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## A sidelong glance

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### 1 Comparative perspectives

Any comparative approach to rhetoric in early China in relation to rhetoric in ancient Greece or in the West generally bristles with methodological difficulties. As in many other comparative endeavours, the application of the dichotomy of “close comparison” and “distant comparison” may be helpful. When one considers things of roughly the same class – do I beg the question by saying: such as, e.g., Chinese and Western “rhetoric”? – that are *distant* from each other, be it in time or space or otherwise, correspondences and similarities stand out amongst all that is different and become particularly interesting. Light might be shed in both directions. As “everything is somewhat similar to everything else”, as the saying goes, there is admittedly a risk of seeing too much, or making too much of it, especially by disregarding the larger context. Used with caution and common sense, however, the heuristic value of such an approach is in my opinion beyond doubt. On the other hand, there is the *close* comparison, i.e. the comparison of things and functions and practices and theories that belong to the same cultural tradition, in a common context. When comparing in such close circumstances the focus will naturally be on differences and dissimilarities, e.g. between the rhetorical theories of Hermagoras and Hermogenes, or between Roman rhetoric and Greek

It will be helpful in any attempted comparison of things Chinese and Greek, including that thing called “rhetoric”, to give some thought to the overall comparative perspective. Granted the considerable – fundamental? – differences between the culture(s) of early China and those of the ancient Mediterranean world, it is tempting to look for similarities and common features. They are not too difficult to find, human nature being what it is, and the nature of power and politics as well. The need for effective verbal communication and for persuasion and propaganda is ubiquitous. There is no doubt in my mind that Chinese “rhetoric” at a certain level can be partly identified and partly paralleled with Western rhetoric



– and be interestingly contrasted with it. With due caution it can be described and discussed in Western terms. But the question arises whether there is enough closeness and sufficient sameness for these two entities to be fruitfully subjected to a close comparison. To what extent do we observe varieties of the same species?

## 2 Rhetorical questions

A conference like the one which gave rise to this publication invites reflection about what rhetoric is, or rather what is meant by “rhetoric” and “rhetorical” whenever those notoriously Protean terms are employed. Inevitably, given the long and chequered history of rhetoric, the terms will be used in different senses, and these days increasingly so, since rhetoric has become fashionable, or let us say: the use of the words “rhetoric” and “rhetorical” has become fashionable.

There is first the phrase “rhetoric of ...”, dear to many these days. I seem to detect three senses in which this phrase is used. For the most part, the phrase directs our attention simply to the way things are expressed and talked about in a certain field, or how a field is “covered” or “served” verbally. Rhetoric then is very close to what otherwise mostly called the “discourse” within a field (of religion, of economics, family planning, beauty etc.). Then, there may be a focus on the formal characteristics and the aesthetic qualities of the texts in question; the “rhetoric of” a text implies that there is an element of artfulness in it, that it is consciously and conscientiously crafted. Finally, the “rhetoric of ...” phrase may assume the employment of rhetoric in a bad sense (but one that for many is still to-day the main sense), involving insincerity, disguise, duplicity, and cheating. The rhetoric of integration and democratization that resounds in political debate may cover up what is really going on, as words are contradicted by facts.

Ancient Western rhetoric developed into a comprehensive and detailed system in which every linguistic and logical device had its name and its recommended use. There are the rhetorical tropes and figures, some of which are figures of words, others of thoughts; there are the different types of *enthymemes* and examples, and the several kinds of *topoi* or argumentative entities; there are the rules for the best distribution of arguments and the right use of the various kinds of introductions and of the carefully distinguished levels of style: the grand, the middle and the slight (in one version). *Et cetera*. But it is a trite truth in the writings of the ancient rhetoricians that nature had priority over art, practical rhetoric over theory. Rhetorical doctrine and the rhetorical inventory were extracted, so to say, from practice. And rhetorical practice itself, the systematic use of linguistic and logical resources to achieve an effect on an audience, was the empiri-



cally grounded, qualified enhancement of the exploitation of the natural resources of language and thus of the mind. In the final analysis, rhetoric – or proto-rhetoric – in the sense of a more than a “degree zero” use of language, is there from the outset.

