted on gate posts or door panels during the Spring Festival. They originated more than a thousand years ago from the peach-wood charms people hung on both sides of the door, allegedly to ward off evil spirits. *Fèng-sú tōng-yì* 風俗通義 has it that the image of the two generals, Shén-tú 神荼 and Yù-lei 鬱壘, were painted on the two panels of the charms as exorcists. By the Later Shú dynasty 後蜀 Mèng Xù 孟昶 (919–965) was known to have inscribed couplets on peach-wood charms, which could be said to be the prototype of the present-day New Year couplets.

But it was not until the reign of T'ai-tzǔ 太祖 (328–1398) of the Ming dynasty that the format became unified. According to *Yèn-jīng suì-shí jì* 燕京歲時記, members of the imperial households and noble families were entitled to use couplets written on white paper framed with either red or blue rims. The common people, however, were denied this privilege and were allowed only to use vermilion stationary or red writing paper. For the next thousand years, the common people observed the same practice, and this black or gold writing on red paper has become one of the most effective, if somewhat indirect, media available to the Chinese to express their collective aspirations.

From an anthropological point of view, the New Year couplets are a type of expressive culture. They reflect “patterns of behavior which include or give substance to emotions, motivations, and other

personality characteristics of people" (Pelto & Pelto 1976: 550-551). Like music, paintings and sculptures, the New Year couplets provide people with the opportunities to express their wishes and frustrations which are in turn conveyed to the recipients of this art form.

In terms of R. Redfield's distinction between the great tradition and the little tradition, we would say that these couplets belong to the latter (Sills 1968: 352). As such they give voice to the sentiments of the general populace rather than the elitist few, and consequently they tend to be more spontaneous and less inhibited. Nevertheless, stylistically they conform both phonologically and semantically to the parallel structure of the elitist regulated verse 律詩. Because of this conformity to the elitist mode of creation, it is safe to say that while the New Year couplets are folk items, they adhere to and are in turn endorsed by the great tradition.

The New Year couplets are thus meaningful in two senses. On the one hand, they represent the feelings of the common people on a spontaneous basis, uncensored and unregulated. On the other hand, they are an endorsed and authorized form of expression and, as such, they are an effective means of communication between the government and its people.

From a folkloristic point of view, the New Year couplets belong to a static genre in the sense that they are written *faits accomplis* (Abrahams 1969: 104-126). Thus, despite the fact that they are a form of communication sanctioned by the public—and endorsed by the establishment as well—their pragmatic effect is not as immediate as that of other conversational genres as, for example, daily conversations. In other words, the couplets' messages are conveyed indirectly, but precisely because of this indirectness, the criticisms and aspirations they express can be candid, and are tolerated by the addressees.

The Chinese people on both sides of the Formosa Strait share the same ancestry, use the same language (written language, that is), and have inherited the same customs. Nonetheless, since the Communist assumption of power in 1949 these two groups have been cut off from each other. For the past thirty years, they have lived under totally different political systems and have been indoctrinated in different political philosophies. As a result, their world views, their political ideologies and their value orientations as a whole have diverged substantially. The aim of this study is to ascertain their differences by means of a comparative study of this particular folklore item.

Methodology

One dilemma a social scientist is constantly faced with is how to

deduce the greatest amount of truth from among the smallest corpus of data (Goode and Hatt 1952: 209; Peltó 1970: 160). This problem becomes even more serious when the object under study is China with its huge population and its large surface area. The job of sample collecting becomes prohibitive. However, New Year couplets are more homogeneous than other folk items because of their connection with the Chinese elite poetic tradition. It is perhaps safe to say that the couplets are more typical than individual. Another difficulty has to do with the selection rather than the number of the samples. In the initial stage of our study, the samples came exclusively from one small town in the People's Republic. To balance the situation, a similar town in Taiwan was chosen to facilitate the comparison. Both towns are situated at some distance from metropolitan centers, but cannot exactly be called isolated. The Taiwanese town is about one hour's drive from Taipei, while the mainland town is situated 120 kilometers northwest of Chángshā 長沙 by the side of the Dòng Tíng Lake 洞庭湖. The grounds for comparisons are as follows:

1. Being at some distance from the urban political centers, they are less susceptible to political censorship. The couplets are more likely to mirror the general sentiments in a candid way.
2. Not located near metropolitan centers or in isolated backwoods areas, they are positioned in what may be called a "folk-urban continuum." As such, the life styles in the two towns are in a transitional stage, from agricultural to industrial. In both cases, traditional and contemporary elements exist side by side.

As for the number of the samples, the original target of two hundred each could not be reached; only 120 were received from the People's Republic and 114 from Taiwan. Printed couplets were excluded, as they tend to represent official ideology and do not directly reflect popular thinking.

