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Confucians Love to Argue: Policy Essays in Ancient China

Xiaoye You

Pennsylvania State University

Yichun Liu

National Chengchi University, Taiwan

Contrastive studies of Chinese rhetoric have been haunted by several myths. First, there has been an overemphasis upon the eight-legged essay, tested in the imperial civil service exam for centuries, as virtually the sole representative of expository and persuasive writing in ancient China. Robert Kaplan, Carolyn Matalene, and Guanjin Cai, for example, have concurred on the centrality of the essay in traditional expository and persuasive writings. As Cai claims, "It thus constituted the basic framework of expository and persuasive writing in classical Chinese and has since influenced academic writing in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and modern China" (282). However, Bernard Mohan and Winnie Lo disagree. They suggest that the eight-legged examination essay is one among several rhetorical and literary forms in classical Chinese writing. The second myth concerns the rhetorical patterns of Chinese expository and persuasive writings. Kaplan claims that "Oriental" writing tends to be circular and indirect rather than linear or direct. A subject is not discussed directly but is approached from a variety of indirectly related angles ("Cultural"). Third, and closely related to the question of rhetorical patterns, is the issue of self and personal voice. Ron Scollon agrees with Kaplan that Chinese writers are indirect in presenting their thoughts. He attributes indirectness to different views of the self in Chinese and Western cultures. In modern English writing, an individual's experience and voice are emphasized, and the individual is encour-

aged to seek and express his or her true self in explicit and unequivocal terms. Scollon argues that the Chinese perception of self as a member entangled in various human relations makes it difficult for the Chinese writer to be direct, to express a point of view in a thesis statement at the beginning of a piece of writing, and as a result to employ deductive reasoning.

These myths, we believe, have two points of origin. First, most scholars have relied heavily on secondary sources to make inferences about classical Chinese writing. Second, these mythic issues have come from the extensive scholarly attention paid to the eight-legged essay. Sustained by an orientalist mentality, as Mary Garrett, Yameng Liu, and Ryuko Kubota and Al Lehner have remarked on various occasions, early contrastive rhetoricians found the eight-legged essay ideal in representing their perception of exotic Asian rhetorical patterns. Assuming the essay to be the archetypal Chinese essay, contrastive rhetoricians projected their understanding of this essay on all Chinese expository and persuasive writings. The heavy reliance on secondary sources and the exclusive focus on the eight-legged essay has confused and oversimplified our understanding of classical Chinese essay writing and its diverse rhetorics.

We would like to present a more complicated view of expository and persuasive writing in ancient China by examining a time-honored literary genre, less familiar than the eight-legged essay: the policy essay. The policy essay is one among three essay genres tested in the imperial civil service exam, the other two being the eight-legged essay and the discourse essay. We may understand the subject matters of these three essays by comparing them with the Aristotelian categorization of the three Greek rhetorical genres. Epideictic rhetoric addresses issues of the present; deliberative rhetoric is concerned with issues of the future; and judicial rhetoric deals with events of the past. The eight-legged essay is chiefly epideictic because it sets up a stage for the writer to display both his erudition of Confucian precepts and the maturity of his literary style. The policy essay is deliberative, as the writer discusses how to solve issues related to agriculture, economy, government, and national defense. The discourse essay is judicial in the sense that the writer makes comments or judgments on historical figures or events, hoping to enlighten current political and cultural debates.

Over the years, contrastive rhetoricians have neglected both the policy and the discourse essays, which date back much earlier than the eight-legged essay. When the imperial academy was first established in the Western Han dynasty (206 BC–24 AD) to recruit literati for government service, students were only tested on the policy essay. The eight-legged essay came into existence

about one thousand years later in the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127). In the process of recruiting scholars for government service, Emperor Wu of the Western Han dynasty wrote questions on bamboo strips regarding various subjects of national significance. The event marked the beginning of the imperial civil service exam.