Seen in this perspective, a somewhat loose use of the term “rhetoric” – such as has been the case in the conference “Masters of Disguise” – is not hard to justify. Texts are called rhetorical if only they strike us as particularly well-wrought and well-aimed, if they are embellished and contrived in some sense. References to the rhetorical character of a text in this sense are often impressionistic and not based on any detailed analysis. Thus it does not provide a solid basis for comparison. To identify and systematize the technicalities of texts is a prerequisite for close comparison. How far do the technical terms of Western classical rhetoric cover the linguistic and argumentative realities we find in Chinese texts? In spite of some very interesting work having been done already<sup>1</sup>, much more remains to be done.

All rhetorical devices are means to an end, the very end of rhetoric, which by its traditional definition is persuasion: to come across, to prevail on others, to win over an audience. Persuasion has been with us and will be with us for so long as there are conflicts of opinion and of interest and power, in the West as well as in China. The use of coercion or brute force by one party in a conflict is one way of winning and keeping control over people. Persuasion by way of words is another and a softer way, and thus more acceptable in the first place. But persuasion entails ethical problems of its own, of which I will mention only four. They are based on some of the core concepts of classical rhetoric (in its original oral form, although for the most part it is as relevant for written texts as well).

First, one cannot have the use of the spoken word without performance and display – the orator himself comes into play. The assumption is that an audience has to believe in the orator before it can believe in what he says. Thus the character of the orator is a major theme in ancient rhetoric. The basic thesis is that an orator must be in some sense “a good man” (*vir bonus* in Latin). One variety of the theory has it that, since virtue is one and indivisible, goodness in speaking cannot exist apart from goodness generally. Some stress the mundane fact that if one is lacking in intellectual or moral qualities and even suffers from bad conscience, one will simply not be able to work out and deliver a speech properly. For Aristotle, another aspect is more important, viz., that the “character” (*êthos* in Greek) of the speaker is not that of the individual who speaks, but *the persona* which that

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. by Lu Xing 1998, Unger 2004 or by Harbsmeier in his ongoing *Thesaurus linguae sericae* (tls.uni-hd.de). Cf. also Harbsmeier 1999, 2001.



individual creates and conveys through his very speech. Character is one of the “technical” resources of the art, not a social given (although Aristotle agrees that it helps if the individual in question is a good guy). This makes every orator into a self-fashioner and potentially into a “master of disguise”.

Second, in the mainstream rhetorical thinking of antiquity the orator always adapts himself to an ascribed role. In ceremonial and celebratory contexts, such as at public funerals or religious festivals, this is unproblematic: the role of the orator is essentially to act and speak according to convention and to give to the audience what they are entitled to get. Consensus and the strengthening of communal values is the goal. But classical rhetorical doctrine is overwhelmingly concerned with political and judicial debate. What orators learn above all is to be partisan, to argue one side of a case, to make selective, one-sided presentations. Although trained to systematically expose every aspect of an issue and to muster all possible arguments either way, when performing they were expected to disguise or deform or at least to diminish one half of the matter. The redeeming feature is that an audience was meant to be exposed to the presentations of both parties and only then to reach a decision according to the best of their judgement.

Thirdly, orators needed to tailor their message to the capacities of an audience. Too many premises, too fine distinctions, too full arguments may be spoilt on it. *Ad hoc* or “*ad homines*” presentation is everything. This was a sore issue in the conflict between rhetoric and philosophy in antiquity. The question how a speech relates to the facts of the matter, or to truth, if you will, is in principle only a version (albeit an extreme version) of how words relate to things, how language relates to reality – would “reveal” or “disguise” be the more appropriate metaphor? I leave aside the deeper philosophical issue. Suffice it to say that the rhetoricians had a vivid sense of how big a difference the choice of one particular word or phrasing over another makes for the picture the orator paints of something, and thus for the persuasive appeal it will have. The caution and conscientiousness in the choice of words also extend to metaphors and examples, so important for making things and persons appear the way the orator wants them to appear. Not only an infelicitous phrase, even more an ill-conceived metaphor or comparison, and an inappropriate example or parallel, may spoil the persuasive effect.

