Pre-Qin Rhetoric and Its “Chinese” Characteristics

WEI Yong-Kang
University of Texas (RGV), Brownsville, Texas, USA

The article explores some of the important features of pre-Qin Chinese rhetoric and challenges it poses to traditional Western rhetoric, with the former being seen as harmonic or self-effacing for its purpose and paradoxical for its epistemological underpinning. The author does not intend to suggest that the Chinese tradition is the right path to rhetoric, but at least it points to an alternative to approaching this language art as defined by Aristotle.

Keywords: rhetoric, harmony, face, and self-representation

Introduction

There appeared no shortage of terms in classical Chinese that can be said to be conceptually comparable to the notion of “rhetoric” as perceived in the Western tradition. According to Lu (1998),

The ancient Chinese appear to have had their own well-developed sense of rhetoric, revealed morphologically throughout primary Chinese texts in the following frequently used terms: yan (language, speech); ci (mode of speech, artistic expressions); jian (advising, persuasion); shui (persuasion)/shou (explanation); ming (naming); and bian (distinction, disputation, argumentation). (pp. 3-4)

If language is the window of a culture, then those rhetorical terms, identified by Lu, may be a good indication of rhetoric in China dating back to a historic period called pre-Qin (722-221 B.C.), which parallels the Greco-Roman period in the West.

Lu tries to prove in her Rhetoric in Ancient China (1998) that rhetoric is not “the sole property and invention of the West” (p. 1), arguing for the need to explore the non-Western tradition of rhetoric such as developed in pre-Qin China. However, she faces a dilemma as to how to conceptualize classical Chinese rhetoric: On the one hand, she stresses “understanding Chinese rhetoric on its own terms” (p. 71); on the other, she takes pains to draw similarities between Greek rhetoric and classical Chinese rhetoric in an effort to “legitimate” pre-Qin rhetoric (PQR) based on terms acceptable to Western students. Railing at “the unfortunate fact that Chinese rhetoric […] is perceived as radically Other”, the author contends that the ancient Chinese grasped “logic and rational thinking” just as those ancient Greeks did (pp. 33, 32). And she even identifies a few key words in PQR that “may be more closely related to logos” in Greek rhetoric (p. 92). I wouldn’t say that Lu is trying to turn Chinese rhetoric into logocentric, but the way she insists that PQR had its share of “interest” in logic or logos seems to indicate the author cannot rid herself of Western standards when conceptualizing ancient Chinese rhetoric despite the fact that she also argues, strongly, against Western “misconceptions”. Lu’s mistake is that she uses Western rhetorical concepts, such as logic and logos, to prove the existence of rhetoric in ancient China.

WEI Yong-Kang, Ph.D., Professor, Writing & Language Studies, University of Texas (RGV), Brownsville, Texas, USA.
Some other scholars of Chinese communication have also made similar attempts. For example, as early as 1991, Garrett wrote about wen in Chinese as a possible equivalent to rhetoric in the West.

I won’t elaborate at this point how logic or logos plays out (or doesn’t play out) in pre-Qin rhetoric, or how wen can function like rhetoric in its Western sense, but I would say that there is really no need to prove, or disprove, that there existed a rhetorical tradition in ancient China. If, as Gusfield (1989) says, in Burkean terms, rhetoric is “human behavior and communication seen as embodying strategies for affecting situations” (p. 6), we can reasonably assume it exists everywhere—as far as human civilization goes—like poetry, architecture, or even food. It would be utterly ludicrous to launch a “scholarly” inquiry into whether or not ancient China or Greece had its own poetry, architecture, or food; rather, a sensible question should be: What was it like? Or how did it differ other cultural traditions? Likewise, it would be meaningless to deny or confirm the existence of classical Chinese rhetoric, as Lu and others have tried to do; rather, a meaningful inquiry should center around the characteristics of pre-Qin rhetoric, focusing on such questions as “how it differed from other traditions, such as the Greco-Roman rhetoric”, “how it was represented in classical texts”, “how it was practiced”, etc.