Policy essays are worthy of scrutiny for at least two important reasons. First, it is the oldest genre in the Chinese academy and was tested in the civil service exam from the very beginning. While students ceased to write eight-legged essays once they had passed the exam, they continued to compose policy essays in government services as memorials. Being a pragmatic genre, historically the policy essay brought as great, if not greater, an impact on essay writing as the eight-legged essay. Second, the policy essay embodies the essence of Chinese academic culture. It originated from the political discourse of Chinese feudalism and was repositioned as a pedagogical discourse, reflecting the Confucian ideal of education; that is, an individual advances the Way (*dao*), or the cosmological order and truth, through ritualizing himself and others in light of the antiquity and by assisting the ruler in governing the State (You). It is this ritualizing function that Chinese academic writing has traditionally performed.

Our assessment of policy essays will focus on an anthology of classical Chinese writings. The anthology, *Gu Wen Ci Lei Zuan* (A Sorted Collection of Classical Writings), was compiled by a Confucian erudite, Yao Nai (1731–1815), more than two hundred years ago. To facilitate students' mastery of classical writing in their preparation for the civil service exam, Yao collected 690 classical pieces in the anthology. The anthology gathered twenty policy essays, and three were composed by Dong Zhongshu (197 BCE–107 BCE) of the Western Han dynasty in response to Emperor Wu's inquiries in 134 BC. In these three essays, Dong answered the emperor's questions on how to rule the empire according to the Heavenly mandate. In the end, Dong suggested that an imperial academy be established to recruit Confucian scholars for government service. Emperor Wu adopted Dong's suggestions on educational reform and other reforms, thus turning the three policy essays into exemplars of effective political discourse in Chinese feudal history. The other seventeen essays were written by Su Shi and Su Zhe, another two renowned Confucian scholars in the Northern Song dynasty. Our rhetorical analysis of these twenty policy essays employs both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The first analysis, of Dong's essay, identifies some key rhetorical features that provide a model for examining all twenty samples, providing a more comprehensive view of the policy essays' structure and purposes.

In his first two essays, Dong replies to Emperor Wu's questions. More impressed by Dong's answers than by those of other scholars, the emperor rephrases his concerns and asks Dong in person for further clarification. Dong's third essay offers an elaborated response to the emperor's concerns. The emperor's questions function as a prompt, first defining a writer-and-reader relationship that determines the nature of Dong's response and potentially affect some rhetorical strategies later adopted by Dong. The emperor poses the following questions:

What one says about Heaven will be verified on earth. What one says about the antiquity will be verified in the present. Therefore I (*zhen*) humbly inquire (*chuiwen*) about the responsiveness between Heaven and earth. People praised Emperor Yao and Shun but pitied Emperor Jie and Zhou. The Way that some dynasties gradually rose and gradually fell guides me in adjusting my governance. You (*zidafu*) are expert in the Ying and the Yang of the universe and versed in the Way of sages. However, your [previous] words are not thorough. Are you puzzled by current matters? As you did not expound your thoughts thoroughly, I (*zhen*) fail to fully get them. In terms of what the three great emperors have taught us about the Way, they reigned in different times and all made mistakes. Some say that the Way does not change in time; but does the Way mean different things for the emperors? You (*zidafu*) fully understand the Way and have explained how to cease the social turmoil. You have studied these issues carefully. Does not the *Book of Songs*¹ say, "Listen to that, you gentleman. And do not forever take your rest. The spirits, they are listening, and will give you blessings for evermore"? (Yao, Book 21, 9) ²

Emperor Wu raises three issues for Dong's deliberation—first, the connection between Heaven and earth; second, the gradual rise and fall of previous dynasties; and third, the seemingly different manifestations of the Way with the three great emperors. In addition, he institutes a hierarchy of emperor-and-official relations defining roles for this courtly, academic/political discourse. The emperor (*zhen*) inquires about puzzled matters with his officials (*dafu*). He uses "*chuiwen*" ("to inquire humbly") to soften the unequal power relations. In this, he testifies to the nature of academic writing in ancient China; writing ritualizes the writer into the Way so that he can advise the ruler and facilitate his governance. Dong's role is rhetorically ritualized through the permission given.

