

## **Cultural Factors and Rhetorical Patterns in Classical Chinese Argumentation**

Yingqin Liu, Texas Tech University

### **Abstract**

This article discusses the interrelationships between traditional concepts of Chinese society, fundamental cultural values, and the rhetorical patterns preferred in classical Chinese argumentative discourse. It attempts to explore how certain rhetorical patterns such as argument by analogy, by authority, and by example in classical Chinese rhetoric are closely related to unique Chinese cultural factors and might be special cultural “products” of Chinese culture. The article also suggests that EFL writing instruction in a Chinese context provide Chinese EFL students with greater opportunities to learn about Western culture for the purpose of increasing the students’ ability to conduct effective intercultural communication both orally and in written form.

Language scholars and rhetoricians recognize the interrelationship between rhetoric and culture. James Berlin (1998) states that rhetoric is a social invention, one that arises out of a time and place, a peculiar social context, establishing the conditions that make a peculiar kind of communication possible in that particular time and place. Similarly, Xing Lu (1998) argues that “a new understanding of rhetoric” should start with “an understanding of the realm, role, and function of rhetorical concepts derived from and addressed to cultural forces and social contexts” (p.57). In addition, in his book *Communication and Culture in Ancient India and China*, Robert Oliver (1971) also notes that “East is not West. Cultures differ, and minds, feelings, and intentions in differing societies intermesh in different ways. Discourse occurs, or is constrained, under different circumstances and has different styles for different reasons” (p.11). Finally, as Kirk St. Amant (1995) suggests, there is no universal rhetorical standard but, rather, human rhetorical preferences and strategies vary from group to group, and from culture to culture.

The present article discusses the interrelationships between traditional conceptions of Chinese society, fundamental cultural values, and rhetorical patterns that are preferred in classical Chinese argumentative discourse. The article attempts to explore how certain argumentative patterns in classical Chinese rhetoric are related to these unique Chinese cultural factors. Specifically, the article demonstrates that certain argumentative patterns in classical Chinese rhetoric such as argumentation by analogy, by authority, and by example might be special cultural “products” of Chinese culture. Implications for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction will also be discussed.

### **Traditional Chinese Society and Classical Chinese Argumentation**

China has been a densely populated, labor-intensive agrarian culture since ancient times. Leon E. Stover (1974) describes it thusly:

The Agrarian State is an archaic form of civilization that in China lasted into the twentieth century...The absence of economic alternatives to farming on the part of the peasantry immobilizes it on the land. The capacity of the land to support human society is limited by the fact that the society specializes in only one type of economic landscape, that of cereal crops tendered by villagers. This type of landscape, repeated in cellular units across China. (p. 6)

This economic situation made Chinese people's survival dependent on the peaceful cooperation of people in communities for the irrigation and planting of crops. As people were unable or unwilling to change their vocations and residential areas (for both geographic and politic reasons), there were few changes in their life-patterns from year to year (Becker, 1986). The cycle of planting and harvest continued inexorably, and there was little room for radical experimentation with new methods of agriculture, for if a new method failed, some of the populace would likely starve. Becker notes that, "when travel and change were thus minimized, experience could be accumulated only through the repetitions of years, and the one who had the most experience was naturally the village elder" (p. 76). Therefore, when a flood or plague threatened the community, the elder was always the one consulted about what worked best against such problems as he possessed an accumulation of knowledge concerning the best practice in such a situation.

Through such historical evolution, China developed a hierarchical society in which the very notion of the two people being absolutely equal was almost inconceivable (Becker, 1986). Age was equated with authority; age and rank became the unquestioned basis for social distinctions of inferior and superior.

Andy Kirkpatrick (1995) states that, when we consider the hierarchical nature of ancient Chinese society, "it seems possible to make the generalization that, in a society where hierarchy plays a fundamental role, the persuasion of a superior by an inferior will be expressed in an indirect way" (p. 289). In other words, the relative status and hierarchy between speaker and audience directly affects the use of language. Norman Fairclough (1989), in his discussion of a society's ability to structure the order of discourse, asserts that power relationships affect discourse structures. Thus, the hierarchical nature of Chinese society influenced its use of language, particularly, the rhetorical patterns of Chinese classical argumentative discourse. This might help explain some of the underlying contrastive features of Chinese and Western argumentation/ rhetoric (although we will not discuss the origins of Western rhetoric in any depth here). It is a historical fact that the forensic law-court origins of Greek rhetoric developed in the context of rhetors of equal social standing arguing a case while the origins of Chinese rhetoric operated in a more rigid political and hierarchical context. The former situation encourages directness in many (although not all) cases while, by contrast, the latter encourages a degree of indirectness. Again, as Kirkpatrick (1995) argues:

