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Incorporating Confucius and Ancient China into a Rhetorical Theory Course

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GIFTS Articles

*Theory/GIFT article***Incorporating Confucius and Ancient China into a Rhetorical Theory Course****Sara Drury, PhD**

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Abstract

In our globalized world, students of communication benefit from experiencing diverse cultures and perspectives throughout the curriculum. One way to encourage twenty-first century global learning is to infuse the study of Chinese discourse into rhetorical theory courses. This essay first provides a rationale for the importance of comparative rhetoric and a review of relevant literature on ancient Chinese rhetoric. Then, the essay details a three-week module on ancient Chinese rhetoric with readings and activities, and an appraisal of the activity, with the goal of demonstrating the necessity and feasibility of introducing undergraduate students to globalized rhetorical studies.

Key Words: Rhetoric, Confucius, Chinese Rhetoric, Comparative Rhetoric, Rhetorical Theory, Pedagogy, Diversity, and Globalization

Introduction

Today's students in higher education often hear that they live in a globalized world. Indeed, the world is increasingly interconnected—not only accessible via efficient air travel and technology, but also linked across geopolitics, economics, and culture. Intercultural, global learning is no longer an optional add-on to a college degree, but rather “one of the new basics in a contemporary liberal education” (AAC&U, 2007). To be engaged and active twenty-first century citizens, as well as successful and competitive employees in a global marketplace, U.S. college students need to be prepared to responsibly and productively engage diverse perspectives, as well as to identify connections and significant differences across societies (Bennett, Cornwell, Al-Lail, & Schenck, 2012; Sterns, 2009). Highlighting the importance of this educational goal, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) recognized “global learning” as a key learning outcome in its 2010 VALUE (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) Rubrics. The rubric describes global learning as demonstrating the “critical analysis of and an engagement with complex, interdependent global systems and legacies ... and their implications for people's lives and the earth's sustainability” (Rhodes, 2010).

In the field of communication studies, recent teaching innovations prepare our students to participate in this rapidly changing environment, encouraging meaningful reflection on and engagement with the globalized world (Driskill, 2007; Gareis, 2008; Heuman, 2009; Simmons & Chen, 2014). Less common, however, are pedagogical adjustments to courses that teach the

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historical development of rhetorical and communication studies. A survey of several undergraduate textbooks covering the rhetorical tradition yields a consistent framing around the rhetorical tradition of the Greco-Roman, Western canon (Bizzell & Herzberg, 2000; Herrick, 2012; Williams, 2009). While these texts often highlight the previously neglected contributions of women—an important, recent development—they also tend to be geographically focused around the Mediterranean origins of rhetoric and rhetorical theory. When diverse perspectives are included, they often relate to contemporary communication.

There are, however, multiple traditions of communication in the ancient world, and undergraduate instructors should teach a more global, comparative rhetoric (Mao, 2010). Encouraging responsible comparative study means instructors must strive to teach ancient rhetorics within the corresponding linguistic and cultural traditions while still providing space for students to compare and contrast with other rhetorical traditions (Kirkpatrick & Zu, 2012; Lyon, 2008). Teaching a more comparative approach to ancient rhetoric enables students to take the perspective of their own culture while recognizing the contributions of other cultures (Lyon, 2010), which encourages the sort of global learning deemed important for twenty-first-century students.

Of particular interest and potential are recent developments in comparative rhetorical scholarship on ancient Chinese discourse. Like the cultures in the traditional histories of rhetoric taught in undergraduate and graduate classrooms in the United States, China has rich philosophical and discursive traditions that trace back thousands of years. Today, it occupies a position of global prominence. Indeed, at 1.37 billion people, China is the most populous nation in the world (CIA, 2015) and the largest gross domestic product in the world at \$17.62 trillion—a statistics derived using purchasing power parity—an economic scaling method that captures the value of all services and goods produced into U.S. dollars (CIA, 2014). Pick up a recent monograph on globalization, and China is likely to play a featured role. Understanding contemporary China requires not only consideration of its current political and economic status, but also its history and cultural traditions—including ancient Chinese philosophy and communication practices.

In thinking about how to broaden rhetorical history to include non-Western rhetorics, China offers a compelling case, because of both its global influence and the prevalence of available and relevant communication studies scholarship. Yet for instructors with no background in ancient Chinese history, philosophy, or rhetoric, the task of infusing one's course with such material can be daunting. Writing in his 1932 work on the Chinese philosopher Mencius, the rhetorician I. A. Richards maintained that Chinese rhetoric must be taught “authentically . . . within its own tradition, yet providing space for students to compare and contrast, ultimately promoting greater understanding of the roles and functions of speech in the ancient world” (p. 87).

