# Rhetorical Clash between Chinese and Westerners

Gu Jiazu, Nanjing Normal University

Based on the relativity of rhetorical theories, the author argues that the standards of rhetoric in the West, which have a unitary development since their identification by Aristotle, are not universals. This conclusion is justified by exemplifying differences in rhetorical philosophy and practices as manifested in different rhetorical tradition between Chinese and Westerners. The author ventures that there are as many rhetorical similarities as there are differences. These rhetorical similarities are chiefly reflected in written forms rather than oral forms.

## Introduction to the Relativity of Rhetorical Theories

According to the relativity of rhetorical theories, the standards of rhetoric in the West, which have a unitary development since their identification by Aristotle, are not universals. They are only expressions of Western culture, applicable within the context of Western cultural values (Matalene, 1985). In other words, rhetorical standards are more or less determined and affected by specific cultural traits. Rhetoric is intertwined with and inseparable from philosophy, religion, ethics, psychology, politics, and social relations. The heritage of Western rhetoric owes a great deal to the doctrines of Aristotle and Cicero. Similarly, the heritage of Chinese rhetoric is heavily indebted to the strands of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism which for centuries have run through the Chinese culture. Chinese rhetoric, due to its unique culture, is so different from Western concept that the outsiders of such a culture might feel puzzled when they read in the writings of Lao Tzu the following observation: "When the highest type of men hear the Tao, /They try to live in accordance with it, /When the mediocre type hear the Tao, /They seem to be aware and yet unaware of it. /When the lowest type hear the Tao, /They break into loud laughter" (Lin, 1943, 1-6).

Rhetorical difference, no matter how great it is, however, is only one side of the coin. Rhetoric, as a separate branch of learning, has many things in common in Chinese and Western traditions. What is more important, rhetorical tradition, like other aspects of cultural tradition, is undergoing changes, the most important reason of which is due to what Leonard Bloomfield calls cultural borrowing: "Every speech community learns from its neighbors. Objects, both natural and manufactured, pass from one community to the other and so do patterns of action, such as technical procedures, warlike practices, religious rites, or fashions of individual conduct. This spread of things and habits is studied by ethnologists, who call it 'cultural diffusion'" (2002, p. 471). As a result, we can find a lot of rhetorical similarities between Chinese and Westerners in spite of difference in their cultural characteristics. This paper, therefore, will deal with Chinese and Western rhetoric synthetically, trying to explore some common areas while seeking the difference.

## A Striking Contrast between Western and Chinese Attitudes toward Rhetoric

Eloquence is considered the essential part of Western rhetoric. Some scholars even try to make the word *eloquence* synonymous with *rhetoric* in their publications. Eloquence,

therefore, is considered as a separate art and highly valued by the people, especially in ancient Western tradition. In talking about the importance of eloquence, George Campbell writes:

> But there is no art whatever that hath so close a connection with all the faculties and powers of the mind, as eloquence, or the art of speaking, in the extensive sense in which I employ the term. For in the first place, that it ought to be ranked among the polite or fine arts, is manifest from this, that in all its exertions, with little or no exception, it requires the aid of imagination. Thereby it not only pleases, but by pleasing, commands attention, rouses the passion, and often at last subdues the most stubborn resolution. (1992, p. xlix)

To Westerners, as Solomon says, "The wise in heart shall be called prudent, but the sweetness of the lips increaseth learning" (Proverbs 16:21).

## Eloquence Negatively Connoted in Chinese Rhetorical Tradition

Chinese rhetorical tradition, however, goes along the opposite direction from that of the Westerners, at least in terms of eloquence. In the works of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu a number of emphases relevant to rhetoric become apparent. "First, eloquence, and even speaking in general, is deprecated and is associated with highly negative connotations. Eloquence is spoken of as glibness, quickness of speech, noise-making, and clap-trap, and is identified with shallowness, superficiality, untrustworthy cleverness, pretentiousness, pride, hypocrisy, and flattery" (Jensen, 1987). Chuang Tzu spoke of "the shallowness of mind of a glib talker" (Jensen, 1987) and asserted that hypocrites "know how to give a good speech and tell appropriate anecdotes in order to attract the crowds, but from the very beginning to the very end, they do not know what it is all about" (Lin, 1955, p. 678). Chuang cuttingly wrote: "A dog is not considered good because of his barking; a man is not considered clever because of his ability to talk" (Lin, 1943, p. 173). Confucius also deprecated "clever and a pretentious manner." "I detest the clever talker," he said, "out of fear that he becomes confused with the truth" (Ware, 1960). One is reminded of the Psalmist's assertion: "The arrogant and wicked-they speak loftily. They have set their mouth in the heaven, and their tongue walketh through the earth" (Psalms 73:8-9).