Let us further explore the ontology and epistemology implied by the emperor's inquiry. Emperor Wu expresses his concerns about the relationship between Heaven and earth, both the enlightened (Yao, Shun, and Yu) and the tyrannous emperors (Jie and Zhou), and the way that these emperors governed their states. In other words, Emperor Wu is concerned about the relationship

between the universe and human society, and he believes that history is a repertoire of knowledge from which he and his officials can draw to furnish the governance of the state. Among Confucian classics, the key historical documents are the *Book of History* (*Shang Shu*) and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chun Qiu*). As Dong was specialized in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, he was an opportune person to resolve the emperor's concerns. At the end of the prompt, the emperor quotes a verse from the *Book of Songs*, another Confucian classic, to show his humbleness and determination to govern the country wisely. To perform his Heavenly duty, he needs the assistance of his officials/scholars. Therefore, the prompt presupposes a shared ontology and epistemology between the emperor and Dong.

Dong begins with some polite words to confirm the power relationship established in the prompt, thus building up both the ethos and pathos of his arguments to come. He first thanks the emperor for offering him special attention and then apologizes for not having thoroughly explained his thoughts in previous essays:

I (*chen*) heard from the *Analects*, 'It is only the Divine Sage who embraces [the Way] in himself both the first step and the last.'³ Now Your Majesty (*bixia*) keep a learned official stay and listen to him. You posed questions again to inquire on his thoughts and to fully understand the virtue of the sages. The kind of persistence in seeking out the Way I (*yü chen*) don't possess. In my previous replies, my words are not thorough and thoughts incomplete. The fault is derived from my shallowness and ignorance. (9)

In these words, Dong accepts the power relations imposed by the emperor's prompt by using *chen* (an official refers to himself as *chen*, or "I," when speaking with an emperor) or *yü chen* ("I being unwise") to refer to himself and *bixia* ("Your Majesty") for the emperor. Dong also quotes a verse from the *Analects* to praise the emperor for seeking the Way persistently. Through these humble and pleasing terms that confirm an emperor-official relationship, Dong establishes his pathos, as well as his ethos, for the elucidation of the emperor's concerns that he turns to next.

Dong addresses the emperor's three issues one by one. For each issue, he repeats the emperor's original words and then states his own thoughts. Here, for the matter of convenience, we will analyze Dong's response to the emperor's third concern, which is the shortest of all in length. The emperor asks, "In terms of what the three great emperors have taught us about the Way, they reigned in different times and they all made mistakes. Some say that the Way does not

change in time; but does the Way mean different things for the emperors?" Dong's response is as follows:

I heard that the Way prevails when music does not lead to chaos, or it haunts without sounding tiring.⁴ When the Way prevails, the world is devoid of corruptions. Corruptions rise when the Way falls. The Ways of previous emperors had their own deviations and inefficacy, thus their governance sometimes stifled, and they amended corruptions with deviations. The Way of the three emperors occurred in different times. It is not that their Ways were opposite but that they encountered different circumstances in salvaging the nation. Therefore Confucius says, "Among those that 'ruled by inactivity' surely Shun may be counted."⁵ Shun only changed the first month of the calendar and the color of court dress to follow the Heavenly mandate. As he largely adopted the Way of Emperor Yao, why did he need to change anything else? Therefore the emperors only changed some regulations but not the Way. However, the Xia Dynasty valued loyalty, the Yin Dynasty respect, and the Zhou Dynasty culture—the right way to amend what is left from the previous dynasty. Confucius says, "We know in what ways the Yin modified ritual when they followed upon the Hsia (Xia). We know in what ways the Chou [Zhou] modified ritual when they follow upon the Yin. And hence we can foretell what the successors of Chou [Zhou] will be like, even supposing they do not appear till a hundred generations from now."⁶ That means all emperors will emulate the three dynasties in their governance. The Xia followed the Yin without people speaking of its modification of ritual because they share the Way and value the same thing. The grandness of the Way originates from Heaven. Heaven does not change, nor does the Way. Therefore, when Yu succeeded Shun, and Shun succeeded Yao, they passed the empire from one to the other, preserving the single Way. They did not have any major corruption; therefore we don't talk about how they modified the Way. From this perspective, inheriting a prosperous nation, the Way of governance stays the same. Inheriting a tumultuous nation, the Way needs to be adjusted. Han rose after a tumultuous nation, thus it needs to embrace the culture of the Zhou and the loyalty of the Xia. (11–12)

