

Laid-off Women Workers' Identity: The Chinese Government's Theoretical Description*

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Abstract:

Over the past three decades, China has been undergoing a transition from a planned economy to a socialist market economy, which has brought into existence new social groups, such as laid-off women workers. They had to give up their “iron rice bowl” and adapted themselves to the competitiveness in the labor market.

The Chinese government defined the social category of “laid-off staff and workers” into existence in 1997 and 1998 for the purposes of reform, social stability and globalization. According to the government’s announcement made in March 2005, this category no longer exists by the end of 2005, which means that their identity might change into either “the reemployed” or “the unemployed”.

Bakhtin’s genre theory, Foucault’s constructionist approach, Critical Discourse Analysis and Lemke’s genre theory are applied in data analysis. The data consist of the definitions of the lay-offs, the service (tertiary) industry and the lifelong training, the policies guiding the reform inside state-owned enterprises and reemployment discourse.

This paper analyzes the relationship between human agency and social structure, and the role of discourse in the production, maintenance and change of social relations. However, the government’s theoretical description of laid-off women workers’ identity is far from enough to reflect the multiplicity of their identity and the flexibility of their identity construction. The media-projection and narrative construction of their identity are also worth studying.

Key Words: Identity, Theoretical Description, Laid-off Women Workers, Political Discourse, Social Change

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Over the past three decades, China has been undergoing a transition from a planned economy to a socialist market economy, which has brought into existence new social groups, such as laid-off women workers, who were considered as “Half the Sky” in the 1950s. At that time, those who worked in state-owned enterprises could enjoy the welfare provided by the government, which was called the “iron rice bowl”. However, since the 1990s, in the process of transformation of state-owned enterprises, a large number of workers and staff, especially women, were laid off. They had to give up their “iron rice bowl” and adapt themselves to the competitiveness in the labor market.

How did the government manage the transition from a planned economy to a socialist market economy? Why did the government define and redefine the social category of “laid-off staff and workers” into existence in 1997 and 1998? Why did the government announce in March 2005 that this category would no longer exist by the end of that year? How was the category of “the laid-off staff and workers” replaced by “the reemployed” or “the unemployed”? How was the identity of laid-off staff and workers constructed in the government’s documents? These are the research questions that I try to solve through data analysis.

Such definitions, re-definitions and announcements are manifested in legal documents, that is, they are discourses manifested in texts. What we see here is the power of institutionalized language to create effects in social practice.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In order to understand further the relationship between language uses, that is discourse, in relation to the Chinese government’s description of the identity of laid-off women workers, this chapter adopts a theoretical framework based on the ideas of Bakhtin, Foucault and critical discourse analysts.

1.1 Bakhtin’s genre theory

Bakhtin studies the linguistic dimensions of genres in terms of their ideologically mediated connections with social groups and “spheres of human activity” in a historical perspective (Bakhtin, 1986: 65). In Bakhtin’s account, genres are not absolutely static, stylistically homogeneous or non-overlapping units, but are constituted by “certain relatively stable thematic, compositional and stylistic types of utterances”. According to Bakhtin, research into utterances should “meet the fundamental logical requirement of classification: a unified basis” (ibid: 64). He considers genre as a tool for classifying texts and grasping their textual structures by looking for a “unified” set of generic features in each case. Bakhtin argues that everyday speeches are patterned into “speech genres”, which are associated with particular kinds of contextual features and social purposes. Utterances and speech genres are “the drive belts from the history of society to the history of language” (ibid: 65). For Bakhtin, language use is

intrinsically evaluative, and the language which has been developed within these contexts will encode particular perspectives and judgements” (cited in Maybin, 2001: 66).

Bakhtin’s insights into the ideology-mediated, evaluative and socially-oriented nature of language use is highly relevant for research into political discourse, including the discourse of government documentation of the type this paper is concerned with.

1.2 Foucault’s constructionist approach

Foucault’s work is well known for its constructionist approach to discourse, understood as a system of representation. Foucault is concerned with the practices that produce “meaningful” statements in particular historical and institutional contexts and with the rules that regulate discourse in such general contexts (cf. Hall, 2001: 73-75). The concept of discourse is about language and practice, and influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others. Meanings and meaningful practices are constructed within discourse.

The concept of discourse is not about whether things exist, but about where meanings come from. This view of discourse is put forward in his article “The Order of Discourse” (Foucault, 1984). Discourse requires particular conditions of application, and it circulates in a complex system of restriction. Discourse is the power that is to be seized (ibid: 110), and discourses themselves exercise their own control (ibid: 114). Discourse should be conceived as a violence, which we do to things, or as a practice that we impose on them, and it is in this practice that the events of discourse find the principle of their regularity (ibid: 127). However, Foucault neglects the influence of the economic and structural factors in the operation of power and knowledge (Hall, 2001: 78-79).