The collected items were then classified in terms of subject matter into ten categories: scenery, personal feelings, cultivation of virtues, good fortune, political ideology, political issues, economic development, education, science and technology, and others. The classification cannot always be clearcut. For example, couplets using metaphoric language are normally classified according to what they actually refer to instead of their surface-level meaning. The couplet

Let there be an abundance of good fortune, longevity and male offspring;

May there be a combination of pines, bamboos and plums.

多福多壽多男子

有松有竹有梅花

refers in the first line to the good fortune most desired by the common people. The second line, however, should not be regarded as a mere description of the natural world. The three plants are known as "three friends in the cold winter" 歲寒三友 and are often held up as models of fortitude and uprightness in adverse environments. The entire couplet is therefore classified under "cultivation of virtues."

Purely from a methodological point of view, a comparative study of the couplets in the two communities is meaningful in several aspects. First, as an analysis of a popular folk object, the study may help us to better understand Chinese public opinion. These couplets are a better reflection of reality than studies of primary school textbooks (Martin 1975: 242-261). Although the textbooks allow one to gauge the attitudes of the school-age children in their formative stages, the materials in the textbooks almost always conform to the official ideology because the educational systems on both sides are strictly controlled by the governments. In fact, the textbooks are used specifically as tools to indoctrinate the people. The method is therefore highly structured and formalized and the behavior patterns provided are ideal rather than actual. Conversely, the New Year couplets allow people to express their ideals (e.g. hopes for a prosperous New Year) as well as their actual (e.g. frustrations over the *status quo*) state of affairs.

Fiction has also been used as data for comparisons, and studies have been made in the areas of marriage and family structure (Chin 1970: 87-120). The samples were taken on the one side from *Xiàndài wén-xué* 現代文學 from 1960 till mid-1966 in Taiwan and on the other side from the semi-official *Rén-mín wén-xué* 人民文學 in the People's Republic. Aside from the fact that the data were collected from rather limited quarters, the Taiwanese journal's readership was restricted mainly to the intellectuals and its general themes likewise were centered around the lives of the educated elite, and the mainland journal, as a semi-official publication, was intended primarily to provide models for the general public. The writers of these two communities, moreover, do not really enjoy complete political freedom. Almost all of their publications were censored beforehand. Literature that candidly reflects reality is all but non-existent. By contrast, the New Year couplets come from the general public and are therefore not subject to censorship, thus reflecting public sentiments in a more spontaneous and collective manner.

It is often said that the couplets come in mass productions and therefore are of no value in a study of public opinions. In the same vein, the couplets from Taiwan were thought to be full of clichés and in fact no different from the entries taken from the couplet handbooks available from bookstores. Those from the People's Republic were in the same way believed to contain nothing original for they were mostly political slogans. The examples to be given below should disprove those claims, for they abound in variety and originality. Moreover, the people's choice of one particular couplet over another also indirectly but significantly reflects their thinking.

Contents

Scenery and personal feelings. A word should be said about the semantic and syntactic formats of the couplet before we discuss its content. A couplet consists of two lines, each constituting an independent syntactic and semantic unit. Though the two lines closely parallel each other, they may deal with totally different subject matters. In this study we shall treat a line as representing a single theme. Of the 304 themes (152 couplets) collected from the People's Republic, scenery takes up 31.9%, appearing altogether 97 times, while by way of contrast, scenery takes up only 20.6% of the 228 themes of the Taiwanese couplets, totalling 47 items (see Table 1.).

On both sides, couplets describing scenery are quite frequent. The descriptions are, however, not exactly original. For example:

Table 1. Themes and Their Appearances in the Couplets

THEMES	People's Republic		Taiwan		
	Total Appearance	Percentage	Total Appearance	Appearance	Percentage
Scenery	97	31.9	47		20.6
Personal Feelings	28	9.2	13		5.7
Cultivation of Virtues	10	3.3	44		19.3
Good Fortune	22	7.2	112		49.1
Political Ideology	26	8.6	0		0.0
Political Issues	52	17.1	5		2.2
Economic Development	52	17.1	0		0.0
Science and Technology	9	3.0	0		0.0
Education	6	2.0	4		1.3
Others	2	0.6	3		1.3
Total	304	100.0	228		100.0

The cycle comes to a new beginning;¹
The entire universe is rejuvenated.

一元復始
萬象更新

Some images are in fact rather trite; e.g. “Spring wind” 春風, “peach flowers” 桃花, “lantern light” 燈火, “songs of nightingales and dances of swallows” 鶯歌燕舞, and “multitudinous violets and reds” 萬紫千紅. The only difference is that on the mainland side descriptions are packed with political terminology. The “red flags” in the following couplet is political jargon, for example:

Red flags fluttering all over the sky;
Fresh flowers blooming all over the land.
紅旗漫天舞
鮮花遍地開

For another example :

Peal after peal of thunder bolts create a new universe;
Mile after mile of eastern winds demolish the old clouds.
千鈞霹靂開新宇
萬里東風吹舊雲

“Eastern winds” here is clearly metaphorical, just as the reference to “the country turns red” is in this couplet;

The Spring Festival this time around is especially good;
The mountain and river under the sun turns scarlet red.
春節今年好
日照江山紅

Puns are used at times:

The horizons are lined as if with bolts of brocade;
Colorful lanterns are raised amidst a garden of songs.
彩霞似錦鋪天邊
華燈初放歌滿園

“Huá” 華 in “huá dēng” (colorful lanterns) could on the one hand mean “flowery,” but significantly it also happens to be the last name of Chairman Huá Kuó-fēng.