A fourth and last problematic aspect of persuasion is the evocation and exploitation of emotions in the audience. In Aristotle, the emotions of the audience serve persuasion on a par with the character of the orator and the arguments of his speech. I will mention only three ways in which emotions may come into play: One is by means of the character of the orator when the orator is, as he should be, so moved and engaged by his own words that he infects the audience with the same emotions. (It is mostly assumed that it is not sufficient for an orator to fake



those emotions, he has to work himself into them, be it fear, disgust, joy, pity or whatever.) Then there is that vividness which can only be conveyed by a rich and varied use of verbal illustration and imagery, whether in the narrative itself or by way of metaphor and example. In rhetorical theory, the visual aspects of the speech are of fundamental importance. The orator must “put things before the eyes” of the audience (*ante oculos ponere*) as Cicero says.<sup>2</sup> Finally there is the music of the language, the rhythms and sounds of a well-composed text that will carry the listener away, sometimes perturbed by its alarming character, or, as is more often the case, happy and elated, and in any case: ready to follow the orator wherever he takes him. The message is *in* the medium.

It should be added that emotions in the tradition of ancient rhetoric are not understood as resulting from or consisting in subjective feelings, something irrational that overwhelms us and for which we are not accountable. While being personal to each individual, emotions in the Aristotelian and rhetorical tradition are objective and arise for a good reason and may therefore also assist us in our judgements, just like reason does.

### 3 Seven points of orientation in ancient rhetoric

In what follows I offer some aspects of ancient rhetoric in a nutshell, with a particular view to identifying its *Sitz im Leben* in the ancient world, and in the hope that it may serve as a foil to some similar pinning down of rhetoric or “rhetoric” in early China.<sup>3</sup>

1. *Rhetoric as oratory.* Rhetoric came of age in what was essentially an oral culture. To be able to wield the spoken word was a must for those who wanted to literally make themselves heard, especially in the small, self-governed communities of ancient Greece, where decision-making was based on debates in the popular assembly and justice was administered in popular courts. It is hard to point to a political leader in classical Athens who is not also a great speaker. The festive kind of oratory which was practised on celebratory occasions was called epideic-

<sup>2</sup> Cicero, *Pro Marcello* 2.9. Cf. “*sub aspectum subiectio*”, Cicero, *De oratore* 3.53.202 and “*sub oculis subiectio*”, Quintilian 9.2.40,

<sup>3</sup> A good historical overview of ancient rhetoric may be found, e.g. in Pernot (2000). Andersen (2001) follows a thematic and synthetic approach. For concise presentations of rhetorical theory in Greece and Rome respectively, see Schirren (2008) and Andersen (2008). The bibliography at the end of this article also lists some fairly comprehensive companion volumes to ancient rhetoric, such as Dominik / Hall (eds.) 2007, Gunderson (ed.) 2009, Worthington (ed.) 2007.



tic or “display rhetoric” not only because it displayed the qualities of that which or those who are praised, but because it was a display of oratorical skills. Public speaking was essential to the life of the community, and to speak well was a cultural ideal and a personal accomplishment.

2. *Rhetoric as theory.* According to Greek anecdotal tradition, rhetoric was first taught by Corax and Teisias in the wake of the expulsion of tyrants from Syracuse in the 470s BCE. They taught set pieces and sly arguments that would work in the assembly and the courts. During the following century a plethora of rhetorical manuals were produced. They are lost to us, and they are dwarfed by Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* in three books (mainly from the 340s BCE), which is the foundational text of rhetorical theory in the West, featuring amongst other things the theory of the three rhetorical genres, the deliberative, the judicial and the epideictic, and the three means of persuasion, rational argument, the orator’s character, and the disposition or emotion created in the listener. The consummation of ancient theory can be found in Quintilian’s huge *Institutio oratoria* (“The orator’s education”) from around 90 CE. An aspiring orator would there be taken through every stage in the production of a speech – the collection of relevant points, the disposition of the material, the verbal and stylistic elaboration of the text, and memorization and delivery. Rhetorical theory was a most vital part of the Greco-Roman intellectual culture. To varying degrees, what I here call theory encompassed not only practical instruction, but also discussion of the scope and status of rhetoric.