The core of the constructionist theory of meanings and representations is that physical things and actions only take on meanings and become objects of knowledge within discourse. Therefore, topics, such as “being laid off”, “unemployment” and “reemployment”, only exist meaningfully within relevant discourse. So the investigation of such discourse should include the following elements:

- * Statements about “being laid off”, “unemployment” and “reemployment”, which give us a kind of knowledge about these concepts;
- * The rules which prescribe certain ways of dealing with these topics at a particular historical moment;
- * How knowledge about this domain acquires authority, a sense of embodying the “truth” about it, constituting the “truth of the matter”, at a historical moment;
- * The practices within institutions for dealing with the subjects---the reemployment of laid-off women workers---whose conduct is regulated and organized according to those ideas;

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- * Acknowledgement that a different discourse will be produced at a later historical moment, which, with the power and authority, will regulate social practices in new ways.

1.3 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

There are different approaches in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), among which van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Approach, Fairclough's Dialectical-Relational Approach and Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach are very influential. Although they adopt various analytical methods, they have some general principles in common. They study the relationship among discourse, society and power, and interpret discourses from a critical perspective. Their common motivations are to reveal the inequalities and injustice in society. They are concerned with social actions, social reality and radical changes that are taking place in contemporary social life. In general, CDA is characterized by two distinctive kinds of relationship among the analyst, language and society: "The critical approach is distinctive in its view of (a) the relationship between language and society, and (b) the relationship between analysis and the practice analysed" (Wodak, 1997: 173).

In the critical discourse tradition, it is social problems that are candidate topics of study, as noted by Sarangi (2002: 329). It is also generally argued by CDA scholars that analysis need to go beyond mere description and explanation of social practices and their discursive manifestations. Critical discourse analysts offer interpretative readings of newspapers, official documents, etc. on such topics as inequality in employment and political strategies. They study social interactions while concentrating on their linguistic elements, and try to expose the hidden determinants in the system of social relationships and the hidden effects upon that system. "Both language and social relations bear the marks of each other", therefore it is necessary to study "how social relations are worked linguistically through the selection of vocabularies, genres, accents, lexical styles, and so on" (Wetherell et al., 2001: 284).

Among the approaches of CDA, my study of identity is more closely related to Fairclough's approach. In a critical perspective, discourse analysts should be concerned with social relations within a social system, and integrate discourse analysis with social analysis of socio-cultural reproduction, change and human agency (cf. Fairclough, 1995: 2, 18).

Fairclough (1992: 64) explores the constructive effects of discourse. Discourse contributes to the construction of the identities of social subjects, the social relationships among people, and the systems of knowledge and belief. He points out that "the ways in which societies categorize and build identities for their members is a fundamental aspect of how they work, how power relations are imposed and exercised, and how societies are reproduced and changed" (ibid: 168).

In sum, Bakhtin's genre theory, Foucault's constructionist approach and CDA provide a theoretical basis for the analysis of the Chinese government's documents on laid-off women workers' identity. Lemke's genre theory is adopted in the data analysis, because he provides very effective analytic methods of genre, which will be introduced in the following section.

2. METHODOLOGY

Although Foucault does not think of discourse primarily in terms of language, we adopt his general approach to the relationship among discourse, knowledge and power, complementing it with Bakhtin's genre theory, which mediates between language use and social and political practice. This view seems to correspond to more recent theorists: "Discourses are defined as thematically connected and problem-related semiotic (for example oral or written) occurrences that relate to specific semiotic types, which serve particular political functions" (Wodak and Krzyzanowski, 2008: 99).

In order to operationalize the data analysis, we have drawn on Lemke's approach to genres (1995, 1998a, 1998b, 1999) and complemented it with a general "critical" framework derived from works in Critical Discourse Analysis.

2.1 Lemke's genre theory

The data analysis draws on methods developed by Lemke (1995, 1998a, 1998b, 1999), which are organized around the concepts of presentational, orientational and organizational meaning. Presentational meaning refers to a specific community's "explicit descriptions of participants, processes, relations and circumstances standing in particular semantic relations to one another" (Lemke, 1995: 41-42). For example, we might take laid-off women workers as a specific community. The Chinese government explicitly describes their identity as social participants, the processes of reemployment, the social relations among the laid-off women workers, their former work units, the government and the whole society, and the social circumstances of reform and globalization.