Modern readers, including native Chinese speakers, may be dismayed by the heavily culture-ridden language in Dong's exposition. This comes with no surprise, as both the emperor and Dong are well versed in Chinese classics, particularly classical thoughts on the Way, music, the three great emperors/sages, and the alternation of the Xia, Yin, and Zhou dynasties. It was on the grounds of shared cultural knowledge that Dong addresses the emperor's concerns.

The rhetoric of the passage exhibits a full-fledged argument structure. Dong first announces, in Stephen Toulmin's terms, two warrants—the relationship between the Way and governance and all previous governments having their deviations or corruptions. Then he raises the major claim, or the thesis

statement, in this passage: “It is not that their Ways were opposite but that they encountered different circumstances in salvaging the nation.” Next, he provides the example of Emperor Shun as evidence, or data, to back up his claim. Dong wants to show that Shun only changed some regulations in his governance instead of changing the Way. After that, Dong offers two more pieces of evidence. First, the Xia, Yin, and Zhou dynasties all changed their priority of values as a way to amend the corrupted. However, again they largely upheld the Way. Second, although the three great emperors made some mistakes in their regime, they did not significantly modify the Way. Between these two pieces of evidence, Dong states another warrant: “The grandness of the Way originates from Heaven. Heaven does not change, nor does the Way.” Based on his claim that the Way might need to be adjusted in some circumstances, he finally draws an inference about what values the Han Dynasty should prioritize, which testifies the ultimate goal of the policy essay, that is, to enlighten the emperor for wise governance.

In Anglo-American models of essay writing, formal logic is often divided into induction and deduction. An inductive pattern frontloads warrants and data and places the claim at the end, moving the argument from particular to general. A deductive pattern places the claim in the front and supports it with warrants and data, moving the argument from general to particular. Dong’s reasoning pattern is deductive in general because he places a general statement (the claim) before the particulars (the data). But because he states some warrants first, he positions the claim in the middle of the passage. The heavy reliance on historical events and classical texts as the backing of Dong’s argument reveals a particular line of rhetorical reasoning, or enthymeme. In Dong’s rhetorical reasoning, history reflects the Heavenly mandate and the Way; therefore, what happened in the past can be a reference for the present and the future. This particular view toward history constitutes the key premise of Dong’s rhetorical syllogism. As Dong claims in the passage, “The grandness of the Way originates from Heaven. Heaven does not change, nor does the Way.” In the same conversation with Emperor Wu, Dong also asks, “Heaven of the ancients is also the same Heaven of the present. Underneath the same Heaven, the country was ruled peacefully and harmoniously in the ancient times. [. . .] Gauging the present with the ancient standards, why the present lags far behind the ancient times?” (12). In other words, the Way of Heaven (the universe) does not change; therefore, the Way of the ancients can be studied and restored in the present human society. It is due to this view of history that Dong mobilizes historical events and sages’ words as premises to back up his claim.

After Dong answers the emperor's three concerns, he moves on to voice his suggestions for the government, which forms the climax of the essay. He first asks, since Heaven remains the same in both ancient and present times, why the present cannot match the ancient times in which the society was blessed by peace, harmony, and lack of crimes. He suggests that Heaven has its own design for living beings. "Someone holding a government post does not depend on manual labor to make a living. He receives the big therefore should not take the small, which is the Heavenly design" (12). Various corruptions in the society are derived from the greed of some officials who seize things that the masses are entitled to. Finally, Dong makes an ideological suggestion that has shaped Chinese educational system for more than two thousand years:

Nowadays people study different Ways and hold different thoughts. Hundreds of schools teach different meanings about the Way. As there is no unified thought in government, and state regulations change constantly, the masses do not know which regulations to follow. I (*chen*) humbly think that those that fall out of the *Six Classics* and the Confucian school should be eradicated. When heresies die off, thoughts in government will be unified, regulations become clear, and the masses know what to follow. (13)

In the above suggestions, despite his humility, Dong's voice is resoundingly clear. Thanks to Dong's persuasive writing, Emperor Wu took his suggestions and waged a series of reforms, one of which established the imperial academy to promote Confucian thoughts and to recruit Confucian scholars to study the Way of Heaven and earth. The Western Han became one of the prosperous and strong dynasties in Chinese history. The history-making reforms embodied in Dong's essays testify to the political weight of the policy essay.