In the summer of 2012, I began the process of integrating Chinese rhetoric into an upper-level undergraduate course on ancient rhetorical theory, *Classical Rhetoric*. My primary goal was to broaden student understanding of language, ethics, virtue, the community, and the self across the ancient world. This task requires instructor and student alike to reflect on methodologies and assumptions, prompting an investigation of “our understanding of the Other” and “our understanding of ourselves” (Mao, 2007, p. 216). A challenge to this goal is how to encourage understanding without engaging in the “essentializing impulse”—the tendency to stereotype based on shallow perceptions of culture and diversity, prioritizing simple differences—that “can ostracize, trivialize, and reduce complexity of recognizing and coming to greater understandings

of diversity (p. 217). Lyon (2010) has commented on the appropriateness of rhetorical studies to engage in this comparative work: one of the key aspects of rhetorical study is “in recognizing and negotiating difference—*real* difference” (p. 351-352).

Comparative studies of ancient rhetorics encourage students to develop a greater understanding of the potentials and limits of speech and language across different societies, providing them historical foundations to interpret and analyze the rhetorics in the diverse, globalized world in which they live. The remainder of this essay details the process of adapting undergraduate courses in communication history and rhetorical theory to incorporate ancient Chinese rhetoric.

Exploring Chinese Rhetoric

Incorporating ancient China into a study of the rhetorical tradition carries two main learning objectives: first, students will identify and learn ancient Chinese perspectives on speech and argumentation; second, using knowledge learned about Greek, Roman, and Chinese rhetoric, students will compare and contrast significant themes in ancient rhetorical theory.

My own study of Chinese rhetoric began with an intensive two-week summer seminar at the University of Hawaii’s East-West Center, as part of an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Grant.¹ I mention this to demonstrate that despite my own lack of language training—a significant limitation that must be acknowledged, both here and in the classroom—teaching Chinese rhetoric does not require that the instructor speak Chinese.

Instructors wishing to commit to such a comparative rhetoric module on China are fortunate in the wealth of scholarship that has emerged in rhetoric and composition studies. Lu’s (1998) book *Rhetoric in Ancient China, Fifth to Third Century B.C.E.* provides an accessible and insightful comparison for those trained in Greco-Roman rhetoric. Recent special issues or sections of several rhetoric-focused journals offer further resources and pedagogical techniques on comparative rhetoric in general and Chinese rhetoric in particular (Mao, 2013; Mao, 2010; Swearingen & Mao, 2009; Wang, 2004), and scholarship in this area continues to grow (Combs, 2003; Garrett, 2012; Lipson & Binkley, 2009; Lu & Frank, 1993; You, 2010; You & Liu, 2009). Finally, those teaching ancient Chinese rhetoric can benefit from scholarship on philosophy of ancient China (Ames, 2002; Hall & Ames, 1995; Shankman & Durrant, 2002).

Teaching Confucius in Rhetorical Theory

While many avenues exist for infusing Chinese rhetoric into courses, the activity detailed here comes from a three-week unit in an upper-level Classical Rhetoric course focusing on the rhetoric of Confucius.² The course themes orient toward understanding rhetoric in the contexts of the individual, community, and governance, and engages in many traditional debates on wisdom, truth, ethics, and rhetoric’s influence on society, both in ancient times and today. Prior to the unit on Chinese rhetoric, students completed units on ancient Greek and Roman rhetoric. In keeping

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² All student material included in this essay has been approved by the Wabash College Institutional Review Board.

with my method for reading primary texts in the course, I approach the study of Chinese rhetoric through two orientations: first, focusing on the *theory* of rhetoric in Confucius, and second, reading Confucius' *Analects* as rhetoric (Confucius, Ames, & Rosemont, 1998). This provides an opportunity for undergraduate students to think in both theoretical and interpretative ways.

Reading Schedule and Themes

The following reflects a reading schedule for a three-week unit on ancient Chinese rhetoric, relying on *Analects* and drawing heavily from categorizations of *yan* (speech) (Lu, 1998) and *bian* (argumentation) (Lu & Frank, 1993) in ancient China.