Oriental meaning refers to the evaluation of the world by the members of a discourse community, their relations with other discourse communities and their attitudes to the presentational elements of their own meaning-making systems (ibid: 41-42). For example, orientational meaning in this paper refers to the evaluation of Chinese society and the world by the laid-off women workers, who might be taken as a discourse community, their relations with other social groups (or discourse communities) and their attitudes to their own social identity.

Organizational meaning concerns the "relations between elements of the discourse itself", or the cohesive devices to achieve the coherence of a text. The presentational, orientational and organizational aspects of meaning are interdependent and should be dealt with linked in analysis (ibid: 41-42).

An organizational perspective reveals that the coherence of texts derives from complexes of “intertextual thematic formations” (ITFs)---“thematic patterns” that “recur from text to text in slightly different wordings, but recognizably the same, and can be mapped onto a generic semantic pattern that is the same for all” texts about a particular theme (ibid: 42). The aim of organizational analysis is to understand the ways in which a discourse community draws upon intertextual thematic formations to provide coherence for the meanings they make, that is, the community’s “canons of intertextuality, its own principles and customs regarding which texts are most relevant to the interpretation of any one text” (ibid: 41). Within certain historical and cultural contexts, those canons become evident, and “large, more complex patterns” appear (ibid: 40).

For example, re-employment discourses share similar thematic patterns and text formations. They are about the same theme of re-employment, but slightly different in wordings. The Chinese government provides coherence for their re-employment policies, so the interpretation of any one re-employment discourse is based on the understanding of the principle of “being self-reliant and independent”. In the transformational period of China from a planned economy to a socialist market economy, the laid-off women workers are encouraged by the government to become re-employed under the guidance of the reemployment policies.

Intra-organizational variations are most readily explained in terms of “rhetorical formations”, which are semantic structures of the kind identified by Mann and Thompson (1983) as “relational propositions”. They usually include two-part structures, such as cause-consequence, problem-solution, benefit-cost (or cost-benefit) and general-particular.

In general, rhetorical formations mediate between generic structure and lexico-grammatical structure. Lexico-grammatical resources enable language-users to make semantic distinctions, while rhetorical formations can be seen to link organizational meaning with orientational meaning, as well as with institutionally-specific genres (Lemke, 1999).

In the context of reemployment discourse, in order to solve the unemployment problems, policy institutions wield abstractions that break apart or force together different social domains. For example, terms, such as “reform” and “globalization”, are a kind of abstraction used by policy-makers as thematic condensations. In addition, there are also evaluative condensations. In virtue of the coherence provided by organizational meaning, readers expand thematic condensations as well as the evaluative or orientational dimension. Presentational meaning and orientational meaning are linked together by thematic condensation, while rhetorical formations link orientational meaning with organizational meaning. Rhetorical formations link or de-link the institutions within which particular genres are produced, reproduced and transformed (Lemke, 1995: 31-32). There are dynamic links between genres and their social contexts of production (Lemke, 1999). Therefore discourses of specific genres should be analyzed in their social contexts.

2.2 Data collection

The data consist of the Chinese government's definitions of laid-off staff and workers and the re-employment policies which aim to encourage the laid-off persons to be self-reliant and become re-employed so as to guarantee social stability and development.

The data were downloaded from the website of Xinhua News Bulletin, from the 1990s to April, 2005. For the sake of space, only 8 examples, which consist of definitions of various aspects of reemployment, are chosen for detailed analysis in this paper. These examples consist of the Chinese government's definitions of the laid-offs (Examples 1, 2 and 3), the service (tertiary) industry (Example 4) and lifelong training (Examples 5 and 6), one of the policy discourses which guide the reform inside the state-owned enterprises (Example 7) and one of the reemployment discourses (Example 8). Examples 1 and 2 are quoted from the relevant documents in Chinese. Since there is no official English version, they are translated by the author of this paper. Example 3 is directly quoted from "China's Social Security and Its Policies" (CSSP, 2004), and Examples 4 to 8 are directly quoted from "China's Employment Situation and Policies" (CESP, 2004). The websites where the translations of these documents could be downloaded are listed in the References.

The aim of this paper is to reveal how the Chinese government makes a theoretical description of laid-off women workers' identity. We will analyze samples of textual data reflecting the Chinese government's policy discourse on laid-off women workers. The aim is to clarify what ideas are conveyed to laid-off women workers that might influence their ideology and activities, what themes, generic features and textual structures are shared by these texts, and what are the social purposes of the Chinese government in announcing the re-employment policies.