Harmony

Plenty of scholarship in recent decades has explored the differences between traditional Chinese and Western rhetoric, notably, Lu, as mentioned above, Scollan and Scollan (1995), Chen (2009; 2011), and Wu (2018). For example, the Scollans point out that Chinese culture was dominated by the Confucian discourse system as opposed to the Utilitarian discourse system in Western cultures. “Discourse system” is a rather complex concept, involving ideology, socialization, forms of discourse, and social organization (pp. 170-171). According to the authors, the Confucian discourse system may be summarized as focusing on human relationship (e.g., building consensus) in contrast to the Utilitarian discourse system being goal-oriented (e.g., seeking effectiveness). They write:

…one major difference between Ancient Chinese and Ancient Greek rhetoric was on [the] dimension of group harmony versus individual welfare. Ancient Chinese rhetoric emphasized the means by which one could phrase one’s position without causing any feeling of disruption or disharmony. Ancient Greek rhetoric, on the other hand, emphasized the means of winning one’s point through skillful argument, short of, says Aristotle, the use of torture. (p. 142)

Scollan and Scollan’s remark, which seems to reflect a popularly held view of ancient Chinese rhetoric by Western scholars (e.g., Oliver, 1995; Kennedy, 1998) is not without dispute. Lu argues that the notion of “harmonious rhetoric” tends to overgeneralize, without regard to the “complex and varied nature of Chinese culture”, not to mention the fact that the pre-Qin period witnessed “intense conflicts between and within ancient Chinese states and philosophical schools” (p. 29). She even questions whether there is such a thing as rhetorical harmony, if it “is achieved by submission to authority…at the expense of truth and individuality” (p. 30).

Here I find myself siding with those Western scholars. For one thing, “truth” or “individuality” had never become an issue in early Chinese thought. For another, harmony, which Chen (2009) declares as the “foundation” of Chinese communication, should not be interpreted, literally, as avoiding conflicts or submitting to authority; in the broad sense, it is about how to position one’s self in the world (society and nature) through the medium of language. To achieve harmony is ultimately to seek unity between man and the Dao (also “Tao”, meaning the
way or principle), a cosmic moral order of being in ancient Chinese ideology. Socially speaking, this would mean promoting communal collectivism and de-emphasizing personal achievements in society. In the philosophical sense, it is about situating human existence in “the stream of the universe”, in which, Lao Zi says, mankind should humble itself “as a little child” (Chp. 28).

Rhetorically, the notion of harmony would have several implications. First, it is the call for humility, discouraging arguments that tend to “enhance the welfare of the individual speaker or listener” (Oliver, 1995, p. 361). Second, it is the stance of holism, emphasizing the necessity in communication not only of seeing a particular tree but of seeing the forest as well that surrounds the tree, to put it in a Chinese way. The “high-context system”, as described by Edward Hall (1976) of Chinese and other non-Western cultures, explains to some extent how this holistic approach works in communicative situations: i.e., to utilize and rely on the context to convey messages, which are generally less explicit, less elaborated, compared to some low-context cultures in the West.

Third, rhetoric aimed at achieving harmony implies the denial of an individual appeal on the part of the rhetor, celebrating instead the role of authority culturally and historically established, such as the sage-kings, like Yao, Shun, and Yu. The sage-kings were thought to have the power to perceive the Dao, capable of carrying out the “Mandate of Heaven” (tian-ming) and governing with virtue “all that is under Heaven” (tian-xia). Thus, the appeal to such authority was essentially the appeal to the Dao, the cosmic orders, from which the ancient writer/speaker drew the ultimate source of rhetorical power. That rhetoric was depersonalized in ancient China contrasts sharply with the Western rhetorical tradition, in which the individual status of a rhetor has been given much more prominence in effecting persuasion. As Aristotle states, the personal character “may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses” (Bizzell & Herzberg, 1990, p. 154).

Self-Effacement

It has long been observed that Chinese culture, among other Eastern cultures, prefers to use inductive discourse patterns (delaying the topic to the end) whereas Westerners opt for deductive discourse patterns (introducing the topic right at the beginning), which, according to Scollan and Scollan (1995), indicates “differences in the cultural structuring of situations and participant roles” (p. 83). What determines the cultural structuring of situations and participant roles, the Scollans argue, is the use of “face” strategies, which can be categorized either as “involvement” (asserting one’s position) or “independence” (withholding from such assertion). The so-called face strategy originates from the Chinese concept of face, the “image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes” (Goffman, 1967, p. 5). In sociological terms, it has to do with one’s assumptions of interpersonal relationships; in rhetoric, it deals with presentations of such assumptions: for instance, how to incorporate the perceived acceptance or rejection of one’s role in a speech event. Scollan and Scollan relate the inductive discourse to the face strategy of independence and the deductive to the face strategy of involvement.