The couplets in Taiwan are as a whole more conventional. Both the natural and social environments in Taiwan, for instance, no longer

answer the descriptions of the following couplets:

A. Five-character couplets:

The moon shines on hundreds of doors in the flower market;
Spring sprawls for thousands of miles along the lantern boulevards.

花市千門月
燈衢萬里春

Radiant clouds take the shapes of fantastic tracks;
Fresh plants launch the beginning of a felicitous year.

雲霞成異跡
花柳發韶年

The imperial birthday falls on the first day of the year;
The clouds of glory brighten up the prime of one's life.

元正當聖節
雲物燦華年

B. Seven-character couplets:

Greeted by a joyful spirit, flowers all wear smiles on their faces;
Moved by the cheerful sounds, birds also understand the lyrics.

花迎喜氣皆如笑
鳥識歡聲亦解歌

A piece of music turns the world into a sea of Spring;
Thousands of lanterns over the doors transform brocades into
rainbows.

一曲笙歌春似海
千門燈火錦如虹

Mountains take on the looks of crouching tigers and sprawling
dragons;

People come across a world of singing nightingales and whispering
swallows.

山呈虎踞龍蟠象
人遇鶯歌燕語來

Surprisingly their popularity remains unchanged over the years in spite
of the fact that they have become obsolete.

Couplets describing scenery in the People's Republic mix jargon
used in people's daily life with pure descriptive elements:

People's communes are prospering and Spring is charming;
Socialism is flourishing and the view is refreshing.

人民公社蒸蒸日上春光美
社會主義欣欣向榮景色新

Expressions from Chairman Mao's poetry are sometimes borrowed:

Snowflakes drift in all directions; see how magnificent the world
looks in her simple silvery attire;²

Radiant clouds assume different colors; see how charming the
clouds of our motherland appear in their blue dresses.

雪花飛六合望大地銀裝素裹萬千氣象
雲霓現五彩看祖國霞披翠彩無限風光

The descriptions in the couplets from the People's Republic also incorporate local color. The first line in the first couplet and the second line in the second couplet are two good examples:

Spring reigns all over the Hunan Province;

The dawn prevails over the entire country.

三湘四水皆春色

五岳九州盡朝暉

Spring tides come rolling down from the sky;

Flowers blossom all over the Dòng Tíng Lake.

春潮滾滾天上來

洞庭處處鮮花開

The locales in the next two lines have special meanings for those who witnessed the changes which took place after the liberation:

What used to be desolate land at Nan-da;³

Now assumes a totally new look at Dòng Tíng.

昔日南大荒涼景

今朝洞庭展新容

Though the category of scenery is often tinged with subjective elements, it primarily shows nature as a life-giving force, a fact which people become fully aware of at a time when the destructive winter is about to be replaced by the productive Spring. The category of personal feelings is different in the sense that it deals almost exclusively with the subjective and the internal. Of the twenty-eight themes about human feelings from the People's Republic, four of them openly glorify the government:

Chairman Mao's achievement will be commemorated for ages to
come;

Chairman Huá's work is acclaimed all over the world.

毛主席恩深世代懷念

華主席功高舉世稱頌

Nevertheless, we also find couplets about people's disillusionment with the endless political turmoils of the past:

Don't say that the floating clouds will shroud the sun forever;
Once the harsh winter is over, plants will unfold their Spring buds.

莫道浮雲終蔽日
嚴春過盡綻春蕾

At times there is even a sense of urgency in the wish for good government:

From behind the tumbling clouds the sun will eventually emerge;
Despite the rolling, turgid waves, the water will finally turn clear.

烏雲滾滾日終出
濁浪滔滔水必清

Sometimes the hardship in life is concretely described as in the second line of the following couplet:

Barbaric tunes were played in the blue sea and azure sky;
Another year was spent in the turbulent pass between two steep shores.

碧海藍天作胡曲
高山急峽又一年

Traditional filial piety seldom surfaces in the mainland couplets, but unquestionably the feeling is there. More often than not, it is expressed in a rather subtle way:

With the departure of winter, mother was taken away;
With the arrival of Spring, why is she not brought back?

冬去既已邀娘去
春來何不送母來

Personal feelings are sometimes made universal, at least in the political sense. Apprehensions about aggressive neighboring states, for instance, are expressed in the following couplet:

Keep your eyes open; watch out for the South Sea Leopard in the south;

Be on the alert; guard against the Polar Bear in the north.

