

Chinese Rhetoric: A Bibliographic Essay

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Introduction

In any given book on rhetoric, there will likely be a mention of Aristotle and Plato in the first chapter – if not on the first page. These men, the time-tested, foundational pillars of Western thought, are often credited with giving birth to the study of rhetoric, and their ideas still influence the field today. We, as Westerners in general and rhetoricians in particular, have been following their thoughts and examples for over two thousand years. Their influence is so pervasive in the field of rhetoric that it often obscures the rhetorical ideas, theories, and practices of other cultures.

In our class on rhetorical invention we have read two texts that deal with rhetoric: Janice M. Lauer's *Invention in Rhetoric and Composition* and the Lauer and Janet M. Atwill edited collection *Perspectives on Rhetorical Invention*. Between the two books combined, there are only a handful of references to non-Western rhetorics and rhetorical theories; most non-Western ideas receive only a passing mention and are often grouped into the catch-all categories of “cross-cultural,” “multi-cultural,” or “inter-cultural” studies. Western ideas of rhetoric are privileged enough to exclude extensive discussion of cross-cultural rhetorics, and when we do examine the rhetorics of other cultures, we often do so through the lens of our own rhetoric, attempting to compare and contrast corollaries and forcing the other culture to measure up to our ideas. True, these books do not claim to be comprehensive in their scope or inclusiveness, but the fact still remains: Western rhetoric is not the only extant rhetoric. Earlier in the semester, one portion of a chapter in Lauer's book caught my attention:

In the East, a fifth-century Chinese scholar, Liu Xie wrote a treatise on rhetoric entitled *Wen Xin Diao Long* (“The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons”). HePing Zhao explained that one of the meanings of *wen* is writing in a generic sense, indicating that

writing is composed of patterns,...thereby establishing a “powerful analogy in which writing, a human creation, is linked to nature, the creation of some ‘primal’ force”

(73)...Zhao pointed out that there are interactions between content-oriented inventional acts and form-oriented inventional acts. (31)

The brevity of the entry left me wondering: How do the Chinese conceptualize rhetoric and how has rhetoric developed in China? The first portion of the question might be found in a single book or article, but the second part, how has Chinese rhetoric developed in the years between Liu Xie’s writing and the present, could fill volumes. I decided to limit my inquiry to an examination of the evolution of Chinese rhetoric from the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) to the present, in order to come up with an idea of what “rhetoric” means in China.

Chinese Rhetorical Scholarship in the West

Rhetoricians in the West have only recently begun to study the rhetorical traditions of China. Carolyn Matalene’s (1985) essay “Contrastive Rhetoric: An American Writing Teacher in China” helped to spark new inquiry into Chinese rhetoric. For her ethnographic study of Chinese writing, Matalene gathered much raw data while teaching in China, and then performed research on Chinese language, communication, and rhetoric when she returned to the US; she drew heavily on the work of Robert T. Oliver and Robert B. Kaplan, two scholars whose work on contrastive rhetoric laid the foundation for much subsequent work on Chinese rhetoric. However, Yameng Liu (1996) demonstrates that Matalene’s essay was marred by the research she conducted, because existing scholarship on Chinese rhetoric in the US was (and to a certain extent still is) incomplete and, even worse, draws broad conclusions from a small amount of source texts.

For example, Matalene claims that Chinese writing relies on repeated assertions rather than logical proofs, follows patterns, imitates and borrows heavily (she uses the terms “idioms, clichés, and set phrases”), discourages originality in favor of borrowing from canonical works, that the function of writing is to maintain social harmony, and that “nothing in China really changes” – a statement that should raise eyebrows when one considers the influence of society and culture on language and rhetoric (793, 800-01). Matalene’s description of Chinese writing is almost the exact opposite of writing in the West.

Andy Kirkpatrick (1995) agrees with established views of Chinese rhetoric put forth by sinologists, and makes some assertions about Chinese rhetoric that are similar to Matalene’s. Principally, he says that Chinese thinkers and writers rely on several types of reasoning. *Chain reasoning* is a type of inductive argument which either relates propositions or relates terms within propositions; it follows the sequence of “if p then q ” and rarely, if ever, makes an explicit statement of the final consequent. *Reasoning by analogy*, in which unfamiliar events are made clear by comparison with familiar events, and *reasoning by historical example* are also common forms of argument.