---

1 According to Daoism, the Dao is “the source of all being and governor of all life, human and natural, and the basic, undivided unity in which all the contradictions and distinctions of existence are ultimately resolved” (see Sources of Chinese Tradition, pp. 49-50).

2 Legendary figures in Chinese history (2357-2205 B.C.).
It appears that the Scollans are countering their own argument about “cultural structuring” when they dismiss the “false east-west dichotomy” in discourse patterns (p. 82), insisting that Chinese and Westerners would use the same face strategies in rhetoric given the same context. To them, what really matters is not culture, but “power” and “distance” (between participants of a communication), which can determine how people employ face/rhetorical strategies: For example, a person in higher power tends toward involvement strategies, therefore being deductive in discourse, and strangers would resort to independence strategies when communicating with each other, therefore being rhetorically inductive. What the Scollans try to say is that face/rhetorical strategies based on their power/distance model can apply everywhere, cutting across cultural boundaries. In their words, “what is significant in intercultural communication is not the difference in culture; it is the difference in that particular rhetorical strategy” (p. 162). But somehow they stop short of explaining why, in general, Westerners prefer involvement strategies and Chinese prefer independence strategies despite the fact that power and distance exist in both cultures, shaping communicative situations and participant roles.

In my view, the face strategies are not just about power and distance; they are also concerned with self-representation—how to identify one’s self-image or face (which is indeed ethos in my view) in discourse through what Goffman (1959) calls “the definition of the situation” (p. 6). As I understand it, Goffman’s “definition of situation” can occur in the immediate context in which a communicator finds him- or herself, but it can also occur in the broader context of culture to which an individual has had a lifetime exposure. Thus, it makes sense to see a person in higher power act aggressively in communication, using involvement strategies (as defined by the immediate situation), but it also makes sense to see that same person abstains from such aggressiveness, using independence strategies (as defined by the extended situation of culture) simply because of the ideological belief in collectivism or the way he or she was brought up. So, culture does count in formulating face strategies—in that it impacts the way an individual projects his or her self in society.

Needless to say, Chinese and Western cultures do not share the same approach to the self, which is to be reflected in their differed ways of constructing and presenting faces rhetorically. Given the notion of harmony, it is quite conceivable that the Chinese face is indeed a “faceless” face, in the sense that the participant of a communication tends to efface his or her own individual appeal, striving to restrain self-imposition in a speech/text. This is particularly true in classical Chinese rhetoric, in which the writer/speaker often went an extra mile to strike the reader/listener as humble and to make sure that discourse, points out Oliver (1995), “adhered to approved patterns” (p. 361). By contrast, the ultimate “I” in Western thought often dictates a full-blown augmentation of self-image in the attempt to expand one’s personal character (ethos) as a rhetorical appeal.

I might add that the term face has a highly individualistic connotation to Westerners, and that what I mean by “faceless” is not that Chinese people don’t have a face, but that their face is not so much individualized, grounded solely in the notion of self by Western standards. Because of this difference, it should come as no surprise that Chinese people and Westerners may end up using different face strategies given the same rhetorical setting (power and distance): While it is the norm for somebody in the West in higher power to use involvement face strategies to assert his or her position straightforward, the Chinese counterpart may simply feel uncomfortable to impose him- or herself, choosing instead independence face strategies, which are characterized in discourse as implicit, indirect, hedging, as well as inductive. Again, my point is that culture does count—it affects our attitudes towards the self and therefore face/rhetorical strategies that project it (self) into a communication act.
To be fair, Scollan and Scollan do distinguish between the Chinese and the Western concept of self, which, according to the authors, may result in varied “face needs” in intercultural communication: “a person from a highly individualistic culture would pay more attention to his or her personal face needs, whereas a person from a more collective culture would always have the face of others foremost in his or her mind” (p. 134). So, Scollan and Scollan do recognize that cultural differences over “self” have their impact on the way people communicate. Unfortunately, they fail to further the connection between face needs and face strategies but, instead, let themselves get carried away by the “universals” of power and distance in an attempt to shift from intercultural communication to interdiscourse communication to better suit their discourse analysis needs.

