Studying the Chinese Rhetorical Tradition in the Present: Re-presenting the Native’s Point of View

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Broadly defined, comparative rhetoric aims to study different rhetorical traditions and their practices across time and space through a dialogic lens. For example, George Kennedy defines comparative rhetoric as “the cross-cultural study of rhetorical traditions as they exist or have existed in different societies around the world” (Comparative 1). The study of the Chinese rhetorical tradition on this side of the Pacific has regularly been conducted in the general context of comparative rhetoric and with a particular interest in, if not a nagging anxiety about, comparing it with the European American rhetorical tradition. Such study is never disinterested—the areas or subjects chosen and the findings that emerge reflect as much the underlying methodologies of the undertaker as the actual process of the undertaking. Differently stated, the methods one deploys will inevitably influence the outcomes of such an undertaking, and these outcomes in turn are often perceived, if not directly cited, as evidence justifying or validating the methods chosen. In view of this reciprocal relationship between the “how” and the “what,” we rhetoricians and writing professionals engaged in this kind of study must reflect regularly on our methodologies, including their intrinsic connections to our objects of study, to our understanding of the Other, and to our understanding of ourselves.

Operating within this general framework, this essay aims to address the relationship between the “how” and the “what” directly. First, I review and discuss three major methodological approaches that have influenced the study of the Chinese rhetorical tradition on this side of the Pacific. Then, I address the recent turn to cultural anthropology. I point out that such a turn has also turned us away from how...
our own discursive conditions impress themselves upon the study of the Chinese rhetorical tradition—upon the ways we interact with the native’s point of view. I suggest that we consider these conditions as constitutive components of our study and that we turn to the concept of discursive fields to help re-present the native’s point of view. I use the *Analects* by Confucius to illustrate how this approach—focused on our own rhetorical exigencies and on discursive fields—can better respond to the methodological challenges discussed above. I close this essay by fleshing out some of the implications and significance of my central argument.

A disclaimer of sorts is perhaps warranted here. By opting to use the singular, rather than the plural, noun “tradition” in “the Chinese rhetorical tradition,” I am not intimating at all that the Chinese rhetorical tradition is unified and monolithic, or unaffected by shifting social and cultural conditions. On the contrary, the Chinese rhetorical tradition, like any other rhetorical tradition, is infused with competing voices, internal contradictions, and fluctuating significations at any given moment. I see my use of the singular “tradition” as an example of what Gayatri Spivak calls a “strategic use of positive essentialism” (205; emphasis in original). That is to say, I want to use “the Chinese rhetorical tradition” as a specific signifier to contest the dominance of the European American rhetorical tradition and to help articulate a rhetorical identity to challenge stereotypes and to celebrate differences—hence “positive essentialism.” At the same time, I am quite mindful, as will become clear shortly, of the internal complexities and divergences that necessarily characterize the Chinese—or any other, including the European American—rhetorical tradition. My disclaimer is in part inspired by Lisa Lowe’s characterization of “Asian American” as a specific signifier of ethnic identity that both disrupts the exclusionary discourses of the dominant culture and reveals their internal differences and even contradictions (38–40). I hope to use this essay to rein in further the essentializing impulse—whether it should originate from European Americans or from Chinese and Chinese Americans—that can often catch us unawares and lead us astray.

**Methodological Challenges: A Critical Reflection**

Explicitly or implicitly, we appeal to some particular methodological approaches as we try to represent the Chinese rhetorical tradition *here and now*. Several such approaches have operated prominently in the recent past.

First, there is the approach to developing some kind of general theory of rhetoric. There is nothing inherently flawed about this approach, but we often fail to consider adequately its daunting challenges. On the one hand, we have to address, in this case, the diversity within the Chinese rhetorical tradition—a formidable undertaking in the first place. On the other hand, while certain concepts or practices in the European American rhetorical tradition *may* appear to be similar to those in the
Chinese rhetorical tradition, any perceived similarities or even equivalences will invariably turn out to be more complex than meets the eye. Absent any concrete efforts to address these complexities, our claims and pronouncements about the Chinese rhetorical tradition and about any “evidence” it offers in support of the general theory of rhetoric could very well become either vacuous generalizations or extensions, in various disguises, of the European American rhetorical tradition.

