

MASTERS OF DISGUISE?
CONCEPTIONS AND MISCONCEPTIONS OF “RHETORIC” IN CHINESE ANTIQUITY
UZH, 4th -6th September 2013
(conference proposal: summary)

Background and objectives

The Warring States period (475–221 B.C.) is often considered as the epoch of the maximum flourishing of classical Chinese philosophical argumentation and as the golden age of Chinese “rhetoric”. The precarious situation of political fragmentation and the increasing supremacy of feudal lords who usurped the title of kings, effectively divesting the legitimate Zhou dynasty of its former political and cultural predominance, had a strong impact on the development of the phenomenon of patronage. The need to secure and legitimize their newly acquired political power induced local sovereigns to gather large crowds of retainers at their courts. This was partly a mere display of political preeminence, economic wealth and more sublime forms of “symbolic capital”. But the increasingly independent feudal lords also relied on the employment of skilled experts, who had mastered all sorts of technical, bureaucratic or military knowledge crucial to governmental practice. This situation eventually led to the emergence of a body of “wandering persuaders”, intellectuals who travelled from court to court, offering their service as political advisers and diplomats, and constantly in search of princes willing to hire them in order to realize their political agendas. This thriving political activity finds its expression in a rich tradition of pre- and early imperial texts, which reflect how rhetoric became a tool, even a weapon, in political and polemical debates in early China.

Because of their cunning intelligence and shrewdness many skilled debaters were harshly criticized by later tradition as “hair-splitters”, and in some cases stigmatized for their apparent lack of overarching ethical goals. They were considered as individuals characterized by a devious and deceitful nature, equipped with sharp tongues, who took undue pleasure in subverting “reality”, only to gain an ephemeral victory in outtalking one’s opponent. Many ended up dismissed as mere court entertainers, since a “true scholar” would never indulge in “thorny speeches”. Upon closer analysis, however, this standard view turns out to be a later (mis)conception, since even those received texts associated with the teaching of masters considered epitomes of “virtue” make widespread use of the very same argumentative techniques, tropes and rhetorical devices which the “sophists” were customarily accused of employing.

So far most studies on rhetoric, argumentation and persuasion in China have been characterized by a piecemeal, sometimes downright romanticizing approach, rather than by a sober and structured analysis of the available data. Textual evidence shows that classical Chinese works are not improvised or extemporaneous sketches, but rather premeditated and adroitly articulated conceptual constructions, mostly abiding by a strict, recoverable logic and a high degree of internal coherence. From this perspective, the Western experience of the study of Greek and Roman rhetoric is precious, since it helps in delineating suitable methodologies to be adopted in dealing with classical Chinese texts, without, of course, limiting scholarly inquiry into practices of argumentation and persuasion in China to such classical “occidental” modes.

Indeed, it will be necessary first to determine whether and in which terms we can speak of a “rhetorical” tradition in China. In the light of shared operational categories and hopefully contouring a common referential core, it would seem that Chinese and Western rhetoric could be preliminarily analyzed under the three key aspects of *composition*, *transmission*, and *performance*, i.e. focusing on the active role of the persuader and the performative nature of his rhetorical deliveries. Particular attention should be given to contemporary and later conceptions and misconceptions of rhetoric in various Chinese and Western (Greek, Roman, Medieval) “schools” or “traditions”. Individual contributions will address one of the following conceptual domains, according to the field of expertise of the speaker, and focus on no more than two of the proposed core issues:

a. From Rhetoric to Sophistry

- How does the gradual transition from orality to literacy influence and alter the relationship between the written and the spoken word in argumentation?
- What do we learn from prejudices against rhetoric and the negative connotation of sophistry? To what extent is the “deceptive power” of the spoken word a later misconception or misreading of former modes of expression?

b. Taking the Stage: Rhetoric as Performance

- -The polemical aspect of rhetoric: rhetoric as a “battle of words”, dialectical skirmishes and diplomatic craft

- -The written text as living word: functions and modes of the dialogue in rhetorical literature
- -The role of the draft between *aide-mémoire*, didactic treatise and as a basis for later editions

c. Rhetorical devices

- How did persuaders build their arguments? Structure and “structural” techniques (parallelism, ring composition, formulaic language, prosody etc.) as means of rhetorical effectiveness
- Is it possible to identify a specific technical language of rhetoric?
- The historical anecdote, “handcraft” and “natural” metaphors as a shared *repertoire* drawing on popular lore

Several conference panels and workshops on rhetoric and artistic prose in Early China have been organized over the past years at Halle, Freiburg, Oxford and Jerusalem, proving the current vivid interest in this topic shared by sinologists all over the world. Treasuring the results achieved through these previous experiences, the workshop configures itself as their prospective continuation. It will bring together a wide and varied group of prominent scholars in the field, in order to enable a lively interdisciplinary discussion on rhetoric in Chinese and in western “antiquities”, welcoming but not necessarily limited to philologically informed perspectives from the fields of history, philosophy, literary studies, and linguistics. Aiming at a fruitful international exchange against a comparative perspective, the overall goal of this conference will be to shed new light on the figure of the persuader and of the argumentative means at his disposal in Early China.

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