The reason I have had a lengthy, and probably excessive, discussion on discourse patterns and face strategies is because I think it is necessary to know that these patterns and strategies intimate, to a large extent, cultural conceptions of self and related issues such as individuality, image, and face. The rhetorical difference is, so to speak, a matter of how to treat the self in discourse within the framework of a culture. So, it makes sense to see that inductive (or, in my words, laid-back) discourse is a preferred rhetorical strategy in Chinese culture because of an age-old tradition that depersonalizes rhetoric for the purpose of achieving collectivist harmony. Of course, I wouldn’t say the notion of self had no place in pre-Qin rhetoric, but just that self-representation in terms of fitting into “accepted social ends” was far more important than self-fulfillment based on an individualistic language (de Bary & Chan, 1990, p. 114). To a Confucian, like Xun Zi (313-238 B.C.), the greatest of all principles was to abide by li (i.e., established social rituals and behavior codes), which, as Chen and Wang (1998) point out, could be the sole standard of “judging good or bad rhetoric” (p. 44).

Without a doubt, the Western conception of self, which is distinct from the Chinese, has led to a different, and more individualized, approach to rhetoric, resulting in much stress placed on the personal appeal of a rhetor as a way to solicit trust and induce persuasion. Quintilian’s “good man speaking well”, which is conventionally interpreted as stressing moral leadership in rhetoric (Bizzell & Herzberg, 1990, p. 35), is a good example to show how much emphasis has been put on the self in Western rhetoric. That is to say, it is the individual who makes a difference between good and bad rhetoric. No wonder Western rhetoric would appear self-assertive to those from Chinese and other Eastern cultures, who are more or less accustomed to harmonic rhetoric.

As a footnote, that Western and Chinese culture treat the individual self differently can also be felt in other branches of language arts besides rhetoric. For instance, Plaks (1977) has observed that the word “hero” in the Western narrative tradition may not have its conceptual equivalent in the Chinese. While “the Western narrative tradition has tended to see in human character a more or less substantial entity, [...] the central human figures in the Chinese tradition are generally something less than heroes, if not full-fledged anti-heroes” (p. 340). And he notices, in the classical Chinese novel, “a certain ambivalence that hovers over them [human figures], an uncertainty that keeps them from presenting or even tending towards an unequivocal self-image” (p. 340). Like rhetoric, traditional Chinese narrative in general de-emphasizes self-representation on the individual basis.

---

3 According to George Mead (1934), a social theorist, the Western conception of self falls into two categories: One assumes a social process as “logically prior to the individuals and their individual experiencing”; the other assumes individuals and individual experiencing as “logically prior to the social process” (see his Mind, Self, and Society, pp. 222-223). But no matter what, there is still much more emphasis on the individual in comparison to classical Chinese thought, which often saw individuality as incompatible with social order.
Paradox

Since the individual appeal has been taken out of the picture in traditional Chinese rhetoric, then can we say that good rhetoric doesn’t depend on “good men”? I would answer “Yes”. Indeed, Lao Zi’s “Good men do not argue” (Chp. 81), which is often seen as anti-rhetorical at first glance, may say just that. At least we can see that Lao Zi separates the role of an individual from rhetoric even though this individual is a “good man”.

The problem is the next line, “Those who argue are not good” (Chp. 81). Does this mean that rhetoric comes out of bad people? Not necessarily so, according to Chen and Wang (1998), who argue that what Lao Zi really objects to is the “untruthful” in rhetoric, citing the fifth century literary/rhetorical theorist Liu Si (pp. 92-93). They especially point out that, since Lao Zi himself says, “Beautiful words command respect from others”\(^4\), it would be impossible for the Old Master to ignore the positive social function of rhetoric. However, I do not agree with the authors when they stretch their argument to imply the beautiful to be something added or polished as opposed to the truthful seen as genuine, natural, and in harmony with the Dao. For one thing, the beautiful and the truthful do not necessarily contradict each other (Remember the English romantic poet John Keats’ “Beauty Is Truth, Truth Beauty”?). For another, given the Daoist ideal of **wu-wei** (roughly translated as “non-doing”), it is highly unlikely that Lao Zi, and his disciples, would cherish anything that is added or polished in speech in order to win respect from an audience.