Table A

Sample Schedule

WEEK 1	Ames, R. T. (2002). "Thinking through comparisons;" Ames, R.T. & Rosemont, H., Jr. (1998), "Introduction," selections. Lecture on <i>yan</i> and <i>bian</i> Confucius, <i>Analects</i> . Book 1
WEEK 2	Confucius, <i>Analects</i> . Book 2 Confucius, <i>Analects</i> . Sayings of Wisdom: Books 4, 7, 12, 14, 16
WEEK 3	Reading: Confucius, <i>Analects</i> . Narrative: Book 7.11, 12–13, 15.6–15.8 Reflections

The module begins with a philosophical orientation to reading cross-culturally (Ames, 2002). Ames advises the reader that to understand Confucianism, one must "feel its pulse rather than locate an artery" (p. 95). The visceral metaphor provides an opportunity to discuss with students how to appropriately engage cultures other than their own— not merely to study and locate differences, but rather to *feel* the culture, to seek understanding of its very lifeblood. This careful introduction should help keep the class from falling into the shallow East-West comparisons typical of early work and criticized by more recent scholarship (Lu & Frank, 1993; Mao, 2007; Swearingen, 2010). Having prepared students to now approach the rhetoric of ancient Chinese on its own terms, the instructor can then provide an introduction to *yan* and *bian* to focus on theoretical understandings.

Focusing on *yan*, or speech, provides instructors a rhetorical classification system to guide class discussion because, as Lu (1998) argues, Confucius' *Analects* offers the "first treatise on Chinese speech and communication" through a framing of *yan* as the representation of oral speech, persuasion, and eloquence (p. 163). Furthermore, Lu traces how the writings of Confucius demonstrate theories of speech, including *de yan* (virtuous speech), *xin yan* (trustworthy speech), *wei yan* (upright speech), *shen yan* (cautious speech), and *yay an* (correct speech) (p. 164). Instructors can use Lu's detailed descriptions of each category of speech to identify and assign specific analects to represent particular categories for comparison and discussion.

When introducing perspectives on Chinese rhetoric, instructors should also review the concept of *bian*. According to Lu and Frank (1993), *bian* can be translated as "argumentation," but is better understood as argumentation traced through cultural traditions resting on "social values" (p. 452). In other words, argumentation from a Chinese rhetorical perspective highlight the social context and historical connections of a proposal rather than the persuasive inventional

strategies found in ancient Greek rhetorical theories. Studying the similarities of rhetoric and *bian* can further conversations about understanding Chinese communication practices within their own cultural context (Lu & Frank, 1993). Recent scholarship can aid instructors in selecting passages from *Analects* that focus on the role of speech and persuasion (Ding, 2007; Garrett, 1993a; Garrett, 1993b; Kirkpatrick, 2005; Lu, 1998; Mao, 2007; You, 2006) as well as the process of *bian* (Lu, 1998; Lu & Frank, 1993).

Class Instruction and Activities

As Andy Kirkpatrick and Zhichang Lu (2012) explain, ancient Chinese rhetoric often takes an indirect style of address, which contrasts the “direct and agonistic” legal style of classical Western rhetoric (p. 25). After spending most of the semester reading classical Western rhetoric, students benefit from a structured, collective reading of *Analects* toward the beginning of the unit to introduce them to this indirect style of reasoning. My experience suggests that students’ ability to read and comprehend subsequent material was stronger after collectively reading (out loud), annotating, and discussing the first book of the *Analects* during the first week of class. The following schedule for the first week of class facilitates this process:

Table B

First Week Assignments

Day	Preparation	In Class
Monday	Ames “Thinking through comparisons.”	Discuss comparative reading strategies.
Wednesday	Ames & Rosemont, “Introduction,” selections.	Discuss background material. Lecture & discussion on <i>yan</i> , <i>bian</i> .
Friday	Confucius, <i>Analects</i> . Book 1	Read Book 1.1–1.4 as class, annotating and discussing. Read Book 1.5–1.8 in small groups, annotating and discussing. Discuss Book 1.

To avoid over-classification and a narrow focus on rhetorical theory, instructors should also have students read substantial narrative passages from Confucius to focus on reading *Analects* as a text. The instructor can assign sections of *Analects* that point students toward the rhetorics of definition, juxtaposition, analogy, history, and metaphor (Lyon, 2010; You, 2006; Lu, 1998; Garrett, 1993a). The second and third week of the unit provide an opportunity to read *Analects* and identify rhetorical strategies in the text while still exploring the rhetorical theory of *yan* and *bian*.

Instructors should be careful to build time into class for reflection to ensure open dialogue about reading *Analects* within its own historical and cultural context. It may be useful to return to themes from Ames (2002), as well as to engage Mao’s (2007) discussion that comparative study should be accompanied by efforts to “rein in further the essentializing impulse” in order to avoid being led “astray” (p. 217). Instructors may find that Mao’s (2007) suggestion to link “discursive fields” of meaning and interpretation may aid summation and reflection in the final section of this unit (p. 223–225).

After studying Chinese rhetoric in its own right, instructors should move students toward comparison. In fact, it is useful to periodically remind students throughout the unit that understanding and comparing are two different critical tasks. Comparative work should be undertaken through class discussion over several meetings, as well as through a culminating activity, titled here as “Rhetorical Encounters.”