## Silence in Traditional and Modern Chinese Rhetoric

If eloquence and expressiveness in general are deprecated, it is not surprising that cautious speech, non-expressiveness, and total silence are honored in the teachings of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu. These mystics stressed the importance of identifying with and emulating the ways of nature, including its silence (Jensen, 1987). Lao Tzu said: "Nature says: /Hence it is that a squall lasts not a whole morning" (Lin, 1943). Silence is, therefore, to be honored, as "the mouth was considered the gatekeeper of the heart; it must guard carefully what goes out, lest the heart becomes known to others" (Jensen, 1987, p. 3).

Although over three thousand years have passed ever since Taoism and Confucianism were first established in Chinese culture, their influence is far from being eliminated. Lingering in one's mind is always the Chinese traditional saying, "Illness finds its way in by

the mouth and disaster finds its way out through the mouth," whenever a Chinese is invited to speak to the public. Even the official makes no exception. Before he speaks to a group of people, he has to ask his secretary to prepare a written speech, and when the meeting begins, his job is to read the prepared speech to the public. When his reading is over, the gathering dissolves quickly. People sometimes might feel fatigued with such speeches, but their discomfort or complaint would soon disappear as soon as they think of the caution with which the officials deliver their speeches. "They are serious and reliable," they would say, because "the speech is prepared and they mean what they say." This characteristic is difficult for many Western professors to understand when they first trespass upon such a tradition and find reserved silence from his Chinese audience either during or after the delivery of his speech. Chinese students and scholars, on the other hand, feel equally alien to the Western rhetorical tradition when they are challenged to speak in class in a Western institution of higher learning. Some of them even think such a practice frustrating, especially when they are first exposed to the Western culture and the clash between Western and Chinese rhetorical traditions are most apparent.

## Argument Regarded as Second Major Difference in Rhetoric

In Western rhetoric, argumentation is closely related to the concept of *inventio*. *Inventio* is the Latin term for *invention* or *discovery*. Theoretically, an orator could talk on any subject, because rhetoric, as such, had no proper subject matter. In practice, however, each speech that he undertook presented him with a unique challenge. He had to find arguments which could support whatever case or point of view he was espousing (Corbett, 1965, p. 23). According to Cicero, the speaker relied on native genius, on method or art, or on diligence to help him find appropriate arguments. *Inventio* was concerned with a system or method for finding arguments. Aristotle pointed out there were two kinds of arguments or means of persuasion available to the speaker: non-artistic or non-technical means of persuasion, and artistic persuasion, including rational appeal, emotional appeal, and ethical appeal (Corbett, 1965, p. 23). Cicero points out in his *Ad Herennium* that invention is used for the six parts of a discourse: the Introduction, Statement of Facts, Division, Proof, Refutation, and Conclusion (Caplan, 1989, p. 9). Both proof and refutation involve themselves with argument: "Proof is the presentation of our argument. Refutation is the destruction of our adversaries' arguments" (Caplan, 1989, p. 9).

## Argument in Early Western Rhetorical Tradition

Cicero gave 16 topics in his *Topica* in which every topic is related with argument (Lanham, 1969, p. 110):

1. Argument from definition.
2. Argument from partition.
3. Argument based on etymology.
4. Argument based on conjugates.
5. Argument derived from genus.
6. Argument derived from species.

7. Argument based on similarity or analogy.
8. Argument based on difference.
9. Argument from contraries.
10. Argument from adjuncts.
11. Argument from antecedents.
12. Argument from consequents.
13. Argument from contradictions.
14. Argument from efficient cause.
15. Argument from effects.
16. Argument from comparison.