For example, to develop a universal theory of rhetoric that will apply to all speech communities and to all cultures, Kennedy uses the Greco-Roman rhetorical tradition as his starting point, and applies its models and concepts to non-Western—including Chinese—rhetorical traditions. His ultimate purpose is to test the universal applicability of these models and concepts and to achieve a better understanding of rhetoric as a more general phenomenon of human life (Comparative 5–6, 217). In an earlier work Kennedy also suggests that “Aristotle’s objective in writing Rhetoric was not to describe Greek rhetoric, but to describe this universal facet of human communication” (New 10). He further claims that it is “perfectly possible to utilize the categories of Aristotelian rhetoric to study speech in China, India, Africa, and elsewhere in the world” (10). Consequently, our knowledge of these other traditions becomes, at least in part, no more than testament to the adaptability and applicability of Western or Aristotelian rhetoric.

Second, and almost the opposite of the approach to developing a general theory of rhetoric, is what the distinguished historian of Greek and Chinese science G. E. R. Lloyd calls a “piecemeal approach” (5). Addressing some of the methodological issues involved in the comparison between ancient Greek and ancient Chinese science, Lloyd criticizes researchers who set out “to make direct comparisons between individual theories and concepts across culture as if they were addressed to the same issue” (3, emphases in original). I see examples of this piecemeal approach in the study of the Chinese rhetorical tradition: we select a certain prominent theory or concept in the Western rhetorical tradition and ask what the equivalent is for the Chinese tradition—as if it were a foregone conclusion that there will be any such equivalent both in meaning and in significance.

Take “rhetoric” as an example. The art of rhetoric was developed and grew into a distinctive discipline in ancient Greece. It is not uncommon, it seems, to look for its equivalent in ancient China and to rationalize its absence should no such equivalent be found, or to propose affinity should some equivalent be uncovered. However, since there were competing versions of rhetoric in ancient Greece, the question simply becomes this: Which version of rhetoric in ancient Greece are we appealing to when we look for its equivalent in ancient China?

As Edward Schiappa has suggested, the term rhetoric or what it stood for underwent some significant changes in ancient Greece. While rhetoric as denoting persuasive speaking or oratory occurred long before Plato, rhetoric as representing a
specific domain of theorizing did not begin until Plato’s coinage in *Gorgias* of the term *rhêtorikê* in the early fourth century BCE. Such theorizing or conceptualization helped separate rhetoric from philosophy and enable it to serve as a disciplinary term for the art of persuasion (10–12, 21–23)—not to mention, of course, the divergences that ensued between the rhetoric conceptualized by Plato and Aristotle and the rhetoric practiced by their immediate successors (Cole 12–19). Any effort to search for the equivalent of *rhetoric* in ancient China will run into some serious problems because there is simply no guarantee that such a concept was fundamental to ancient China, as it was to ancient Greece. Indeed, in ancient China, rhetoric was not separated as a discipline distinct from philosophy. More important, the diversity and divergence in the forms rhetoric took in ancient Greece are such that any generalization regarding ancient Greece itself can be a complex proposition.

The same difficulties apply, it must be said, even if we start with China. For example, the “yin-yang” concept was rhetorically important in ancient China. Appearing initially as two of six *qi* (energy, 氣)—the other four *qi* are wind, rain, dark, and light—in the fourth century BCE, *yin* and *yang* began to assume the role of the quintessential polarity in China in the third and second centuries BCE, first as a cyclic model that “emphasized the alternation of day and night or darkness and light (晦明) and the four seasons” (Raphals 143). Then, along with the concept of the “five phases” (*wu xing*, 五行)—which are water, fire, wood, metal, and earth, and which are related to one another in that they conquer one another in a regular cycle (Graham 326)—*yin* and *yang* became part of the discourse in the explanation of social, political, and cosmological processes (Raphals 143). Such discourse, according to Lloyd, provides the cosmological synthesis of *yin* and *yang* and the five phases, signifying “the unity of the political and the natural orders, with the emperor serving the role of mediator between heaven and earth” (125).

Can we now turn to ancient Greece and look for a similar concept there? Should we ever fail in this (piecemeal) approach, can we then conclude that ancient Greece lacked this kind of correlative concept? Or if we happen to come across the Pythagorean Table of Opposites, the *stustoicha*, reported by Aristotle in the *Metaphysics*, can we then declare some immediate compatibility between the *stustoicha* and the *yin-yang* concept? Either move, I am afraid, would miss the point. To impose a “deficiency” label upon ancient Greece, as has often been done the other way around, because of this apparent absence is to assume that the *yin-yang* concept or some such should have attained the same level of rhetorical importance in ancient Greece. In so doing, we perpetuate, without due cause, this perceived divide between Chinese correlative thinking and Greek causal thinking. Further, to claim some outright affinity, without careful investigation, between the *stustoicha* and the *yin-yang* concept amounts to giving up on many obvious and not-so-obvious differences. For one thing, the reciprocal, interdependent characteristic of *yin* and *yang*
was never in doubt or in dispute in ancient China. By contrast, there were widespread divergences among Greek theorists of opposites, and these disagreements or confrontations left little room for a consensus (Lloyd 128–29). For another, the use of the yin-yang concept in ancient China was consistently moral and political (Sivin 2). It emphasized the influence of harmony and reciprocity on the strength of cosmological unity because it “see[s] heaven and earth, ruler and minister, father and son, old and young, male and female, as all, ideally, embodying the same reciprocal relationship” (Lloyd 127). By contrast, there was no such emphasis in the Greek use of opposites, and the use of opposites was never set out to lend legitimacy to a particular regime (Lloyd 136–39).