When people of lower status have to communicate with people of a higher status and who have power over them, they will normally use language that is indirect. Persuasion and argument in such an environment will therefore tend to adopt methods of reasoning that are also indirect, methods such as chain-reasoning and by analogy, which themselves are far more suited to patterns of inductive argument than to the directness of deductive argument. The latter are more likely to flourish in societies or contexts where people share similar levels of power or status. (p. 291)

### **Core Chinese Cultural Values and Classical Chinese Argumentation**

The agricultural and hierarchical nature of Chinese society, in addition to having influenced the mode of Chinese argumentation, also made harmony one of the core values of Chinese culture. Bih Shia Huang (2002) states that harmony was the final goal that the ancient Chinese tried to achieve. In ancient China, cities as well as villages were crowded with people, and the people could not afford unnecessary conflicts because of these cramped living conditions. Therefore, they developed, as Oliver (1971) suggests, a high regard for tolerance and a political ideal with less justice and equality than harmony. Harmony then was the major concern in providing for a stable society in ancient China, and most of the thinkers of that time proposed the notions of harmony in an attempt to save society from chaos. Harmony, then, became an essential content of Chinese rhetoric. Lu (1998) observes that scholars believe the purpose of Chinese rhetoric is to achieve harmony. Oliver also asserts that the, “primary function of discourse is not to enhance the welfare of the individual speaker or listener but to promote harmony” (p. 261) in Chinese rhetoric. In addition, Huang (2002) notes that, in a hierarchical society such as China, “harmony appeared more important than any thing else, because inequality and injustice in a hierarchical society might be potential forces to create chaos” (p. 95).

Confucius, one of the most influential philosophers in Chinese history, was a supporter of hierarchy in society and believed that everyone in this hierarchy should be satisfied with the role he or she was supposed to play in order to maintain the social order. Confucius regarded harmony as the stabilizer of the society; accordingly, his teachings were all concerned with promoting social harmony. One of his core teachings, “li,” rites or proper speeches and behaviors, regulated communication among people of different ranks, genders and ages for the purpose of achieving social harmony. “Li” set up five relationships between family and society as Oliver (1971) observes:

One of the distinctive social achievements of ancient China was the development of the principles of li, or of decorum, in the five basic relationships which concerns everyone: “The duties are those between sovereign and minister, between father and son, between husband and wife, between elder brother and younger, and those belonging to the intercourse of friends. Those five are the duties of universal obligation. Through careful management of these relationships, the primary goal of harmony could be maintained; for all would know what to expect, and the natural anticipations of conduct would be fulfilled.” (p. 92)

In fact, Chinese society’s strong emphasis on harmony has influenced the development of other related cultural values. One of these is the idea of saving face. J. Vernon Jensen (1992) suggests that, “To preserve social harmony, one must learn how to save face for another person, how to present uncomfortable truths in an unthreatening way or how to be appropriately ambiguous” (p. 155). From the ancient times to the present, Chinese people not only respected the dignity of others but also expected to retain their own dignity as well during a conversation. For example, during a debate, one party does not push the other to a “dead end” but, instead, employs the strategy of “saving face” to avoid this undesirable situation. The strategy of “saving face,” then often acts as a pacifier to avoid conflicts. The purpose is not to embarrass the counterpart but to produce constructive communication and obtain an expected end. Carolyn Matalen (1985) claims that saving face follows from the fact of social stability (immobility) in ancient China and has important consequences for the practice of Chinese rhetoric. That is, considering saving other’s face serves to achieve social

harmony through encouraging Chinese people to conform to the social ceremony, etiquette and respect to tradition in both their language and behaviors.

Another key Chinese cultural value was respect for authority because authority and submission were two factors that promoted harmonious relationships in ancient China. As Christopher Smith (1991) points out:

In traditional Chinese society, harmony could only be achieved if all people adhered to their position in the hierarchy, whether it be high or low... Thus the sovereign was dominant over his subjects; the father over his sons; the husband over his wife; an elder brother over his younger brother; and an older friend over a younger friend.  
(p. 34-5)

These hierarchical relationships were based on rank, gender, and seniority. The purpose of distinguishing rank in this way was to establish order within a family and in society as a whole. Submission to the superior authority also implied that each individual had to sacrifice his or her own interests to obtain the best interests of the group. According to Oliver (1971), Confucian respect for established authority rests on social priority over individual preferences in order to maintain social harmony or order.

### **The Dominant Rhetorical Patterns in Classical Chinese Argumentation**

In this part, we will look at how the values of hierarchy and respect for authority influenced classical Chinese argumentative discourse. As previously stated, Chinese argumentation (in the classical sense) typically takes three forms: argument by analogy, argument by authority, and argument by example.