## Argument as Devalued in Chinese Rhetorical Tradition

From the previous analysis, we can easily come to a conclusion: argument, as a means of persuasion, serves as the essential constituent in Western rhetoric. In Chinese rhetoric however, argument—like the concept of eloquence—is heavily deprecated, for "it is equated with contentiousness, with exaggerating differences, with decreasing mutual understanding, with undermining harmony" (Jensen, 1987). Chuang wrote: "One should live so that one is at ease and in harmony with the world" (Lin, 1955, p. 655). Lao Tzu taught that, "To know harmony is to be in accord with the eternal" (Lin, 1943). Confucius expressed it this way: "When standing still, the water is in the most perfect state of repose. Let that be your model. It remains quietly within, and is not agitated without. It is from the cultivation of such harmony that virtue results" (Lin, 1955, p. 655*).*

## Chinese Reluctance to Give up Their own Rhetorical Tradition

According to Taoism, "The true Sage (Scholar) keeps his knowledge within him, while men in general set forth theirs in argument in order to convince each other" (Merton, 1965, p. 88). In other words, "those who do not tell; those who tell do not know" (Giles, 1923, p. 56). As a result of their preaching, scholars in China have become, on the whole, very reserved and overcautious in giving opinions, especially on formal occasions. When they find themselves different in point of view from others, they usually keep quiet until they are sure what they are thinking about is correct, after spending some time pondering over the issue. Thus, in their rhetorical tradition, the Chinese do not have the habit of arguing, especially in oral form. Occasionally, if some people are found arguing over certain issues, the bosses as well as the employees might feel that something serious has happened to their work units because arguers have disturbed their harmonious atmosphere. Some Westerners might, as Jensen (1987) points out, break into loud laughter when they hear of such a rhetorical tradition. The Chinese, however, still enjoy their tradition, especially when they think of the striking contrast between the strong Chinese family ties and the high divorce rate of Westerners, who are fond of argument and who swear an oath upon marriage that they would share wealth and poverty, health and illness with their lovers. Not long after marriage, they tend to forget the oaths they have taken and change their minds immediately. The Chinese, therefore, would laugh at the eloquence with which the Westerners speak to their lovers before marriage and

the argumentation with which the Westerners seek a divorce, both of which seem to Chinese only insincere, artificial means of persuasion, and deceitful rhetorical games.

## Memory as Generally Ignored in Western Rhetorical Tradition

The third difference in terms of rhetorical theory between Western and Chinese is reflected in the treatment of memory. Memory was valued in early Western rhetorical tradition. It was the fourth of five rhetorical parts: Invention, Arrangement, Style, Memory, and Delivery. Cicero insisted that the speaker should possess these five faculties. Memory, as defined by Cicero, is the firm retention in the mind of the matter, words, and arrangement. According to Cicero, there are two kinds of memory: one natural, the other the product of art. The natural is that memory which is imbedded in our minds, born simultaneously with thought. The artificial memory is that memory which is strengthened by a kind of training system of discipline (Caplan, 1989). The natural memory, according to Cicero, must be strengthened by discipline so as to become exceptional, and on the other hand, this memory provided by discipline requires natural beauty (Caplan, 1989).

Of all the five parts of rhetoric however, memory was the one that received the least attention in the Western rhetoric books (Corbett, 1965, p. 27). The reason for the neglect of this aspect, according to Corbett, is probably that not much can be said, in a theoretical way, about the process of memorizing; and after rhetoric came to be concerned mainly with written discourse, there was no further need to deal with memorizing (Corbett, 1965, p. 27). This process did receive, however, some attention in the schools of rhetoric set up by the sophists. The orator's memory was trained largely through constant practice, but the rhetors did suggest various mnemonic devices that facilitated the memorizing of speeches (Corbett, 1965, p. 27-28). But this rhetorical tradition didn't last very long. In the 16th century, the Ramists would reduce the aforementioned five rhetorical parts into two: Style and Delivery, leaving out Memory altogether, as a subsidiary classification (Lanham, 1969). The subject of memory, which we have seen to be a recognized part of a traditional rhetoric since the youth of Cicero, was detached by Ramus from rhetoric, and was not made a special topic elsewhere in his scheme for the liberal arts (Lanham, 1969, p. 89).