3. *Rhetoric as the mould of education and as a cultural pursuit.* General education in antiquity – mostly private and for boys only – was focused on language and literature with a view to the productive and creative potential in the pupils. In the Roman world, where we most conveniently can observe the system, after elementary schooling – offering roughly the “three Rs” – those who went on, entered on a programme of *progymnasmata* or “preliminary exercises” which would not only train their memory and make them familiar with history and mythology, but also put them in command of the literary forms and figures and of argumentative techniques that would make them produce good analyses and presentations of any given subject. The most resourceful would then go on to be taught by the *rhetor*, in whose classes they would work with more specifically *rhetorical* exercises in the form of *suasoria* and *controversia*, fictitious deliberative and judicial speeches, respectively. Even those who did not become prominent in public life and thus practising, professional orators had gone through the rhetorical educational curriculum. An educated person in Greco-Roman antiquity was *eo ipso* a *rhetorically* educated person. Rhetorical tradition and theory provided a common frame of



reference and a common standard. The practice of rhetoric as a pastime was common among the upper classes.

4. *Rhetoric as a formative force in literature.* Rhetoric had repercussions in almost all areas of textual production. While performance always remained important, rhetoric moved on from the oral sphere into written texts, not only in the obvious sense that many speeches were also edited and circulated in writing. Every literary genre was subject to the overwhelming influence of rhetoric. Characters in drama and epic tend to express themselves rhetorically, that is according to rhetorical norms and conventions. Conventional rhetoric would teach one what kind of words goes with what level of style, and what kind of things could be treated in what way. Appropriateness reigned. While to-day, many see only the limiting or stifling influence of rhetoric in that sense, we should not forget that a rigid system and strict rules provide strong support for those who are out to produce texts.

5. *Rhetoric between aesthetics and logic.* A core topic in classical rhetoric and one that takes up much space in rhetorical treatises, is *ornatus*, the elaboration and embellishment of language: choice and combination of words, use of tropes and figures, sound and rhythm. Oratory was eloquence, rhetoric was the art of speaking well. For some genres, in some periods – in Roman Imperial times, or in the Baroque era –, that has been the dominant aspect of rhetoric, while persuasion has receded into the background. On the other hand, there is the argumentative arsenal that rhetoric employs: examples and *enthymemes* (that is, less than certain deductions), a whole array of *topoi*, the distinction between more or less certain indications and signs, etc. This argumentative aspect of rhetoric was admittedly even more important to Aristotle than to most others in Antiquity (although the fullest treatment, as usual, is in Quintilian). It remained an important part of the domain of rhetoric until, in the West, it was usurped by philosophical logic in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. To rhetoric then was left mainly the ornamental or aesthetic aspect of language, which is what most people associate rhetoric with today.

6. *Rhetoric vs. philosophy.* Throughout Greco-Roman antiquity, philosophers were concerned with the quest for truth and certainty, the nature of things, the right kind of life and the right thing to do in life, and they were mostly given to *theoria* or contemplation, scorning public life. Rhetoricians thrived on the assumption that there are always two sides to a case and that the best one can do is to try and find out what is *probable*, so to say by any means. They taught not to shrink from one's obligations as a member of the community. The conflict between rhetoric and philosophy and the competition between rhetoricians and philosophers is one of the great topics in the intellectual history of Greece and Rome.



7. *Rhetoric as a theory of communication*. Lastly, rhetoric can be seen as what today we would call a theory of communication. Aristotle's well-known triad: *logos, ethos, pathos* ("argument", "character", "emotion") may serve as a pointer. Or Cicero's claim that the orator should instruct, entertain and move his audience (*docere, delectare, movere*). Even solely within the classical context the theory can be filled in and worked out to quite some level of sophistication. And what is more, elements of the theory can be put to good use even today. Classical rhetoric is still with us in the West. In its time – and we speak of some one thousand years from, say, Corx and Teisias until St. Augustine – it made its mark so decidedly that, after a time-out during the middle ages, it is still a living and productive part of our cultural heritage.

## 4 Envoi

Rhetoric – Ancient rhetoric – refers to much more than just communicative cleverness and the ability to craft a text effectively. It goes beyond the technicalities of tropes and figures and other aesthetic devices, of sound and rhythm and structure. Whether my seven points above on rhetoric – Ancient rhetoric – and my remarks on some standard issues – the fashioning of character, the partisanship, the intellectual shortcuts, the exploitation of emotions – situate it close to what is called rhetoric in early China, or rather makes the two more distant, I leave it to others to judge.

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