

# Business Writing in Mainland China: A Look at the Development of Sales Genres

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## Abstract

This paper sets out to examine the development of Chinese sales genres in relation to the changing social context. An approach embracing both social context and communicative purposes (Swales, 1990) is proposed and used in this paper. Fundamental changes have taken place in Chinese business context since the economic opening-up in 1978. In response to these changes, sales letters have emerged to meet the communicative needs of business. An introduction is given to sales genres in two different periods of business communication: the delinking period (1949-78) and the relinking period (1978 to the present). In the first period, sales 'qingshi' (requests raised by subordinates), and sales 'pifu' (official approvals) were employed. The second period is characterized by the use of the sales letters to reflect the change towards the market economy. In addition, the use of the specific sales genres is largely determined by reader-writer relationships under different economic structures of the country. While an equal relationship is shown in sales letters in the second period, a hierarchical relationship is exhibited in the sales genres used in the first period.

**keywords:** social context, economic structure, communicative purposes, Chinese sale genres, sale letters, changing reader-writer relationship.

## Introduction

This paper sets out to examine the current trends of sales genres used in Chinese business communication. The focus is to look at how sales genres have evolved in relation to the changing social context since the beginning of the economic opening-up in 1978. Sales genres in this paper refer to various types of writing used to buy and sell products. Among them, sales letters are only one type, others include sales 'qingshi' (requests) and sales 'pifu' (official approvals). Very little study has been done to discuss the position of sales genres in either Chinese written discourse or business communication. One exception is Zhu (1996; 1997a; 1997b; 1997c, 1999) who investigates the writing of Chinese sales genres. All other literature on Chinese sales genres only relates to textbook materials, such as Gu (1995); Li, (1983). These textbooks mainly provide a 'recipe' (Freadman & Macdonald, 1992) style prescription about how to write business letters. The present research represents an initial step to explore sales genres from a historical perspective. The exploration is composed of the following three tasks. First, a combined approach is to be proposed to study the development of sales genres. Secondly, this paper will give an introduction to two different periods in Chinese business communication, and to the position of sales genres in Chinese written discourse. The relationship between the use of sales genres in each period and the nature of the economic structure will also be discussed. Finally, a sample letter of each genre will be discussed to show in what way sales genres have evolved. These letters are taken from the data of authentic letters collected from mainland China (see Zhu 1999). The purpose of this research is to answer questions such as: What are the current trends in Chinese business communication? How are the trends related to the changes in social context? What factors determine the type of sales genres used in each period? In what way do these sales genres reflect the changes in the social context?

## The approach

In order to study the current trends of Chinese business writing, this paper proposes a combined approach based on schema theory (Bartlett, 1932; Rumelhart, 1980) and Swales' (1990) Genre analysis in addition to a historical perspective.

Swales' (1990) approach emphasizes the study of the communicative purposes and genres. The important concepts of Swales' to be discussed are communicative purposes and moves. According to Swales (1990), genre is characterized as having a set of communicative purposes. These purposes and writing conventions shape the structure of the discourse and constrain the choice of linguistic forms. These purposes can be realized in moves, which are considered to be the smaller idea units under a text.

The important concept to be coordinated with this genre approach is schemata. According to schema theory (Bartlett, 1932; Rumelhart, 1980), a text does not have meaning by itself when it is presented to readers. They have to construct the meaning based on their previously acquired knowledge when reading or learning a text. These knowledge structures are called schemata (Bartlett, 1932; Rumelhart, 1980). The process of understanding a text is thus seen by the schematic theorists as an interactive process between the readers' background knowledge and the text. The understanding of a text does not only require linguistic or formal knowledge, but world knowledge (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983; Cook, 1994) as well.

However, the concept of schemata used in this paper will be further elaborated. In line with the schema theory, world schema is defined as genre-related social context which goes beyond the boundary of the text content. However, I attribute the feature of general knowledge to world schema, while Carrell and Eisterhold (1983), as well as others (Bartlett, 1932; Rumelhart, 1980), confine the definition to an individual's knowledge. The general knowledge structures in this paper refer to those shared by a discourse community in a certain social context.

If schema theory is integrated into Swales' genre approach, Genre can be treated as a dynamic process which develops with changes in the social context. I propose a relationship among social context, communicative purposes and world schemata as illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. The Proposed Model of Genre Study**

Figure 1 can, first of all, show how genre develops. Changes in social context will bring changes to communicative purposes. Out of a certain social context different communicative needs may arise. These needs are an important basis for changes of communicative purposes, and genre will involve as a consequence. The degree of change in communicative purposes will lead to changes of similar degree in the various lower levels, such as moves and linguistic forms. When fundamental changes take place in communicative purposes, the existing genres will be replaced by new genres. Appropriate world and formal schemata will be required to understand this genre development.