擦亮眼睛南門注視南海豹
提高警惕北疆謹防北極熊

As for Taiwan, the diplomatic setbacks in recent years are the subject of quite a few couplets:

In seeing the old year off, forget not the new sorrows;
While welcoming the new year, remember the old grievances.

除舊歲勿忘新傷
過新年切記舊恨

Though this couplet is overwhelmingly bitter, elsewhere people are quite optimistic and even ambitious:

Let's avail ourselves of the Springtime and take actions;
Push forward our enterprises and make renovations.
共趁春光及時奮發
宏興事業努力革新

Of course, they can also be philosophical about the setbacks and become quite self-reliant:

Unassisted, we shape the fate of our nation;
Undaunted, we overcome difficulties against all odds.
自立自強開國運
不屈不撓挽狂瀾

Since the people in the two communities have been cut off from each other for over thirty years, the homesickness of the mainlanders stranded in Taiwan invariably takes a turn for the worse during this festive season. The result:

The grey-haired parents back home appear in the wanderer's dream;
The old house at the green hill preoccupies the homesick man's mind.
高堂白髮遊子夢
青山老屋故園心

The writer has obviously gone through some hardships in life and his yearning for the good old days comes out in a most straightforward manner.

It is clear from the foregoing analysis that politics prevails in all sectors of life and on both sides of the Formosa Strait. As far as scenery is concerned, objective descriptions are often tinged with subjective political elements both in the manner of presentation and in their philosophical implications.

Cultivation of virtues and good fortune. Traditional Chinese society stressed pan-moralism by imposing a system of moral principles in almost every aspect of life. The concept of *pao* 報, for example, pervades Chinese society and determines how it functions. Yang Lien-sheng's rather extensive definition should serve our purpose here:

The Chinese believe that reciprocity of actions 報 (favor and hatred, reward and punishment) between man and man, and indeed between men and supernatural beings, should be as certain as a cause-and-effect relationship, and, therefore, when a Chinese acts, he normally anticipates a response or return. Favors done for others are often considered what may be termed "social investments," for which handsome returns are expected. Of course, acceptance of the principle of reciprocity is required in practically every society. Nevertheless, in China the principle is marked by its long history, the high degree of consciousness of its existence, and its wide application and tremendous influence in social institutions (Yang 1957: 291).

According to this line of thinking, the cultivation of virtues is believed to be able to bring about good fortune. The ever popular saying that "the family that accumulates virtues will have more good fortune than it can enjoy" best testifies to this belief. For this reason the two categories are put together here. These two categories also differ from the foregoing section in that both cultivation of virtues and good fortune can be considered voluntary disciplines, in contrast to scenery and personal feelings, which have to do respectively with external reality and spontaneous and even involuntary internal feelings.

On the Taiwanese side, the two themes appear a total of 156 times, or 68.4% of the total cases. By contrast, on the mainland side, they appear only in 10.5% of the cases, which falls far short of the Taiwanese examples. We believe, however, that it is more meaningful to ascertain specifically the virtues to be cultivated and the well-being to be sought after by people of the two sides.

The moral themes in the Taiwanese couplets, are, in order of frequency of appearance: peace, fairness, diligence, restraint, filial piety, harmony among siblings, righteousness, and courtesy. Some examples are in order here:

There is a way toward self discipline: peace is foremost;
 There is no secret in dealing with people: self-restraint first.
 修業有道和爲貴
 處世無奇忍至高
 With diligence alone, there is nothing impossible in the world;
 In the Hall of Self-restraint, there exists ultimate peace.
 一勤天下無難事
 百忍堂中有太和
 In dealing with people, by all means be courteous and sincere;
 In managing business, above all be fair and diligent.

待人和氣誠爲首
處事公正勤第一

Self-discipline begins with filial piety and kindness to one's siblings;

A perfect family starts with the basic principles of diligence and frugality.

立身以孝悌爲首
治家以勤儉爲先

Laws of nature are impartial; do good and you shall reap good fortune;

Sages' teachings are explicit: discipline yourself and you shall have harmony in the family.

天地無私爲善自然獲福
聖賢有教修身所以齊家

What is especially worth mentioning about the above examples is that filial piety, which had always been upheld as the cardinal virtue, is upstaged by peace and fairness. That filial piety is slipping backward in popularity becomes even more obvious when we compare it with the themes having to do with business ethics in the category of good fortune. In view of the enormous corpus of this category, it is only fair to give more examples than elsewhere

We open our doors to all the wealth of the world;

We stock our houses with all the money of the land.

門迎四海千鄉寶

戶納三山萬貫財

Our business grows like thick woods and slender bamboos;

Our wealth soars like tall hills and steep ranges.

生意如茂林修竹

財源似峻嶺崇山

Totally devoted to the success of our ambitious enterprises;

Happily settled in the land with a firm foundation.

全力圖功成駿業

安居得地固鴻基

Open up proper and decent channels of wealth;

Lay down the long lasting cornerstone of business.

開千載有道財源

立萬世無疆基業

Wealth comes without an end like the South China Sea;

Profit wells up all over like Spring waves.