In the data analysis we shall apply Lemke's genre theory, especially his notion of "rhetorical formations", which include two-part structures, such as cause-consequence, problem-solution, benefit-cost (or cost-benefit) and general-particular. At this level, we are concerned with the meanings that are not significantly altered in the translation process. In particular, the focus is on the definitions that contribute to their identity construction.

3. THE CHINESE GOVERNMENT'S THEORETICAL DESCRIPTION OF LAID-OFF WOMEN WORKERS' IDENTITY

The data analysis consists of the analysis of the government's definitions of the laid-off staff and workers, the service (tertiary) industry and the lifelong training, and the analysis of policy discourses which guide the reform inside the state-owned enterprises and reemployment discourse. The aim is to render explicit what the government encourages the laid-off women workers to do, how their identity is constructed in the government policies, and how the laid-off women workers should face the reality of the "socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics".

3.1 Defining the laid-off staff and workers

In the 1990s, with the establishment of a Chinese socialist market-oriented economic system, with the deepening of reform and the large-scale structural adjustment of the state-owned enterprises, large numbers of staff and workers had to leave their original working positions. These people constitute the social category of “laid-off staff and workers”. As we have noted, the defining of “laid-off staff and workers” is a linguistic meaning-making process. In “A Report on the Statistic Investigation of the Unemployed and the Laid-off Staff and Workers” issued by the Ministry of Labor and Social Security and the National Bureau of Statistics on December 31, 1997, the category of “laid-off staff and workers” was defined as follows:

(1) Laid-off staff and workers refer to those who, due to the troubles in the production and management of the enterprises, have left their working posts, and no longer have any other jobs there, but still maintain some labor relations with their original places of work. Laid-off staff and persons include those who leave their posts to rest, have a long vacation and leave their posts to wait for work, but do not include those who keep their posts without payment, stop working seasonally, receive training within their enterprises or those come from bankrupt enterprises. (The Ministry of Labor and Social Security (1997) No. 373)

In this extract, the rhetorical formations (in Lemke’s sense outlined above) link organizational and orientational meanings by chaining problem-solution and cause-consequence rhetorical formations. “Troubles in the production and management of the enterprises” is taken as the problem and the cause, while “leaving their working posts” is the solution and the consequence. The undesirable situations of the production and management of the enterprises (the cause) inevitably lead to the problem of laid-off persons (the consequence). This chaining supplies organizational coherence for the proposed solution, which is orientationally a consequence.

In the latter part of the above definition, the general-particular rhetorical formation is adopted. “Laid-off staff and persons” is a general category, while the particular categories consist of “those who leave their post to rest, have a long holiday and leave their posts to wait for work”, not including “those who keep their posts without payment, stop working seasonally, receive training within their enterprises or those who come from bankrupt enterprises”.

The government gives the theoretical description of those who belong to the category of “laid-off staff and workers” and those who do not, but does not explain the reasons for this classification here. Maybe in this way, some people are included in the category of “laid-off staff and workers”, while others are excluded. This might reduce the burden of the government and the society, because those who are excluded have to support themselves without being able to enjoy the favorable policies for laid-off staff and workers.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Security and the National Bureau of Statistics redefined “the laid-off persons” in March, 1998 as follows:

- (2) The laid-off persons refer to those who have not terminated the labor relations with their original places of work, but have no post there, and have not been reemployed in society because of the troubles in the production and management of the enterprises.

A comparison between these two definitions indicates that the most important disparity concerns the traits of the laid-off staff and (women) workers as an emergent social group in the course of China’s reform. In other words, according to the latter definition, “reemployment” becomes the demarcation line to exclude those who have found new jobs from the category of laid-off persons.

The change was echoed by the sharply declining statistics of the laid-off workers at different periods of time. According to the “Report on Statistic Investigation of the Unemployed and the Laid-off Staff and Workers” issued by the Ministry of Labor and Social Security and the National Bureau of Statistics on December 31, 1997, there were 11.5 million laid-off persons all over the country by the end of September that year, and there would be about 12 million laid-off persons by the end of that year. However, according to the redefinition of lay-offs, there were only 5.154 million laid-off persons by the end of 2001 (China National Economy Research Institute, 2002: 28).