The dominant view in the West is that Chinese communication is inductive and indirect. However, as both Kirkpatrick and Liu demonstrate, Chinese is capable of producing deductive, direct arguments that posit a thesis or hypothesis first and then present evidence to back it up. LuMing Mao (2006) suggests that the Chinese language plays a role in the perceived indirectness of its communication patterns. While Western thought and language privilege logic and causal thinking, Chinese thought and language are highly correlational; things are defined by their relationship to other things and the associations, or “richly vague significances,” that are produced (65).

Kirkpatrick suggests that the choice between inductive and deductive, and the subsequent *preference* in Chinese to use indirect, inductive arguments, is based on the question of audience. China has long been a hierarchical society in which individuals are keenly aware of their status and the status of others; social harmony has been valued over destabilization of the status quo. There is a strong distinction between “up writing,” writing from a subordinate to a superior, and “down writing,” writing from a superior to a subordinate. Up writing is more common, and subordinates cannot afford to be direct in their language or to use deductive arguments that place conclusions and statements up front. Instead, says Kirkpatrick, Chinese writing uses a lot of indirectness and induction out of necessity; “criticism by indirection,” he says, “has indeed become an art” (290). Simply put, “the autocratic and hierarchical nature of Chinese society has influenced the language,” while “the forensic law-court origins of Greek rhetoric developed in the context of equals arguing a case” (290). In this case, it might be helpful to examine the social and cultural factors that contribute to indirectness in Chinese communication, rather than to say that Chinese indirectness is the opposite of Western directness.

Confucianism

Although officially outlawed by the Communist Party, the 2,500-year influence of Confucianism on Chinese culture cannot be denied (as evidenced by Kirkpatrick’s statement about up/down writing, as well as several other texts I examined). Confucianism was periodically adopted by various Chinese dynasties as a method of governance, was the foundation of the educational system and government entrance exam, and was practiced by ordinary citizens in their day-to-day lives. Confucianism stresses hierarchical relationships between people as a means of preserving social harmony. Citizens should strive to be moral,

should engage in self-reflection and self-criticism as a way of determining their morality, and should exercise piety towards elders, family, and persons of higher status.

The practice of *shu* – reciprocity, or putting oneself in the other’s place – is the means by which a person becomes a whole, humane individual. This can only be accomplished through one’s relationship with other individuals: “one has to be related to and constituted by some other individual or individuals” and “it is by way of aligning oneself with others...that one realizes humaneness” (Mao, 104-05). *Shu* is related to one of the definitions of the Greek *ethos* (ἔθος): a social, public self constructed on the basis of participation, one who “manifests the virtue most valued by the culture to and for which one speaks” (Mao, 118).

A central component of *shu* is *xin*, or “making good on what one says.” Speech, in Chinese, means “connecting to others with speech that is substantiated by action” (i.e., is not empty). Lu (2004) says that Confucius “recognized the power of language in maintaining social order and political control,” and Confucius believed that “words served as an impetus and catalyst for social transformation and behavior change” (31-2). Xiao-Ming Li’s (1996) ethnographic cross-cultural study of teacher’s perceptions of “good writing” in both China and America sheds light on how language is valued in China in the modern era. One of the Chinese instructors commented that, “Writing is for educating and molding people’s minds” (49). Another, a self-described Neo-Confucianist, said “I believe writing should be used to understand, improve, and perfect oneself” (16). Speech and language, rooted in the Confucian practices of *shu* and *xin*, are one of the key ways to maintain social order, improve oneself, and to relate to other individuals, while in the process becoming a humane person. But in order for language to work effectively in maintaining harmony and producing moral individuals, the culture must be moral as well, as language and culture are reflexive.

The Chinese Cultural Revolution

The Chinese Cultural Revolution (CCR) set out to abolish the “four olds” from Chinese culture (ideology, culture, customs, and habits) and to install the “four news” of Marxism/Maoism. But rather than build a completely new culture, the CCR used many things from traditional Chinese culture in its attempt to abolish the old ways. In her book Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Xing Lu (2004) makes the claim that the CCR “destroyed Chinese culture and communication values and practices,” and that the Communists did so by controlling and limiting language, and subsequently thought, during the CCR (5). At the same time, though, many of the media and rhetorical techniques that were used by the Communist party were merely appropriated from traditional Chinese culture; Maoism and Confucianism both stress ideological conformity and the moral integrity of the individual. Lu analyzes four forms of discourse used during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (CCR), political slogans, wall posters, revolutionary songs and model operas, and political rituals, and describes the roles that these communicative forms played in destroying typical Chinese values of social harmony and fully indoctrinating the nation in the idea of Marxist class struggle.