財如粵海來無盡

利似春潮觸處生

Our business reputation is known throughout the world;

Our branch offices are established on all continents.

經商信用通萬國

營業機關達五州

Our wealth is as plentiful as the water in the Three Rivers;

Our business is as firmly established as the Five Hills.

財源富有三江水

基業壯如五嶽山

Concern for business success comprises 95 of 112 themes in the Taiwanese couplets. This is hardly surprising if one takes into consideration the islanders' devotion to the development of trade and industry in recent years.

In the People's Republic, themes dealing with the cultivation of self and individual virtues are extremely rare, the following couplet being the only example:

If a man is diligent, spring will always be with him;

If a family is harmonious, blessings are sure to come.

人勤春常在

家和福自生

On the other hand, examples dealing with collective consciousness and the spirit of teamwork are quite numerous. The language used, moreover, is comparatively more explicit and simple, presumably to make sure that the messages are understood.

Stamp out corrupt practices;

Build up new habits.

掃除歪風

創立新習

Innovative practices flourish overnight;

The Four Modernizations compete with each other.

新風突起

四化爭先

Row the boat in the middle of the stream;

Battle with the waves and the winds.

泛舟中流

搏擊風浪

The Four Modernizations benefit the nation and the family;

People ought to be of one mind to go on the Long March.

四化是爲國爲家造福

人民要同心同德長征

For the sake of our spectacular nation, be heirs to ancient ages and
be teachers to posterity;

With millions of fighting spirits, carry on their heritage and pave
the way for the future.

承先啓後神州風光無限好
繼往開來十億堯舜鬥志昂

Fight against all odds to uphold the glorious tradition of our Party;
Be industrious and thrifty to preserve the spirit of the working
people.

艱苦奮鬥發揚我黨光榮傳統
勤儉節約保持勞動人民本色

The virtues to be extracted from these examples are courage, hard work,
thrift, teamwork spirit, and the like.

As for the couplets related to good fortune, there are only three
instances which follow the traditional way of expression. The rest are
intermingled with contemporary expressions:

Spring remains forever in the houses facing the sun;
Blessings invariably fall on the workers' families.

向陽門弟春常在
勞動人家福自來

People enjoy privately owned production;
Spring returns earlier to a radiant world.

生產自主人歡笑
大地生輝春早回

The view at the Dòng Tíng Lake remains good year after year;
People's living standard improves step by step.

洞庭風光年年好
人民生活步步高

Greet the incoming New Year and rejoice at the new residence;
Purge the Four Pests and push forward the Four Modernizations.⁴

迎新年賀喜遷新居
除四害大步跨四化

It is true that the above themes—hard work leading to wealth, people
enjoying privately owned production, improvement of one's standard of
living, and moving into a new house—are all considered good fortune,
but they are quite different from their Taiwanese counterparts. In the
People's Republic the emphasis is not on wealth and profit as such, and
furthermore, themes of this kind are limited in number, totalling only
twenty-two or 7.2% of the mainland total.

One can see that immediate cause-and-effect relationship between
men and between man and nature are honored on both sides. In main-
land China, however, the emphasis is put on collective virtues and their
subsequent rewards, again on a communal basis and very much in line

with socialist work ethics. In Taiwan, traditional virtues are stressed. Frequently traditional cause-and-effect mores are translated into economic terms.

Political ideology, political issues, and economic development. In this section all human endeavors are considered on a collective basis. Because political issues and economic development can be seen as concrete extensions of abstract ideologies, the three categories are treated as a group here.

It must be pointed out at the outset that these three categories take up 42.8% of the total themes in the People's Republic. Of course, coming from a society where "politics takes command" of everything else, the percentage is not altogether unexpected. What is of more interest to us is the specific trends the concrete contents in the couplets represent and point to.

Chairman Mao's thinking still has its impact on the people. Even though it is no longer as recurrent as before, the lingering influence of this political leader is explicit in the following two couplets:

The five precious volumes with their radiance always light the
revolutionary path;⁵
Nine hundred million people with their red hearts forever look up
to Chairman Huá for leadership.

五卷寶書光輝常照革命路
九億人民紅心永向華主席
Chairman Mao's thinking nourishes the earth as rain and dew;
Communist policies shine on all households as the spring sun.
毛澤東思想似雨露滋潤大地
共產黨政策如春光普照萬家

As a matter of fact we can even find those skeptical and cataclysmic attitudes which characterized the Cultural Revolution. The next two examples testify to this negative outlook:

Wreck the world by applying the iron fists;
Greet the fresh Spring by chopping apart the waves.
鐵拳砸碎舊世界
劈波斬浪迎新春
Emulate the revolutionary pioneers and be proficient in both martial
and cultural skills;
Act as real heroes and make sure our descendants are both red and
expert.

効革命前驅能文能武
做英雄後代又紅又專

The second line in the following couplet is of special interest because the preoccupation with political ideology links two unrelated motifs together, creating an incongruous effect.