First, argument by analogy is the dominant means of persuasion and argumentation in China. According to Richard Lanham's (1991) definitions, analogy means reasoning or arguing from parallel cases. Karl Kao (1994) explains that, analogy, as the predominant form of reasoning in Chinese, is in fact also fundamental to its literary *xici* (Chinese term for rhetoric); it also underlies the operation of some of the most important Chinese rhetorical device, for instance, *bi* (metaphors) and *xing* (introducing secondary information into the main subject) and *shilein* (allusion).

Analogy is an often used feature in the works of Confucius, Lao Tzu, and Chuang Tzu. Historical examples abound in Confucius' *Analects*. In Waley's (1956) collection, we see the following: "The Master said I do not see what use a man can be put to, whose word cannot be trusted. How can a wagon be made to go if it has no yoke-bar or a carriage, if it has no collar-bar" (p. 93). Similarly, Chuang Tzu's works are filled with fables, myths, and stories used as analogies. Mary Garret (1991) discusses the extensive use of analogical reasoning in early Mohism, suggesting that, "since this ethical system was based on supernatural agency, Heaven, they often made assertions about the nature and attributes of Heaven which lend themselves to analogical argument" (p. 372). She further suggests that analogical reasoning has been heavily used because of its simple structure, the monosyllabic nature of both oral and written classical Chinese, and by its ready dependence on intuition since it appeals mainly to the audience's perception of similarities. In addition, the characteristics of indirectness and non-assertiveness inherent in analogy are especially valued by the Chinese as it allows for indirect appeals to those higher in social status. Further, this characteristic also helps people save face during a conversation or debate when there exists a potential conflict as it allows the speaker to shift focus to something analogous to but potentially less threatening than the topic under discussion. With preserving social harmony as a social ideal, indirect expressions

realized by using analogy help avoid head-on conflicts and are conducive to maintaining a peaceful society.

Similarly, argument from authority has been another dominant mode of argumentation in Chinese discourse. Argument from authority usually refers to a quotation from past prestigious figures whose deeds and speeches are used as models. The quotation and its source must be credible, both ones that most people hold in high regard. As Garrett (1991) explains, "Argument from authority involves quoting a text of some antiquity, reflecting the belief that the distilled wisdom of the past could be applied to the present" (p. 299). Confucianism, Taoism, and other philosophical schools of ancient China rely heavily on argument from authority, as they consistently refer back to the sayings of the ancient masters. Confucius (1938) said, "I have 'transmitted what was taught to me without making up anything of my own.' I have been faithful to and loved the Ancients...I am simply one," he said, "loves the past and who is diligent in investigating... I... am not one of those who have innate knowledge" (p. 19). Chuang Tzu wrote, "I shall substantiate what I say by appeals of antiquity... He who substantiates his words by appeals to antiquity is a servant of the Sages of old. Although I utter the words of warning and take him [the one with whom I communicate] to task, it is the Sages of old who speak and not I" (Lin, 1942, p. 647). Mo Tzu was also fond of quoting from the wisdom of the past. In the topic of "the Will of Heaven," Mo Tzu said: "Who were those who, loving and benefiting others and obeying the will of Heaven, won Heaven's reward? Yao, Shun, Yu, and T'ang, Wen and Wu, the sage kings of the Three Dynasties of antiquity. What did Yao, Shun, Yu, T'ang, Wen, and Wu devote themselves to? They devoted themselves to universality and partiality" (Watson, 1967, p. 89).

The devoted disciples of these great ancient philosophers, then, certainly made Confucius and Taoist sages the source of authority. However, it is important to note that the "practice of citing authoritative texts as evidence... did not end argument; it merely moves it to the commentaries on such works, where battles were fought over how to interpret their meaning or over issues of textual corruption" (Garrett, 1991, p. 299). In addition, argument from authority connotes not only status but also credibility. Thus, the citing of authority can increase the credibility of the writer/ speaker if the writer/speaker is unknown to the public. Argument from authority is also intimately linked with the Chinese value of a deep respect for age, for the elderly, and for building a clearly structured hierarchical society in which everyone knows one's place. As Oliver (1971) has put it, "It was more likely that a person would be wrong about what he thought he saw or felt than that the condensed and evaluated wisdom of the past could be misleading" (p. 90). Jensen (1992) further observes that, intimately intertwined with age is filial piety, which is looked upon as the chief of Chinese virtues; it is at once the social, the political, and the religious duty of every individual, because the family is the unit of society, and filial piety is its bulwark.