The policy makers were thus able to redefine the category of laid-off staff and workers. As Graham and Paulsen put it in another context:

- The meaning of unemployment [was redefined] so that it would ideally no longer exist as a concept. If this last goal is achieved, the problem of unemployment is ideally cured, thus realizing the technocratic function expected of policy makers---to solve extensive social problems, in this case by defining them out of existence. (Graham and Paulsen, 2002: 463)

Similarly, in the following quotation, the policy makers claim that there have been no more new laid-off persons since 2001, so the social category of laid-off persons would be gradually defined out of existence. The persons who were laid off before 2001 would become reemployed or unemployed. The social problem of laid-off persons would be replaced by that of unemployment or be solved to some extent due to their re-employment.

- (3) With the steady improvement of the unemployment insurance system and the increase of the fund accumulations, since 2001, the basic livelihood guarantee system for laid-offs from state-owned enterprises has been integrated with the unemployment insurance program. State-owned enterprises now have ceased to establish any new re-employment service centers, and, in principle, people newly laid off by enterprises have also ceased to register at such centers. Instead, enterprises just terminate their labor

contracts according to law, and the laid-off persons will then be entitled to unemployment insurance benefits according to relevant regulations. (CSSP, 2004)

In the above example, there is such a cause-consequence rhetorical formation: the cause is “the steady improvement of the unemployment insurance system and the increase of the fund accumulations”, and a natural consequence is that enterprises could “terminate their labor contracts according to law”, so they would become the unemployed and “be entitled to unemployment insurance benefits according to relevant regulations”. This theoretical description is different from the definitions given by the Ministry of Labor and Social Security and the National Bureau of Statistics in 1997 and 1998, in which the laid-off staff and workers still maintain some labor relations with their original places of work. It is clearly shown that the category of “the laid-off staff and workers” is replaced legally by that of “the unemployed” according to the government’s theoretical description.

Most significantly, the Ministry of Labor and Social Security announced on March 10, 2005 that by the end of 2005, the laid-off workers who had not been reemployed would be classified into the unemployed and be entitled to the minimum living guarantee, and that all Reemployment Service Centers would be closed. This means that the social category of “laid-off staff and workers” would no longer exist. The social problem of “laid-off staff and workers” would thus appear to be solved, although in reality the objective unemployment problem remained to be addressed.

From the above discussion, a clear pattern emerges of the close association of “laid-off discourse” with the dominant and broader “reform” agenda. These discourses are adaptive responses by government policy-makers to the imperatives of the transformation of the state-owned enterprises, modernization and globalization. The following of this paper is on the functional aspects of laid-off discourse currently being deployed to redefine the service (tertiary) industry, lifelong training, reform within state-owned enterprises and reemployment.

3.2 Defining the service (tertiary) industry

The laid-off women workers are mainly encouraged to develop in the service (tertiary) industry, especially in services to communities, because most of them are over 40 years old and without practical skills. For example,

(4) Expanding the capacity of employment by developing tertiary industry. The Chinese Government takes persistently [sic] the development of the service industry as a major orientation for the expansion of employment and encourages the development of community services, catering, commercial and trade circulation, tourism, etc., for the purpose of creating more job opportunities in these industries. In 2002, the Chinese Government enacted the policy to support the increase of job opportunities by vigorously developing tertiary industry, broadening employment avenues in the traditional service

sector and striving to develop tourism, with the emphasis on creating posts for the public good in neighborhoods and communities and assisting the reemployment or employment of laid-off and unemployed persons and those who have difficulties finding jobs. (CESP, 2004)

The above example presents a complex of problem-solution rhetorical formation, that is, the problem of reemployment and the solution of expanding employment in the service industry. Over-lexicalization is adopted here, that is, slightly different expressions are used to emphasize a topic. For example, the expressions such as “the expansion of employment”, “the increase of job opportunities”, “creating more job opportunities”, “broadening employment avenues” and “creating posts” are used to show that the government tries every means to help the laid-off workers get reemployed.

For another example, “tertiary industry”, “the service industry”, “community services” and “the traditional service sector”, are used to emphasize that one of the government’s practical solutions to the reemployment problem is to develop the service industry in order to create more job opportunities. Such a solution presupposes that many laid-off women workers have to take the repetitive physical jobs in the service industry, because they are not skilled enough for more complex jobs. It could be inferred that if they wanted to get more decent jobs, they had to receive further training. This is why life-long training is encouraged.

3.3 Defining lifelong training

Since the liberation in 1949, the basic principles of “the equality between men and women”, “equal pay for equal work” and “the protection of women’s rights and interests” have been established in national laws and regulations, and the social status of women has increased dramatically. However, in the early 1980s, the revolutionary slogan “women can hold up half the sky” was replaced to some extent by the view that “women should go back home to be good wives and mothers”. However, the All-China Women’s Federation encourages women to receive lifelong training and to have their own careers.