## Memory: An Essential of Chinese Rhetoric

The Chinese rhetoric, on the other hand, has always valued the importance of memory. For the Chinese students and scholars, the fourth art of rhetoric, the one the Westerners ignore, is and has remained more important than any other. There is an old Chinese saying which affirms their rhetorical tradition: "Keep reading the three hundred Tang poems until you are familiar with them and you'll be able to fabricate, if not compose" (Matalene, 1985). The Chinese poet Du Fu (A.D. 712-770) reaffirms such practice: "If you read ten thousand books until they are well worn, you will be inspired in your writing." In Tu's poem, according to some Chinese critics, the important phrase was "well worn," not "ten thousand." "It's better to read one book one hundred times than one hundred books once," a Chinese scholar explains (Matalene, 1985). Thus, "the usual Chinese response to any text is to repeat it, not to paraphrase, analyse, or interpret it. . . . Learning the text by heart while walking is the habit of the students from the Foreign Languages Department. They keep at it day after day, month

after month, and year in and year out'" (Matalene, 1985, p. 790). And that is true, not only with foreign language majors in China, but also with students in general across the country.

## Reasons for the Chinese Appeal to Memory

There are many reasons to account for the emphasis upon memory in China. The most important one seems the fact that the Chinese, due to their long feudal social history, have cultivated the habit of respecting tradition and authority of the past. Their technique is, therefore, always "the repetition of maxims, exempla, and analogies presented in established forms and expressed in well-known phrases" (Matalene, 1985, p. 795). Carolyn Matalene, again, gives a very thorough analysis of such practices:

> To achieve social harmony and to express the views of the group by referring to tradition and relying on accepted patterns of expression were the central purposes and practices of China's rhetoric. And in spite of tremendous political upheavals in the twentieth century, rhetoric in China still seems to function this way. The authorities appealed to have changed, and social harmony is now called camaraderie, but whatever arguments, quarrels, or purges occur before consensus is achieved, they occur privately. Public discourse consists of announcements about the correct course of action for the group. (p. 795)

Philosophically speaking, the Chinese emphasis upon memory in their rhetorical approach is caused by deprecation of individualism in Chinese culture. Confucianism subordinates the individual to the group, Taoism subordinates the group to nature, and Buddhism denies that the self exists. Chinese ultra-leftists reject and denounce what they call bourgeois individualism. What the Chinese can do, therefore, is to appeal psychologically to others by means of reciting as much as they can so that they can make their behavior or way of thinking conform to accepted social norms or political standards, a sort of practice which is the direct opposite to originality and individuality in the Western sense of rhetoric.

## Similarities between Western and Chinese Rhetoric

In spite of many weaknesses caused by over-emphasis upon memory in Chinese rhetorical tradition, many Chinese, however still feel reluctant to give it up. Sometimes they are even very proud of it when they find the Chinese students, due to their good memory, have achieved more success in doing TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and other exams which require a lot of memory work. Among other things, a good memory on the part of Chinese students enables them to become the largest group of all the international student population in the United States. Seeing the brilliant achievement of Chinese students in Western institutions of higher learning, some Westerns might regret that they have for so long ignored memory, the fourth art of rhetoric ardently advocated by Cicero. Although the Chinese, in their rhetorical tradition, appeal to tradition and authority rather than to elegance and argument, this does not mean that the Chinese rhetoric does not have anything in common with Western tradition. It is true that the Westerners value the importance of originality. There is, however, as T. S. Eliot remarked, "no such thing as complete originality owing nothing to