Finally, argument by example provides another common practice in Chinese argumentation. This is partly because, like argument by analogy, it uses strategy of indirect approach to carry the author's intention of criticizing or enlightening a certain audience without making the audience lose their "face." The use of argument by historical example (as opposed to deductive argument) is well summarized by A. S. Cua (1985). He points out that "Philosophy means a kind of wisdom that is necessary for the conduct of life, particularly the conduct of government... [I]t sought to exercise persuasive power on princes, and... resorted, not to deductive reasoning, but to the exploitation of historical examples" (p. 133). As an

example of argument by analogy and by historical example, we can look at an excerpt from *The Discourses of Salt and Iron (Yan Tie Lun)* written by Huan Kuan in 75BC and translated by Gale (1931). Here, a debate is depicted between the ‘worthies and scholars’ and the Lord Grand Secretary. The debate concerns the government monopoly on salt and iron, and the reasoning used in the debate provides good examples of Chinese arguing by historical example (Cua 1985):

The Literati: Confucius observed that the ruler of a kingdom or the chief of a house is not concerned about his people being few, but about lack of equitable treatment; nor is he concerned about poverty, but over the presence of discontentment. Thus the son of Heaven should not speak about much and little, the feudal lords should not talk about advantage and detriment, ministers about gain and loss, but they should cultivate benevolence and righteousness, to set an example to the people, and extend wide their virtuous conduct to gain the people’s confidence. Then will nearby folk lovingly flock to them and distant peoples submit to their authority. Therefore, the master conqueror not fight, the expert warrior needs no soldiers; the truly great commander requires not to set his troops in battle array. Cultivate virtue and temple in the hall, then you need only show a bold front to the enemy and your troops will return home in victory. The Prince who practices benevolent administration should be matchless in the world; for him what use is expenditure. (p. 4-5)

In this excerpt, instead of directly criticizing the ruler’s shortcomings in governing the country, the author used Confucius as his historical example to persuade “the son of Heaven,” the emperor, that cultivating benevolence and righteousness, setting an example to the people, and extending officials’ virtuous conduct was the most effective way to gain the people’s confidence in the government. We may also note that the propositional structure of the argument in this example of reasoning by historical example is inductive and follows a “because- therefore” sequence. Also, its tone is indirect. Thus, the author might make his viewpoints on the subject more easily accepted by those who were higher in rank than himself.

### **Summary of Classical Chinese Rhetorical Patterns of Argumentation**

The above brief discussion indicates that the dominant patterns of classical Chinese argumentation (argument by analogy, argument by authority, and argument by historical example) can be regarded as the products of influences of the unique Chinese cultural values, and Chinese traditional hierarchical society.

The core cultural value of social harmony makes Chinese people not only pay special attention to respecting the dignity of others but also try to avoid unnecessary conflicts by using tacit or more roundabout persuasive strategies. In such a way, harmony can be preserved and reinforced. Likewise, the hierarchical nature of Chinese society encourages ordinary people to criticize their superiors in indirect ways such as using argument by analogy, argument by authority, and argument by historical examples, in order to help save the face of those in higher position and to make their criticism more easily accepted.

The discussion also shows that rhetoric is about relationships and that different cultures define and value relationships differently (Matalen, 1985). As Robert Kaplan (1996) suggests, rhetoric is always rich in its societal and cultural contexts and, indeed, is cultural-specific.

### **The Implications for EFL Writing Instructions in Intercultural Communication Contexts**

The discussion of the relationship between Chinese rhetoric and culture in this article has some very definite implications for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching in general and Chinese EFL teaching, in particular.

In the first case, EFL writing instructors should encourage students learning argumentation in English to give more attention to the peculiar cultural construction of Western argumentation as it differs in certain degree from that used by other cultures. For example, Edward T. Hall (1959, 1976), a well-known American anthropologist, in his theory of low-context and high-context cultures, discloses that, in a global picture, Northern and Western (Germanic) countries, would be low context, explicit cultures that use direct, linear discourse when communicating; in contrast, Southern and East (Asian) countries would be high context, implicit cultures that prefer indirect, digressive/circular communication patterns (Uljin and St. Amant, 1995). Although Hall has been criticized for a bit overgeneralization on the cultural differences of communication styles between the West and East, he does draw people's attention to some preferred culturally identified communication styles in intercultural communication situation. The insight we can draw from Hall's theory and from our discussion in this article is that ESL writing instruction should always lay emphasis on audience awareness of a writer from a multicultural perspective in addition to teaching basic writing conventions.

This is particularly true in the case of Chinese EFL writing instructions as Western and Chinese argumentation is different to some extent in terms of cultural orientation. Because argumentation reflects cultural values, only fluency such as coherent discourse formation in a second language is not sufficient to master argumentation in the target language. Instead, the student must understand the core cultural values associated with the second language and its writing conventions, which are different from those of Chinese in many ways because of uniqueness of Western culture. The more the Chinese EFL students become familiar themselves with the target language culture (i.e., that of the English-speaking in the West), the more they might be able to understand the discourse modes in general, and argumentation mode in particular, within that language community. Consequently, they might be able to increase their ability in conducting effective intercultural communication both orally and in written form.

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