One basic solution to the reemployment of laid-off women workers is to encourage them to receive lifelong training so as to acquire practical skills and be qualified for skilled jobs. In “China’s Employment Situation and Policies” (2004), “lifelong training” is defined like this:

(5) It is necessary to fully utilize various education resources, strengthen the improvement of human resources quality, direct major efforts to the promotion of quality-oriented education, stress cultivation of practical abilities, and make efforts in improving education quality so as to train millions of high-caliber workers, thousands of special talents and a large number of outstanding innovative talents for the socialist modernization drive. In line with market demand and the demand for enhancing laborers’ quality, it is necessary to strengthen elementary education, actively develop higher

education, vigorously promote vocational education, adult education and other forms of continuing education so as to gradually establish a socialized life-long training and education system. (CESP, 2004)

Here the solution to the problem of training “high-caliber workers”, “special talents” and “outstanding innovative talents” is through “quality-oriented education”, “vocational training”, “elementary education”, “higher education”, “adult education”, “other forms of continuing education” and “socialized life-long training”. The solution to the problem of being laid off or unemployment is projected as an exhortation for all of human experience to be brought into a formally codified system of “life-long training”.

As Sunderland (2006:128) puts it, “being good is not a natural attribute, but one constructed through the interplay of language and social expectation”. In the above example, it is clear that the government encourages laid-off women workers to meet the social expectations by receiving life-long training. A more specific purpose of life-long training is to train and create a pool of skilled labor. Consequently, a new genre of skilled-labor discourse came into being. For another example,

(6) In line with the higher and higher requirements of economic development and sci-tech progress for laborers’ knowledge level and work skills, it is necessary to further readjust the structure of vocational education, increase input, construct a modern vocational education system, and vigorously strengthen training of skilled workers, especially high-level skilled workers and technicians. ... It is necessary to introduce in an all-round way the work preparation system and employment accession system, and achieve the dual goal of improving young laborers’ ability for employment and regulating the supply of labor force. (CESP, 2004)

“Skilled workers” is a general category, which sets particulars (“high-level skilled workers and technicians”) in a subordinate position. Although the category of “low-level skilled workers” is not mentioned, it is implied that it is another particular category. So a general-particular rhetorical formation is established.

“Economic development and sci-tech progress” are projected as the active entity in this complex of cause-consequence and cost-benefit rhetorical formations, and they are taken as the cause of increased demand for high-level skilled workers. This implies that there is reduced demand for low-level skilled workers, which is one reason for the problem of laid-off women workers. The solution is that “low-level skilled workers” should receive training so as to improve their capability for employment. The demand for high-level skilled workers is presented as a consequence of economic development and progress in science and technology, and it is a benefit to high-level skilled workers and a cost to low-level skilled workers.

In this example, there are different kinds of rhetorical formations: general-particular, cause-consequence, cost-benefit and problem-solution. This reveals that the laid-off or the unemployed might affect the whole society via welfare cost, and implies that the government and the whole society should help them get reemployed.

3.4 Policy discourse guiding the reform inside state-owned enterprises

Facing new technologies, free trade and a global knowledge-based economy, the Chinese government realized that the state-owned enterprises should be reformed. As a result, a large number of staff and workers had to be laid off. In order to guarantee social stability, the government put forward policies to guide the reform inside state-owned enterprises and provide explanations and solutions to the problem of the reemployment of the laid-off. So the problem-solution rhetorical formation, as a macro-rhetorical formation, is reinforced by other kinds of rhetorical formations. For example,

(7) As the Chinese Government pushes ahead with the reform of the economic system and the readjustment of the economic structure, a number of women workers have been laid off. To support the reemployment of laid-off women, especially older women, governments at all levels have actively developed and expanded trades and fields suitable for women to work in, and have adopted more flexible forms of employment to provide them with job opportunities according to their needs. Government-run public job agencies provide laid-off and unemployed women with consultancy on policy matters, job vacancy information, vocational guidance and job referral services, and actively carry out vocational skill training for them. ...The government has established a maternity insurance scheme, with the premiums paid for by enterprises, instead of individual employees. This has created a favorable environment for women to participate equally in competition for employment. (CESP, 2004)

In the above example, presentationally, broad and abstract thematic condensations are attributed with agency in relation to other condensations (e.g. “the reform of the economic system and the readjustment of the economic structure”, “the reemployment of laid-off women”, “provide them with job opportunities”, “created a favorable environment”, etc.).