the past" (1948, p. 118). In classical Chinese poetry, for instance, we cannot expect to find absolute originality. The words, phrases, images, and the like in a poem may be conventional. But, as James J. Y. Liu puts it, the pattern that emerges from the way the poet has combined them is different from any previously existing one (1982, p. 69). While, as a general tendency, the Chinese, in their rhetoric, have shown too much respect for tradition and authority, this does not mean that the traditional Chinese writers and critics thought the same. As a matter of fact, in their long cultural history, some successful writers thought entirely differently from the majority and exercised no small influence upon Chinese rhetoric. Some advocated originality likewise and warned against clichés. Here are two famous examples: Du Fu wrote, "If my words do not astonish people, I would not stop even after death," and Han Yu wrote, "Stale words must be removed." Among later critics, Zhao Yi (1727-1814) praised Du Fu, Han Yu, and other poets for their originality in syntax, verse form, or prosody, and emphasized novelty instead of imitation of ancient poets (Liu, 1982, p. 69). As might be expected in Chinese rhetoric, some other poets and critics who were nicknamed *archaists*, such as Huang Tingjian (1045-1105), in contrast, advocated imitating earlier poets and observing prosodic rules. In short, we can find certain rhetorical features which are similar to the Western rhetorical tradition.

## Similarities in Rhetorical Devices

Moreover, the Chinese generally do not have the Western concept of eloquence and argumentation, and they do not respect a person's talent in verbal expression, because the Chinese do not have oratorical tradition in their rhetorical history. Rhetoric, however, is by no means limited to oral form only. Poetry, for example, is "properly no other than a particular mode or form of certain branches of oratory…, the direct end of the former, whether to delight the fancy as in epic, or to move the passions as in tragedy, is avowedly in part the aim and sometimes the immediate and proposed aim, of the orator" (Campbell, 1992). In other words, one can equally find in written Chinese, particularly in literature, the eloquence, argument, or the three offices the orator had: to teach, to please, and to move. We need to point out that the similarity in rhetorical devices is not limited to image or emblem only. Many other rhetorical devices, such as parallelism and antithesis, are frequently found in both traditions.

## Similarities in the Concept of Metaphysics

In rhetorical theory, in addition to these features, we have found similarity even in the concept of metaphysics. The Chinese metaphysical concept of literature as a manifestation of cosmic Tao is comparable to a concept of art as a manifestation of being, and the Taoist concept of Tao itself is comparable to the phenomenological-existential concept of Being, Some Chinese critics who held metaphysical views of literature asserted the solidarity of *wo* (*I* or *subject*) and *wu* (*thing* or *object*) and the inseparability of *qing* (*feeling* or *inner experience*) and *jing* (*scene*, or *external environment*), just as some phenomenologists asserted the solidarity of *subject* and *object* and the inseparability of *noesis* and *noema* (Liu, 1982, p. xvii). We should say that, in comparing the rhetorical tradition between West and China, the similarities are as numerous as the differences. Due to the limited space of this

issue, the author chiefly deals with the rhetorical differences between the two different cultures, leaving the common aspects between them for another paper.

## References

Bloomfield, L. (2002). *Language*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. (Originally published in 1933)

Campbell, G. (1992). *The philosophy of rhetoric*. Scholar's Facsimiles & Reprints. Southern Illinois University Press.

Caplan, H. (Trans.). (1989). Cicero: *Rhetorica Ad Herenium.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Corbett, E. (1965). *Classical rhetoric for the modern student.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Eliot, T. S. (1948). *Notes towards the definition of culture.* London: Faber & Faber.

Giles, H. A. (1923). *A history of Chinese literature*. New York: D. Appleton and Company.

Jensen, J. V. (1987). Rhetorical emphasis of Taoism. *Rhetorica, 5*(3), 219-229.

Lanham, R. A. (1969). *A handlist of rhetorical terms.* Los Angeles: The University of California Press.

Lin, Y. T. (Ed.). (1943). *The wisdom of Laotse.* New York: The Modern Library.

Lin, Y. T. (1955). *The wisdom of China and India*. New York: Modern Library.

Liu, J. Y. (1982). *The interlingual critic.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Matalene, C. (1985). Contrastive rhetoric: An American writing teacher in China. *College English, 47*(8), 789-808.

Merton, T. (Trans.). (1965). *The way of Chuang Tzu.* New York: New Directions.

Ware, J. R. (Trans.). (1960). *The sayings of Mencius,* New York: New American Library.