Increase production to repay our country;
 Raise children to ward off revisionism.
 增產報國
 養兒防修

Among the various political issues of current interest, the most important is unmistakably the Four Modernizations. They constitute a category of their own:

Be ambitious and promote the Four Modernizations;
 Lay down plans for the next thousand years.
 宏圖開四化
 大計定千年
 Purge the Four Pests and restore order out of chaos;
 March with great strides toward the Four Modernizations.
 除四害撥亂反正
 朝四化奮勇進軍
 Be selfless and be devoted to the Four Modernizations;
 Take heart and be determined to renovate China.
 胸懷全局獻身四化
 奮發圖強改造中國
 Hand in hand and shoulder to shoulder, we set our minds on the
 path of the Long March;
 Of one mind and with joint forces, we promote the Four Moderniza-
 tions.
 携手並肩齊志長征新路
 同心合力共創現代四化

The demand for democracy is another major concern of the people. It runs counter to the wishes of the authoritarian government and yet in a limited sense it manifests itself in this particular folk medium of expression. The following couplets are rather blunt in their demands, for example:

Promote democracy;
 Emphasize science.
 發揚民主
 講究科學
 Spring descends on the road of the Long March in full force;
 Flowers hang on the twigs of democracy in full bloom.
 春滿長征路

花繁民主枝

The first couplet reminds one of Mr. Science and Mr. Democracy as advocated in the May Fourth Movement of 1919. May one not say that they have come to the people's attention again after sixty-odd years as a result of their frustrations over the high-handed political control as well as the great tribulations caused by the Cultural Revolution?

There are, of course, other political issues which cause people concern. These are quite diversified, ranging from specific views on how the government should be run to abstract political philosophies:

With the Four Pests purged, the state of the nation is sound;
With the blueprint almost drawn, our prospect is encouraging.

四害已除全國大治
藍圖在望形勢喜人

In this whole wide world, young intellectuals pursue their ambitious careers;

In a land of opportunities, the poor and lower-middle peasants raise new blood.

廣濶天地知識青年創大業
大有作為貧下中農育新人

Revolutionary truth originates in practice;

The courage and wisdom to struggle come from the people.

革命真理源於實踐
鬥爭膽識來自人民

These couplets reflect some major concerns of the people: the Gang of Four, practice as the criterion to judge truth, class struggle, and the problem of intellectuals transferred to the grass roots or to do manual work.

There are altogether 52 themes related to economic development. In what follows, economic development will be further divided into agriculture and commerce. Because the data from the People's Republic come from an agricultural area, themes related to agriculture are quite numerous and varied:

Extensively plant seedlings to afforest the land;

Meet the need of the Four Modernizations.

大力植樹造林
適應四化需要

Plant fences of trees around the fields on a large scale;

Speed up the greening process of the lake district.

大搞田旁植樹
加速湖區綠化

Let's firmly make up our minds to move the mountains;
Let's scientifically reclaim the land at the lakes.

立下愚公移山志
造遍湖洲科學田

One silver string connects the north and the south;⁶
Thousands of acres of fields put on new looks.

一條銀綫穿南北
千里山鄉換新裝

With good medicine we rejoice that the cattle are strong and healthy;
With good weather we hope that rice and cotton will be equally
plentiful.

醫明葯効但喜牲畜強力
風調雨順惟願棉稻爭輝

As a whole the agricultural themes concern planting seedlings, creating forests, improving irrigation, rearing domestic cattle, scientific methods of farming, and agricultural automation.

Since private enterprise no longer exists in the People's Republic, themes about business are quite different from their Taiwanese counterparts, which put great emphasis on profit making. In the following two couplets from the People's Republic, the stress is on devotion to work:

Business agencies proliferate like chessboards and constellations;
Business staff work hard with open eyes and red hearts.

商業網點星羅棋布
財貿職工眼亮心紅

Stand behind the three-foot counter and view the prospect of the
Four Modernizations;

Take good care of customers from the four quarters and be totally
devoted to the entire population.

立三尺櫃台放眼望四化美景
迎八方顧客掏心爲九億人民

Personal gains are not mentioned and in the absence of self-interest it is only natural that puritanical devotion is advocated.

Coupled with this emphasis on selfless devotion is the extreme leftist idea that poverty itself is an honor. In recent years, however, its priority has been gradually downgraded. Glorification of poverty and lack of ambition is on its way out:

With great ambitions and spirit, root up the philosophy of poverty
and lack of ambition;

In the beautiful bosom of our motherland, bring into being glories

of all kinds.

志氣高幹勁足改變一窮二白

祖國好山河美開創萬紫千紅

Advocate the philosophy that hard work leads to wealth;

Abolish the thinking that poverty is glorious.

提倡勤勞致富

廢止貧窮光榮

These couplets clearly stand to the right of the leftist doctrine of poverty.