In the discussion to follow, the proposed approach will be used to study how the changes in social context may lead to the current use of the sales genres. A detailed discussion will also be given to each sales genre from this perspective.

## Changes in Economic Context and the Development of Sales Genres

### The Two Periods in Chinese Business Communication

The period under discussion covers more than fifty years (from 1949 to the present). Fundamental changes took place in 1978 when the open-door policy was first implemented. Since then, China has been developing towards a market economy. Together with this change in economic structure, there has been a fundamental change in business communication. Since the economic opening-up, sales letters have begun to play an increasingly important role in business.

Therefore 1978 can be set as a demarcation line, and the period under discussion can be divided into two: the pre-opening up period: 1949-78, and the opening-up period: 1978 to the present. This division happens to agree with the socialist de-linking and re-linking development strategy (Tian, 1996). The



The change of social context and reader-writer relationships has led to the change of communicative needs. In the economic reform, marketing and promotion have become the major purpose of sales genres. All the sales genres will be discussed in detail to indicate how they have evolved.

Textbook advice can be used as a reference in discussing the sales genres. However, textbooks tend to discuss forms of writing in a very general sense of business letters and would not look at sales genres as a particular type. Each of the sales genres will be defined as an individual genre and will be exemplified below. Only translations of these letters are provided and all of them are translated by the author with the original in the Appendix.

### Sales Genres Used in the First Period

#### Sales 'Qingshi' (Requests).

According to Li (1983:200), a 'qingshi' is an official document by means of which a subordinate makes a request to his/her superior for an approval. This definition can be used to help define sales 'qingshi'. In a business context, a sales 'qingshi' is a formal sales request raised by a subordinate to a superior to replenish stock. In the first period, the subordinate level could only sell what the superior had supplied them. If the subordinate organisation was in need of a certain product, they had to go through the request procedure to have the product supplied. The sales request was the first step in these procedures. Take the following excerpt as an example:

	Document of XX Provincial Bureau	
	Heading	Reply to XX Town Company's Request for an Increase of Coal Supply
	Salutation	Coal company of XX Town,
		We have received your request about increasing the coal supply for winter
		Official reply heating. After discussion, we have made the following approval.
Approval		Owing to an increased demand for coal supplies all over the province, we have to make an overall plan about how to supply
		towns of the province. Therefore an increase of only 800 tons of coal is approved for you. Detailed information about
	Closing	This is in response to your request.
	Signature and date	Signature: XX XXX, 1965

The major purpose of the above letter is to raise a request to a superior. This letter has five moves as indicated in the left-hand column, and the most important move is the request which relates to supply of coal, the main heating material in the past. The writer expresses the request indirectly by telling the writer about the urgent need. The salutation refers to the position of the reader as 'leading comrades'. The closing indicates the uncertain attitude of the subordinate about whether the request is appropriate, which is a typical subordinate's attitude in a 'qingshi' (request). Both the salutation and the closing indicate the appropriate degree of politeness towards a superior. The letter as a whole indicates that the subordinate does not have control of the planned stock supply, and has no choice but to wait for a reply from the superior. This letter also shows that sales 'qingshi' was an important genre since it was the initial step in obtaining supplies at that time.

#### Sales 'Pifu' (Official Approvals).

According to Li (1983:201), a 'pifu' is an official reply letter often used by a superior to a subordinate's 'qingshi'. In fact, a sales 'pifu' is closely related to a 'qingshi' and is used to respond to what has been applied for. This genre can be exemplified in the following letter, which is also the reply to the above sales request:

	Document of XX Provincial Bureau	
	Heading	Reply to XX Town Company's Request for an Increase of Coal Supply
	Salutation	Coal company of XX Town,
		We have received your request about increasing the coal supply for winter
		Official reply heating. After discussion, we have made the following approval.
Approval		Owing to an increased demand for coal supplies all over the province, we have to make an overall plan about how to supply the stock for all the
		towns of the province. Therefore an increase of only 800 tons of coal is approved for you. Detailed information about the time and place of its
		arrival will be provided in the near future. (We) hope you can solve the rest of the problem by yourself.
	Closing	This is in response to your request.
	Signature and date	Signature: XX XXX, 1965

The major purpose of the above letter is to express an official reply to a subordinate, which is clearly indicated in the move of the approval. It gives a certain degree of approval to the sales request. The official tone to a subordinate is shown by the phrase 'after discussion'. Here the English translation is only an approximation, and the Chinese original signals that the view concerned is an agreement among a group of decision-makers. The closing is the usual way a superior ends an official reply. The letter as a whole indicates that the superior organization has the control over stock supply. This letter also indicates that sales 'pifu' is an important genre in the second and also the final step in obtaining stock supplies. This letter also shows that the customers' needs might not be fully met, and the supply of goods, especially important energy resources such as coal, was controlled by the country.