Slogans have been used by Communists in China since the mid 1900’s. Slogans are effective because they condense ideas and values, are easy to remember and recite, and often cause polarized thinking in people who use slogans. In addition to those slogans calling for the abolishment of the “four olds” and the establishment of the “four news,” many slogans eulogized Mao Zedong or used his quotations. Mao slogans are an example of an appropriation of traditional Chinese culture: “devotion to a great leader is deeply rooted in Chinese history and life,” and Chinese often believe their leaders are given the “mandate of heaven” to rule (65). Political slogans during the CCR “simplified theories related to social change, polarized reality

into good and evil, and radicalized one's understanding of the old and the new" (67). They also helped to create a "cult of Mao" based on mythmaking and traditional Chinese reverence for great leaders.

Dazibao, or "big character poster," were the most popular means of written communication during the Cultural Revolution. Any literate person with access to ink, brush, and paper could create a wall poster to spout party doctrine, make moral appeals (a common Confucian practice), deify Mao, or accuse others of being capitalist roaders or subversives. "Sloganeering and the rhetoric of agitation became the main features of wall posters...[which featured] antagonistic and polarizing language" (75). They also relied heavily on superlatives, aggressive language, profanity, formalized phrases, and war metaphors. Wall posters, however, were not new in China; in the fifth century BCE, Deng Xi, a thinker and lawyer, used bamboo slips to display his views on judicial issues and to challenge the Zhou dynasty. Many wall posters were begun with a quote from Mao as a sort of deductive proof, or syllogism, for the remainder of the poster; such deductive argument, which was traditionally used when one wished to be up-front and direct, was a way to heighten the emotional and political content of the posters.

Music and art have been used in political rituals to "elicit proper conduct from...imperial subjects" for thousands of years in China; each emperor had his own music bureau (98). Mao carried on this tradition, and melded his ideas about art with Lenin's, stating, "There is in fact no such thing as...art that stands above classes or art that is detached from...politics" (99). Revolutionary songs were based on classic folk melodies, easy to remember, and ubiquitous. Most revolutionary songs eulogized Mao or were written using Mao's quotations or poems. Opera gained widespread popularity in China in the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), but during the

CCR, all operas were outlawed save for those “model operas” written by Mao’s wife Jiang Qing. These model operas featured stereotypical characters; hateful, inflammatory, and revolutionary dialogue; and a lack of emotion.

In her discussion of political rituals Lu draws on W. Lance Bennet, claiming that “public perceptions of reality are shaped through the dramatic enactment of myths rather than through rational engagement” (126). The most dramatic political ritual during the CCR was the deification of Mao; the day typically began and ended by wishing well the portrait of Mao in one’s home or workplace, Mao badges were mass produced and worn, a “loyalty dance” existed at one point, and frequent mass gatherings were held in Tiananmen Square to honor Mao’s personal appearance. Another form of destructive political ritual was self-criticism. In order to be true revolutionaries, said Mao, a person must fight selfishness and disloyal thoughts. Self-criticism is another appropriation from Chinese culture; the practice is rooted in Confucius’ ideas of self-contemplation and self-criticism.

Conclusion

As Li (1996) points out in the beginning of her book, China “has a literary history of more than three thousand years, developed most of the time independently of Western influence. Ever since the Confucian era, literacy has always been highly valued in China” (3). As the concept of *shu* demonstrates, individuality in the Western sense does not exist in China; rather, an individual is defined in terms of how he or she relates to and interacts with other individuals. Speech, writing, and language, which together form *xin*, a key component of *shu*, are the ways in which individuals negotiate these relationships with others. The topic-comment structure of Chinese relies on the speaker and audience to *agree on* and therefore create meaning in communication (Mao, 2006).

Language in traditional Chinese culture was a way to maintain social harmony, and language had to pay special attention to both the needs and, more importantly, to the status of the audience. The Chinese preference for indirectness fills the need to negotiate the status of different audiences. During the CCR, however, where status had been reduced to revolutionary and counter-revolutionary, communication was often forceful and direct, which polarized society and maintained division among peers, friends, and even family members. Lu argues that the rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution was one-sided and infused with the inflammatory rhetoric of the Communist Party, limiting the linguistic diversity available to the population (many of whom were illiterate peasants); in short, language became a tool of government oppression.

In the intervening years since the CCR, though, China has been exposed to an ever-increasing level of Western culture, ideas, and influence; the quality of life has been steadily improving; and education and literacy have both increased. The political climate, though, is still one of oppression, at least on a certain level. If and when China begins to develop a democracy, it will be interesting to see how traditional rhetorical considerations of collective identity, status of audience, and indirectness play out in the political discourse, or how much Western rhetoric democracy brings with it.

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