Compared with the total politicalization of almost all aspects of life in the People's Republic, the situations in Taiwan are quite different and the couplets on the island seldom touch on ideology, political issues or collective economic development. They occur only five times and among them only one couplet conveys an explicit message:

Exterminate the Communists;

Regain our control of the land.

消滅共產

還我河山

Again, the sharp contrast between the abundance of this group of themes in the People's Republic and its scarcity in Taiwan reflects the difference between the former's emphasis on the collective and the latter's on the private—a dichotomy which cuts through almost all themes under discussion.

Education, science and technology. It is a well-known fact that the Chinese put a great deal of emphasis on the education of their youth. The education is, moreover, highly structured and for thousands of years was geared toward civil service examinations, which provide incentives as well as ideal behavior patterns for young people. In a society that lacks mobility, education prepares young people as prospective citizens who know their own positions. For ordinary people, education is practically the only ladder of success available to the young. In an analysis of the theme of education one should be able to find out specifically what people expect their children to live up to.

After 1949, however, the leaders in the People's Republic saw only the corrupt side of the examination and education systems. No sooner had they gained power than the entire education system together with the intellectuals was downgraded. Fortunately the pendulum has been swinging in the opposite direction during the past few years. Although education and science and technology take up only 5% of the total in the People's Republic, there are some signs of revival.

Let us acquire new technologies;
Let us reform old ways of thinking.

學習新技術
改造舊腦筋

In the morning open the door and drink from the Xiang River;
At night shut the door and study technology textbooks.

開門晨飲湘江水
閉戶夜讀科技書

While all the gongs and drums are playing, technologies duel with
one another;

Under the hoisted red flags, the Four Modernizations excel one
another.

金鼓齊鳴科技比武
紅旗招展四化參雄

In a new chapter of education, generations of new talents are on
their way in;

From the newly created miracles of science, news of success arrive
one after another.

教育譜新篇人材輩出
科學創奇跡捷報頻傳

Climbing the top of technology, one needs to have the perseverance
required to rub a pestle into a needle;

Attacking the bastions of science, one must be equipped with the
determination needed to move mountains.

攀技術高峯須具磨針韌勁
攻科學堡壘要有移山精神

One must not be intimidated by difficulties in the texts, for with am-
bition a hill of the height of thirty thousand *ren* can be scaled;⁷

One should never stop on the Long March, for with triumphal
songs in the air, the entire land looks forward to the year two
thousand.

攻書莫畏難試看壯志凌雲奮力攀登三萬仞
長征不停步喜聽凱歌遍地齊心奔向兩千年

As we can see here, the purpose is to acquire practical knowledge, not to train the elitist few as it has been in the past. In fact, the concern seems to be with the immediate effect, rather than the long-range planning, of science. And indeed in the push for the Four Modernizations, technological aspects receive the top priorities. By comparison, social sciences and humanities do not enjoy the same prestige. On the other hand, Taiwan maintains a more conventional view of education. No mention is made of specific technology;

Study and you shall know how much you lack;

Work hard and you shall be proficient.

學知不及
業精於勤

Associate with scholars of the entire world;
Study classics written by ancient authors.

友天下士
讀古人書

The virtuous tradition as family heirloom;
The written works to ensure immortality.

傳家惟德業
壽世有文章

The concern is in general non-pragmatic, which is not exactly in keeping with Taiwan's effort to keep itself informed of the progress in the outside world.

Conclusion

New Year couplets reflect grass-roots attitudes toward life in general, and by examining the couplets one can gain insight into the people's concerns. Our study is aimed at something more specific: to ascertain the differences between these two groups of people, who have the same ethnic backgrounds but differ from each other in their outlooks on life as a result of the different political structures in which they have been living for the past thirty years. Four general conclusions can be drawn.

In the first place, the couplets from the People's Republic strike us with their overt political orientations, especially concerning the government's policy to build a socialist state in which people's political beliefs and actual behavior are expected to conform to pre-established norms—the cliché, “putting politics in command” best sums up this preoccupation. If the function of socialization is to mold citizenry into roles (Langton 1969: 8), then the family as a unit has felt the impact of political interventions on an unprecedented scale (Hsu 1968: 580–581). The couplets are a collective, familial form of expression and as a result are packed with political doctrine. Even descriptions of scenery and personal feelings are heavily tinged with political dogma.

The data, however, was collected in February, 1979, three years after the purge of the Gang of Four when government control on people's thinking was gradually being relaxed. Chairman Huá urged the public to be even “more liberated in thought” and Senior Vice-Premier Deng Xiao-ping also advocated “practice as the only criterion to judge truth” (Wang 1978: 7). As a consequence of this trend (in contrast to the predominant collectivism in the past), certain individual feelings started to surface in the couplets. Examples given above have to

do with people's disillusionment with political turmoils, yearning for democracy, interest in science and technology, desire for the improvement of the standard of living, pride in one's accomplishment and stress on family relationships. These are radically different from the blind adherence to the collectivist dogmas of the Cultural Revolution period during which the emphasis is on the following: total rejection of tradition, class struggle, poor and lower-middle peasants providing leadership for the transferred intellectuals from the urban centers (presumably for the purpose of bridging the gap geographically between city and country and psychologically between those who labor mentally and those who labor manually). The differences also characterize the transitional state the People's Republic is in at present, from collectivism to individualism. The transition, however, is not going to be a smooth one. Neither absolute collectivism nor absolute individualism can really sustain itself (Lukes 1973: 38). One of the most demanding tasks confronting the leaders of the People's Republic is to incorporate the two ideologies on an administrative level.