Both sales 'qingshi' and 'pifu' were the important sales genres to conduct sales transactions. The hierarchical relationships expressed in these letters were quite reflective of the actual rigid economic system at that time as discussed earlier on in this paper.

### Sales Letters

Sales letters refer to letters used to promote products. This genre is mainly employed by the owner or manufacturer of the product. The main purpose of sales letters is to advertise the product and persuade the reader to buy it. As Chen (1991:260) puts it, "Sales letters have to arouse the buyer's interest, and stimulate his/her desire to buy the product". One can therefore see that the use of sales letters reflects the change towards a market economy. In addition, another purpose of establishing a relationship or 'guanxi' (contact) is worth noting. In Chinese culture, it is important to build a personal relationship with the reader or addressee. This is reflected in today's business practice. According to Hofstede (1980, 1991), group harmony and relationship are strongly valued in a collectivistic society. Similarly in China, using 'guanxi' to promote products has become vital for success in business. The concept of relationships building will shed light on understanding some of the cultural norms in sales letters. Characterized by both marketing and relationship building, for the first time in Chinese business communication, the writers of sales letters have begun to compete in the market. This genre can be exemplified by the following letter:

	Salutation	Dear computer customers,
	Greeting	How are you?
Product offer		Do you want to buy an extraordinary, good quality and exquisite looking reserve UPS at the lowest possible price?
		Product details • It can run on direct current;
		• It has an RS232 communication joint, and matches all UPS control systems;



The main step is the request, which is expressed through the following linguistic forms:

... if you are interested, (please) you (H) can:

- Ring us directly;
- Or fax the response form to us;
- Or mail the response form to us.

The linguistic realization of the request is shown in the conditional clause. This request is polite, giving the reader two options by using the conditional clause. In the request, both the softener 'please' and the modal verb 'can' are used. Here the writer might prefer to combine these two forms as a strategy to make the request more polite. The request is respectful as it refers to the reader using the honorific form. The subordinate to main construction also serves to lighten the imposition of the request (Kirkpatrick, 1993).

The above analysis of the sales letter can be summed up as follows. First, this letter is different in style from sales requests and applies in that it is a 'pingxing' letter which reflects an equal reader-writer relationship. Secondly, this letter shows how sales letters reflect the changes towards the market economy. The communicative purposes can be seen as realized in this letter in a top-down model of moves, steps and linguistic forms. Each of these levels reflects the cognitive structuring of the text, and the communicative purposes are the central ideas to guide the development of the text. Thirdly, this letter also reflects an important concept of relationship building in Chinese business practice. Although the Chinese market is progressing towards a market economy, it is still deeply rooted in its own cultural values of harmony and relationship building. That is why greetings are preferred in sales letters (Zhu, 1997). Fourthly, this sales letter is linear in style: it begins with the offer of the product and proceeds to introduce the product and solicit a response. Finally, the letter appeals to both reason and emotion. For example, the detailed description of the product is related to reason, while the use of pressure tactics is related to emotion.

### Conclusion

The current use of sales genres is closely related to the economic and business structure of the country. Changes of economic structure have led to the popularity of sales letters. In addition, the development of sales genres discussed in this paper has revealed changing relationships which are once again determined by economic structures. Sales letters reflect an equal relationship which differs fundamentally from the former hierarchical sales genres. Not only does the writer choose this appropriate genre, but also has the responsibility to communicate effectively with the reader.

The study of these sales genres also indicates that sales genres are dynamic and are developing with the progress of society. However it is still difficult to forecast what will happen to the use of sales genres in China in the future. There is one thing certain though, which is that sales genres will continuously reflect the changes that take place in the economic structure and sales letters will be more and more widely used if the market economy turns out to be the sole economic structure in business communication.

The findings of this paper have the following implications for intercultural business communication. A sales genre is used to achieve certain communicative purposes, and to reflect a certain kind of relationship between the writer and the reader. It is therefore essential for business people to understand the dynamic nature of language in relation to the economic structure, and this can be a key factor to understanding how to communicate with Chinese business enterprises.

The study also has implications for international business correspondence education. It is not enough to follow the 'recipe'-style textbook advice in teaching or learning, as this style cannot very well reflect the links between the language forms and the social or economic structure of society. Educators or learners have to take account of the dynamic nature of language, the economic context and even the historical background of a certain culture so as to have a full grasp of the relevant genres.

To sum up, it has been found in this paper that the use of sales genres can reflect a change of economic structure. This finding can provide valuable clues to both business people conducting business in an intercultural context, and to those learning and teaching business communication. However, it is suggested that further study in business communication be undertaken in other places such as Taiwan and Hong Kong to find if similar changes are taking place there. If so, there would be further proof that sales genres are genres in evolution influenced by the social and economic structure.

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