**Wu-wei** is nothing nihilistic, in my view. On the surface, the term can be interpreted as doing or saying what comes naturally, to use Fish’s words,\(^5\) with the suggestion that one should not be overwhelmed by “the materialist quest for power, dominance, authority, and wealth” (Jacobus, 1994, p. 18). Deep down, it is meant to answer the ever-lasting (or ever-haunting) question of how to define virtue. Thomas Merton (1965) writes:

> If one is in harmony with Tao—the cosmic Tao, “Great Tao”—the answer [to the question of “what ought to be done”] will make itself clear when the time comes to act, for then one will act not according to the human and self-conscious mode of deliberation, but according to the divine and spontaneous mode of **wu-wei**, which is the mode of action of Tao itself, and is therefore the source of all good.

> The other way, the way of conscious striving, even though it may claim to be a way of virtue, is fundamentally a way of self-aggrandizement, and it is consequently bound to come into conflict with Tao. Hence it is self-destructive … (p. 24)

We can probably draw two conclusions from Merton’s argument: One is that **wu-wei** is virtue, “the source of all good” because it accords with “the mode of action of Tao”; the other is that **wu-wei** as virtue is essentially a way of self-renunciation in that the other way, the way of “self-aggrandizement”, in the sense of “conscious striving”, poses conflict with the Dao. This seems to say that Daoism (Taoism) is recommending no action taken in order to cultivate virtue, since any action would by definition constitute a “conscious striving”.

Again, I would argue against approaching **wu-wei** too literally. Lao Zi is not a nihilist; rather, what he means by **wu-wei** is more or less like saying: Let everything in this world take its own course, and virtue will thus prevail. He teaches his followers: “Not exalting the gifted prevents quarreling. Not collecting treasures prevents stealing” (Chp. 3). For Lao Zi, the gifted and treasures are just part of nature. They cause moral consequences only when you make a conscious striving to exalt them or collect them. Hence, virtue exists in doing nothing—**wu-wei**. In

---

\(^4\) My translation. In Feng and English’s version of *Tao Te Ching*, it is “Sweet words can buy honor” (p. 62), which I don’t think is close to the original.

\(^5\) The title of one of Stanley Fish’s books is called “Doing What Comes Naturally”.
the philosophical sense, doing nothing is essentially to let the ultimate Dao prevail. But since now the Dao takes
care of everything, doing nothing is indeed doing everything—and anything. That is why Lao Zi says, “If nothing
is done, then all will be well” (Chp. 3). Likewise, he advises those in power to rule by not governing: “Tao abides
in non-action, [yet] nothing is left undone. If kings and lords observed this, [the] ten thousand things would
develop naturally” (Chp. 37). What a paradox! But underlying the paradox is Lao Zi’s deep concern about a
mundane creature called “man”, who might “mess up” with the eternal, heavenly, sublime, all-embracing, and
all-encompassing thing named the Dao.

To summarize, politically, the Daoist *wu-wei* can be interpreted as “ruling by non-governing”; socially, it
can be seen as “acting by non-doing”. Rhetorically, *wu-wei* would be like “persuading by non-arguing”. Hence
Lao Zi’s statement: “Good men do not argue”.

**Conclusion**

So far, I have discussed several important features of pre-Qin rhetoric: namely, rhetoric as harmonic, as
self-effacing, and as paradoxical. Without a doubt, these features pose questions about the traditional perceptions,
and strategies, of rhetoric in the West, prodding people to explore new areas to expand their conceptions on
rhetoric as well as on culture and other issues. I wouldn’t say that the Chinese tradition is the right way to
understand rhetoric, but at least it shows us an alternative to approaching this particular language art.