The main concern of their counterparts in Taiwan is with economic gains and personal good fortune. Lack of opportunities to participate in politics in the past three decades has further diverted people's attention to these concerns. Yet with the increase in the level of education, in people's awareness of the current international development, and in their financial powers, there is bound to be some feedback; and indeed, demands for redistribution of political powers have already been made. Such sentiments, however, have not yet surfaced in the couplets, which remain so far conventional in subject matter. Political concerns are mainly restricted to frustration over diplomatic setbacks and nostalgia for the past.

Secondly, respect for education is a time-honored tradition in China, but again there are significant differences between these two states. In Taiwan the couplets stress the inseparability of morality and knowledge while at the same time totally ignoring the impressive progress made in science and technology. In the interpretation of a renowned anthropologist, Fei Xiaò-tóng, what the couplets preach is ethical knowledge which teaches people how to make things, rather than knowledge of what things are, which is knowledge of the natural world. Traditionally ethical knowledge has been valued above knowledge of the natural world and mastery of the former often led to success in the comprehensive civil service system (Fei 1953: 64). In this sense, the attitude in Taiwan toward education is more conventional than in the People's Republic. There the emphasis is on the pragmatic aspect of the sciences. Though much less elitist in policy, mainland education does

not exactly touch on the basic issues of science, either.

Thirdly, people in mainland China have started to take pride in affluence at a time when leftist glorification of poverty is on its way out. The emphasis on poverty is, of course, not without its history. According to Fei Xiaò-tōng again, Chinese economy can be described as one of scarcity characterized by low living standards and lack of opportunities and material wealth. This is in contrast with the economy of abundance in the western industrial nations, known for their potential for accumulation, development and enterprise (Fei 1947: 3-4). To cope with scarcity, certain indoctrinations are required and "the image of limited good" is glorified so as to both make people feel content with their limited share and to understand that resources are limited in quantity and must be distributed among all (Foster 1965: 296). For all its political radicalism, the government in mainland China actually has adopted the same limited-good rationale. The idea is not exactly progressive and is, in fact, responsible for the economic stagnation of the past. The *People's Daily* has candidly labeled their economic structure "beggar's Communism" (*Ming Pao*, 23 February, 1978). Fortunately, during the past three years there have been signs of change for the better. By contrast, the Taiwanese couplets openly advocate the quest for wealth, often by ignoring political and social issues.

Fourthly, certain traditional virtues such as frugality and diligence are quite numerous on both sides, but with significant differences. In Taiwan the emphasis is on the cultivation of personal virtues such as fairness, peace, honesty and harmonious familial relationships. In the People's Republic teamwork ideals such as unity, struggle, courage and discipline are valued. In the same way, though good fortune is cherished on both sides, the perspectives are different. In Taiwan, blessings are seen as the immediate effect of specific causes, very much in the traditional, religious line of thinking. The emphasis in the People's Republic is, on the other hand, more political, namely, labor leads to good fortune.

Last but not least, the family is perhaps the most basic and significant constituent unit of Chinese society. The New Year couplets endorse this traditional concept by being part of the New Year festival activities which stress family unity. The Communist revolution has been described as an attempt to transform the basic social system from one based on kinship to one based on politics (Hsu 1968: 582-583). The experiment, however, cannot exactly be said to have been successful, for what has been changed is the family structure—the content of the kinship relationship remains little changed or practically untouched. The recent restoration of the family lot, privately owned production

and individual economy all demonstrate concessions made by the government to the family as an economic unit. As for the Taiwanese side, the family is often treated as a microcosm of the entire society. The moral principles used in the family unit are often extended to the entire society. It is safe to say, therefore, that on either side the role of the family remains relatively unchanged amidst political and social changes.

NOTES

1. In its original sense, a cycle comprises sixty years. Here it denotes one year as a self-sufficient unit.
2. Part of the line is borrowed from Mao's "Qin yuán chun" 沁園春. See Barnstone 1972: 84-85.
3. A district in the Hunan Province, where the town from which our data were collected is located.
4. The Four Pests refer originally to rats, bedbugs, flies and mosquitoes, which the government tried to stamp out. Later it was used pejoratively to refer to the Gang of Four.
5. Obviously a reference to the five volumes of the collective works of Chairman Mao.
6. Another borrowing from Mao's poetry. See Barnstone 1972: 48-49.
7. *Ren* is a measure of length, approximately eight feet.

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