The activity “Rhetorical Encounters” compares ancient rhetorical perspectives. This assignment can be completed either as an oral presentation or written assignment. For an oral presentation, students should be divided into triads and assigned three rhetorical figures—one from Greece, one from Rome, and a third from China. Instructors should use figures that students have studied in the course; for example, a triad might be assigned to represent the perspectives of Isocrates, Cicero, and Confucius. Then, each triad crafts a dialogue among the three figures on a relevant rhetorical concept such as virtue or political speech, with each student representing (acting as) one of the figures. Instructors should encourage the students to write the scripts for the three characters as advocating and explaining their viewpoints, demonstrating to the class the points of agreement and disagreement among the three perspectives. One way of encouraging students to have fun while demonstrating their knowledge is to have the first task of the dialogue involve demonstrating how these three figures have arrived in your classroom in this era—this often produces humorous “time travel” justifications and the light tone at the beginning of the presentation helps students feel more comfortable performing in front of the class. Each triad presents their dialogue to the class and, once they have finished, their classmates may ask questions.

If the instructor chooses a written format for the “Rhetorical Encounters” activity, students construct a written dialogue among the three rhetorical figures. For this version of the assignment (a paper or a final examination grade), each student would independently select the three figures, one from each unit of the course. Then, the instructor should offer a question for the dialogue. For example, the three figures might be discussing “What are the qualities and practices of an ideal speaker and citizen?” and students might be instructed to reflect on themes such as speaking and citizenship, rhetoric and governance, the importance of virtue, definitions of eloquence, and the importance of appropriate speech in society. (The instructor should caution students to choose a few concepts to explore in depth rather than try to address all of these themes.) It might be useful to suggest a model for the dialogue, perhaps from a previous course reading such as Plato’s *Gorgias* or Cicero’s *De Oratore*. Furthermore, to demonstrate comprehension of the course readings, students should be encouraged to use footnote citation when they paraphrase specific passages. As a culminating activity, “Rhetorical Encounters” encourages critical and creative thinking, provides an opportunity for oral and/or written expression, and offers a strong reflective component.

Appraisal of the Teaching Experience

I have taught a course module on Chinese rhetoric three times, and student evaluations have consistently provided positive responses to open-ended questions. A majority of students responded that they found the unit interesting or insightful. Some comments reflected that students found the unit challenging because it was so different, while others remarked that it helped them to see rhetoric in a different way.

The evaluation comments, combined with the performances in the “Rhetorical Encounters” activity, suggest that some students reached capstone levels of global learning,

while others reached significant milestones in the aforementioned AAC&U VALUE Global Learning Rubric (Rhodes, 2010). For example, exemplary dialogue assignments analyzed how three figures related to themes such as the definition of “rhetoric” in relation to *yan*, the framing of rhetoric/*yan* and citizenship/community, or the role of virtue in relation to public speaking. One student’s dialogue between Plato, Aristotle, and Confucius ended with a discussion of how different societies encourage learning the art of rhetoric or ethical communication, with Confucius warning Aristotle about the importance of teaching caution: “When one learns how to restrain themselves and not rush into speech, they will be able to speak well in the other areas. If you are ever more curious I would tell you to reference the *Analects* in sections 4.23–4.24, 14.3, and 16.7 to see where cautious speech is employed.” Another student drew attention to the differences among ancient theories on whether natural ability was the most important factor in mastering rhetoric, citing passages from *Antidosis* (Isocrates) and *Analects* (Confucius). These assignments demonstrated capstone levels in aspects of global learning, which the VALUE Rubric states “evaluates and applies diverse perspectives to complex subjects... in the face of multiple and even conflicting positions” (Rhodes, 2010). In this assignment’s case, the complex subjects are theories of rhetoric.

Other students who used historical and contemporary examples in “Rhetorical Encounters” demonstrated milestone levels of global learning, showcasing that they could explain and connect “two or more cultures historically... demonstrating respectful interaction.” While a few essays struggled to do more than identify the different perspectives of the three rhetorical figures, this is understandable given the challenge of introductory comparative work. Overall, most students appreciated the unit and demonstrated some gains in global learning, as assessed through the “Rhetorical Encounters” activity.

A significant challenge to implementing this unit is that many instructors are unfamiliar with ancient Chinese history and philosophy. Still, with resources on ancient China available and growing, instructors of rhetoric would do well to think globally, in both ancient and contemporary settings. The inclusion of the Chinese rhetoric unit can lead to a richer view of rhetorical theory and encourage students to explore how rhetoric forms and functions in diverse societies past and present. Broadening the classical canon of rhetorical study enhances student global learning, particularly around historical perspective-taking.

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