For instance, reason and logic are very much privileged in the Western tradition of rhetoric, under the
assumption that they provide epistemological certainty to the writer/speaker as well as to the reader/listener.
Texts as such often appear “ordered, controlled, teleological, referential, and autonomously meaningful” (Kernan,
1990, p. 144). Also, because of the obsession with logos, the Western tradition tends to treat rhetorical practice as
a unilateral action, in which the rhetor argues “single-handedly”, from the beginning to end, just to prove he or
she is right without yielding space for audience participation (Matalene, 1985, p. 803). In contrast, pre-Qin
rhetoric operates rather paradoxically, with emphasis on understanding through distinction instead of logical
representation aimed at describing the world as it is. And, because of the collective authorship, the texts in PQR
are largely dialogic, involving an open-ended process of making and remaking, which in turn points to more
interaction between writers and readers. As Jacobus (1994) says of *Dao De Jing* (which is generally believed to
be a collection of aphorisms contributed by generations of Daoists),

> Sometimes the text seems to be purposely ambiguous—a rhetorical device that promotes examination and careful
speculation on the part of the reader. This ambiguity may annoy a reader who is used to having ideas clearly spelled out
and explained. [But] Lao-Tzu seems to treat ideas like seeds to be planted in the mind of a listener, to take root and grow
as the soil will permit. (p. 18)

The ambiguity of *Dao De Jing* and other pre-Qin classics may indicate the lack of control by one particular
author in text production, but it may also suggest that logic doesn’t have much say in PQR. Graham (1989) has
revealed the “curiously familiar-sounding syllogism” (p. 168) in a text by Wang Chong (A.D. 27-C. 100), and
many other scholars, both Chinese and Western, have made similar discoveries, so there is no reason to assume
that the ancient Chinese did not understand logic or could not think logically. However, it seems safe to say that
in ancient China logic, or logical thinking, had never been elevated to such an important epistemological status as
it had enjoyed in the West. This is because, points out Graham (1992), Chinese thinking engages in “correlative
thinking” (pp. 97-119) as opposed to analytical thinking, that is, “in terms of process rather than of static entities” (p. 77). That means, by extension, that the logical wouldn’t be singled out as the most important mode of thinking or reasoning in the Chinese mind.

It appears that I now have more grounding to argue why pre-Qin rhetoric is holistic—because of the “process” mode of thinking that underlies it. “Process” indicates motion, which in rhetoric would be “fluidity”, a feature Graham identifies in such classical texts as *Dao De Jing* and *Yi Jing* (Book of Changes) (pp. 97-119). Thus we may have seen an epistemological reason behind the open-ended, anti-logical nature of pre-Qin rhetoric. Logocentrism, it would seem, has no place in Chinese rhetoric.

Like the word “rhetoric”, there is no equivalent in Chinese (either classical or modern) to Greco-Roman ethos, but like “rhetoric”, there are some concepts in Chinese rhetoric that are close enough to the concept of ethos defined in Western rhetoric. One example would be *chen* (sincerity) and *chen-yan* (truthful words), as identified by Lu (1998, p. 175). Since ethos is to make one appear good or trustworthy to an audience, these rhetorical concepts in ancient China can be said to have some connotations of ethos as understood by Western students. To me, what appears most significant in terms of ethos is probably the idea of *xiu-ci li qi chen* (roughly translated as “rhetoric oriented towards trust”) in PQR. According to Chen and Wang (1998), Confucius (551-479 B.C.) was the first to invent the term *xiu-ci* in Chinese rhetorical history (p. 32). Because the Great Master was so obsessively concerned with the moral codes of society, it’s not hard to see why he related *xiu-ci* (rhetoric) to *li qi chen* (establishing trust). The next question is how to establish trust: through individual appeal? or through the communal or cultural? My answer is, obviously, in the latter.

In modern Chinese, the closest concept to ethos is probably “face” (*mian-zi*). Goffman (1967) defines face as one’s “self-image” projected through approved attributes of a society, suggesting that it is more than an individual property. The reason I believe face constitutes ethos in Chinese rhetoric is because it directly points to one’s credibility—in terms of how one is accepted in a community. Without face, without social acceptance. Then, of course, without credibility. Since face is not seen as entirely of a personal quality in Chinese society, we can reasonably assume that Chinese rhetoric approaches ethos in a way different from Western rhetoric. How different? I think it ought to be explored and discussed in a separate paper given the weight of the subject.

References


PRE-QIN RHETORIC AND ITS “CHINESE” CHARACTERISTICS