The rhetorical features of Dong's essay are exhibited in different proportions in the remaining essays. Deduction is the most predominant logical structure used. Among the 88 key points that we have identified in the twenty essays, 18 points (20 percent) are reasoned following induction, and 70 (80 percent) following deduction. Dong expresses his independent opinions on issues in question, voices his particular concerns, and makes suggestions for action. To measure the extent of the authors' voice, we have counted the uses of *chen* as the subject of a sentence, in which case the word means "I." Among the twenty policy essays, the average uses of *chen* are 5.1 per essay.

Historical anecdotes and analogies are found across all the policy essays. Historical anecdotes are used for comparison or contrast when the authors make an argument. Altogether 78 historical anecdotes are used in the twenty

policy essays. Analogy, or a comparison of some similar aspects of two dissimilar objects, is also relatively common. There are altogether 19 instances of analogy in the twenty essays. Clearly, giving directions is an important value in academic essay writing because deductive patterns prevail in the policy essays. To address the emperor's concerns and to propose plans of action, the authors have to write in their outspoken voices while remaining polite and courteous. Like previous scholars, we find in these policy essays ample use of reasoning by analogy and historical anecdotes. However, we argue, the wide use of these methods of argument has as much to do with the historical view toward the universe shared by the Confucian literati as the traditional social hierarchy as previous scholarship tends to suggest. Through a firsthand study of the twenty policy essays, our findings have clarified some confusions about ancient Chinese essay writing previously caused by the exclusive scholarly attention devoted to the eight-legged essay.

However, the task of achieving a complicated view of essay writing in ancient China does not stop here. We have only focused on policy essays, one of the three essay genres that ancient Chinese literati practiced inside—and outside—the academy. After additional research is done on the eight-legged and the policy essays, future studies should explore the other academic genres such as the discourse essay. Only after the three genres have been systematically examined can we more confidently make claims about essay writing in the Chinese academy and literary culture past and present. As Yao Nai's collection of classical Chinese writings suggests, once we move beyond the academic essays, there is a vast family of Chinese essays composed in different sociocultural contexts and for markedly different audiences. Collections of classical Chinese essays, such as Yao Nai's, are treasure troves for comparative rhetoricians. Therefore, the next step in studying Chinese essay writing, we suggest, should focus on firsthand, systematic examination of these texts. It is through a firsthand study of primary texts that we can hope to fend off both essentialism and orientalism in comparative studies of non-Western rhetorics and writing.

Notes

1. The verse was quoted by Emperor Wu from the last stanza of the song "Minor Bright." The complete stanza sings, "Listen to that, you gentleman, / And do not forever take your rest. / Fulfill the duties of your station. / God loves the upright and straight. / The spirits, they are listening, / And will give you blessings for evermore" (*Book of Songs* 192). Here, we adopt the English translation of Arthur Waley.

2. All Chinese sources are our translations unless specified otherwise.
3. The English translation of this verse is adopted from Arthur Waley (Confucius 227).
4. This sentence conveys the Confucian thoughts on the mythic power of music and government. Dong seems to have quoted the two ideas about music (i.e., music does not lead to chaos; music haunts without sounding tiring) from *On Music (Yue Ji)* and *History by Zhuo (Zhuo Zhuang)*, which is an elaborated annotation of the *Spring and Autumn Annals (Chun Qiu)*.
5. The English translation of this verse is adopted from Arthur Waley (Confucius 193).
6. The English translation of this verse is adopted from Arthur Waley (Confucius 93).

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