Orientationally, evaluations for the inevitability, necessity and desirability of certain elements (e.g. “support”, “actively carry out”, “suitable for”, “flexible forms of employment”, “their needs”, “a favorable environment”, “participate equally”, etc.) are propagated at varying levels of abstraction. The cause-consequence rhetorical formation shows the inevitability of this social issue.

The evaluations of the government’s performance are revealed in the choice of adjectives or adverbs with positive meanings, such as “suitable”, “flexible”, “favorable”, “actively” and

“equally”. This shows that the government is “of the people, by the people and for the people”, as Abraham Lincoln described what a government should be like.

Organizationally, there is an intertextual thematic formation, that is, the issue of the reemployment of laid-off women workers. The Chinese government, as the authoritative legislator, encourages laid-off women workers to get reemployed at some indefinite point in the future (e.g. “flexible forms of employment”, “participate in competition for employment”).

Understatement is applied to make the issue of re-employment sound less serious. In the above example, the expression of “a number of women workers have been laid off” is an understatement. In fact, it is not “a number of” but millions of women workers who were laid off.

3.5 Re-employment discourse

In 1994, the Ministry of Labor launched a pilot “Re-employment Project” in 30 cities, such as Shanghai, Shenyang, Qingdao, Chengdu and Hangzhou, and extended it all over the country in April, 1995. The Ministry of Labor planned to organize 8 million unemployed and surplus staff and workers to take part in the Re-employment Project from 1995 to 1999. The aim of the Re-employment Project is to maintain social stability, deepen the restructuring of the employment system, the social security system and the economic system, bring into play the initiative of the government, enterprises and laborers and make arrangements for the employment of laid-off staff and workers.

The calculation of the level of re-employment depends on the definition of re-employment given by the government. This calculation includes both full-time and part-time jobs. If only full-time jobs were included, the reemployment rate would be much lower. The government has been encouraging laid-off women workers to take flexible forms of jobs, such as part-time jobs, so as to increase the possibility of getting reemployed. This is usually considered as a positive development by the employers, while in fact the laid-off women workers usually have no choice but to take part-time jobs. There is some discrepancy between the statistics of the re-employment level and the expectations of laid-off women workers.

In government documents, “re-employment” is often terminologically and rhetorically preferred to “unemployment”. There are many texts concerning the re-employment of laid-off workers, which constitute a new genre of “re-employment discourse”. In this section, the data analyses go beyond the purely terminological level of defining re-employment, aiming to explore the features and structures of re-employment discourse.

In the foregrounded orientational dimension of re-employment discourse, rhetorical formations function to link organizational and orientational meanings by chaining benefit-cost, problem-solution, and cause-consequence rhetorical formations. In the cost-benefit rhetorical formation, costs are projected as social problems by drawing on the orientational undesirability

and unacceptability of the costs, and by activating a cause-consequence link: there are increased costs to employment systems, implying that being laid off inevitably leads to increased level of unemployment. This may be taken as an introduction of the macro-structure of the reemployment discourse.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Security made clear in June, 2003 that “the unemployed” refers to those who are legally eligible to work, who have working abilities, do not have work, or apply for work but haven’t been employed. According to this new criterion, the term “laid-off staff and workers” will be out of date, because such people are included within “the unemployed” and can enjoy the welfare provided by the government. For example, the Ministry of Labor and Social Security announced on October 28th, 2003 that there were no longer laid-off staff and workers in 7 provinces or cities, namely, Beijing, Tianjin, Liaoning, Shanghai, Zhejiang, Fujian and Guangdong, where the Re-employment Service Centers had been closed (Liu, 2003).

On March 10, 2005, the Ministry of Labor and Social Security announced that within that year, the laid-off staff and workers who could not get re-employed would be classified into the unemployed, and that the Re-employment Service Centers would be closed. This means that the social category of “laid-off staff and workers” would be defined out of existence by the end of 2005. Those who get re-employed would become “the re-employed”, while those who fail to be re-employed would become “the unemployed”. In this case, the unemployment rate is sure to increase. For example,

(8) It is necessary to increase the posts of employment in large numbers through developing the economy and imposing its structure.... It is necessary to create a better environment for workers to choose jobs on their own....It is necessary to control the unemployment rate and average unemployment cycle within limits the society is able to bear....It is necessary to give priority to the strategic goal of creating job opportunities and expanding employment. China’s general goal in solving the employment problem in the early years of the 21st century is: ...to control the unemployment rate within limits endurable to society....In the year 2020, ...the unemployment rate is expected to be controlled at a level endurable to society. (CESP, 2004)

In this example, a problem-solution rhetorical formation links the orientational meaning with the organizational meaning. It is clear that the problem of unemployment could not be completely solved with the government’s re-employment policies. The sentence pattern “it is necessary to ...” is repeated four times in this paragraph, presumably to emphasize the importance of the reemployment policies, that is, to create job opportunities and to encourage laid-off persons to find jobs by themselves.

Readers may note the vagueness of three similar phrases: “within limits the society is able to bear”, “within limits endurable to society” and “at a level endurable to society”. What are the

“limits” which are “endurable to society”? This is not mentioned clearly in this paragraph. However, according to China’s Employment Situation and Policies (CESP, 2004), “the registered unemployment rate in the urban areas is planned to be controlled at around 4.7 percent”. Does this mean that the unemployment rate of 4.7% is considered as “endurable to society” by the government?

However, there are various social groups whose powers of endurance of unemployment are different. For example, it is very difficult for laid-off women workers to endure higher unemployment rate, because that means it will be even more difficult for them to get re-employed. So the statement mentioned in the former paragraph, that is, “the registered unemployment rate in the urban areas is planned to be controlled at around 4.7 percent”, may be taken as a promise or warning speech act to different social groups.

In political discourse, the boundary between a promise and a warning is fragile, since the future action referred to in both acts may be desirable to some, but undesirable to others (Chilton and Shäffner, 1997: 221). It could be taken as a promise made by the government to control the unemployment rate in order to maintain social stability. However, it might also be taken as a warning that the unemployment rate might increase, so the laid-off workers have to be psychologically prepared.

Through close analyses of the data, certain salient features of re-employment discourse could be summarized as follows.

First, modal verbs, such as “will” in the following 2 sentences, “Continued efforts **will** be made to provide employment aid”; “The laid-off persons **will** then be entitled to unemployment insurance benefits according to relevant regulations” (CSSP, 2004), are used to show the government’s determination and authority in promoting the Re-employment Project.

Second, repetition is adopted as a rhetorical device to achieve communicative effects. For example, in the government documents, there are many (Chinese) sentences with the structure (when translated into English) “it is necessary... that” used in parallel structures. In addition, the government repeatedly emphasizes that it will control the unemployment rate “within limits endurable by society”, which shows that the government is concerned about the weal and woe of the people, and proceeds in all cases from the interests of the people.

Third, many commendatory adjectives and adverbs are employed as a means of positive evaluation of the government’s efforts to promote the Re-employment Project, such as, “energetically/actively/persistently/vigorously/continuously (develop)”, “favorable (environment)”, “efficient (measures)”, “continued (efforts)”, “great (efforts)” and “preferential (policies)”.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper contributes to the understanding of the policy-making process and the government's description of laid-off women workers' identity. The classification of social groups and the definitions of social categories are in fact theoretical descriptions by the government institutions for certain purposes. The government defined the social category of "laid-off staff and workers" into existence in 1997 and redefined it in 1998 for the purposes of reform, "opening up" and social stability. From 2001 to the end of 2005, this social category was gradually defined out of existence.

The issue of identity is central in this process. As Hall (1996: 4) points out, "identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being". In this paper, we have seen how the identity of "laid-off women workers" is transformed into that of "the reemployed" or "the unemployed". This is of course not a spontaneous change, as we have shown, but one brought about by governmental and administrative means. Indeed, this paper deals with the relationships between human agency and social structure, and the role of language in the production, maintenance and change of social relations.

Our analysis of the ways in which laid-off women workers are defined by the Chinese government can be said to be interpretative, since we analyze official documents on re-employment in the socio-cultural contexts in China, with the aim of revealing their determinants in the economic system in China, such as the transformation from a planned economy to a socialist market economy, the reform and opening-up policies and globalization. As a result, the relationships between the people and the government and those among different social groups are in constant change. Through the re-employment policies, the government encourages laid-off women workers to be self-reliant and get re-employed through their own initiatives, rather than relying on the government for help.

However, the government's theoretical description of laid-off women workers' identity is far from enough to reflect the multiplicity of their identity and the flexibility of their identity construction. Many social factors and interrelated discourses are involved, including the media-projection and narrative construction of their identity.

Given the background of reform and globalization, new social phenomena and relevant discourses are emerging one after another. It is thus necessary to analyze the relationship between discourse and social change. When we take part in the social practice of reform, we should be clear that discourse is also a social practice. Therefore, to a certain extent, the aim of discourse analysis is to enhance the analysis of social change.

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