Aside from the general and piecemeal approaches, an orientalist logic may continue to influence and thus handicap our study of the Chinese rhetorical tradition. An interpretive procedure that not only essentializes the Other, but also projects and constructs the West as the idealized standard and the Other as its unchanging antithesis (Said 12–13, 59–60, 67–68), orientalist logic may intrude upon our studies in ways obvious and not so obvious. For example, we may, by applying European American sets of ideas and values to the study of the Chinese rhetorical tradition, end up characterizing the Chinese rhetorical tradition, in relation to the European American rhetorical tradition, either as lacking some all-important concepts or models or as possessing some very different concepts or models.

At least two problems stem from this kind of characterization. First, the knowledge gained on the strength of this characterization is based on a non sequitur: “being different” and “lack” are one and the same thing (L. Liu 9). Second, this kind of characterization teeters dangerously on being circular. On the one hand, we are presented with the conclusion that the Chinese rhetorical tradition lacks certain important concepts or that its concepts are very different from those in the European American rhetorical tradition. On the other hand, the conclusion only serves to identify, rather than explain, the phenomenon. In other words, the question remains of why the Chinese rhetorical tradition lacks certain important concepts or why its concepts are very different from those in the European American rhetorical tradition. In the end, the conclusion or the perceived explanation becomes at once the explanandum and the explanans.

And perhaps to “hypercorrect”—to borrow a term from linguistics—the past ills committed by orientalist logic, we become so anxious to see the Other in its Otherness that we might end up representing the Other beyond its Otherness. For example, Confucian rhetoric has recently been suggested as possessing the “potential for democratic deliberations” (Lyon 142) or construed in general as a legitimate alternative to dominant Aristotelian rhetoric. While I have no quarrel with the intent of these suggestions, I worry about the possibility of taking Confucian rhetoric, without qualification or reservation, out of its own political and social context. In
other words, I am concerned about the increasingly blurred distinction between the level of importance we want to attribute to Confucian rhetoric because of our present rhetorical exigency and the level of importance that accrued to Confucian rhetoric because of its own context and its own terms. Not that we should necessarily find fault with either justification, but it would become our fault indeed should we fail to distinguish one from the other. Incidentally, this tendency to idealize Confucian rhetoric almost parallels the robust effort in the late twentieth century to turn Confucianism into a viable alternative to communism and capitalism (Dirlik).

Similarly, to recuperate Chinese indirection—which has been seen, at worst, as an example of “Chinese inscrutability”—Linda Young moves to characterize it as a unique example of how Chinese negotiate with one another within a network of relationships to nurture subtle, fragile bonds and interconnections (58–59, 61). However, Chinese indirection is really not unique. Examples of indirection or uses of indirect or vague language can easily be discerned in ainos of ancient Greece, an archaic narrative form addressed to one particular individual in order to induce an immediate reaction in the individual or a change in his or her attitude. Ainos, which has the same etymological root as amigma, the Greek word for “riddle,” is noted for its use of vague language and of symbols from the animal and plant worlds. These discursive characteristics are shared by the Greek oracle and by the archaic language of diplomacy (Brill’s 405). And according to Thomas Cole, this particular narrative form features the speaker, often an inferior, trying to “answer or petition a superior without seeming arrogant or to praise him without seeming obsequious” (48), and it stands for any story—often a beast fable—“that means more or other than what it says” (49). In a word, to characterize Chinese indirection as unique could very well be an overstatement or an example of what may be called “discursive hypercorrection.”

**Negotiating between the Conditions of the Present and Discursive Fields**

How do we, then, study the Chinese rhetorical tradition in the present in ways that can better respond to these methodological challenges and concerns? In the recent past we have turned to cultural anthropology for possible answers. We have learned, for example, how to value “the natives’ point of view” and how to use “their own words” and “their own context.” At the same time, we have also learned that “going native” will not necessarily lead us to the shore of “trans-rhetorical identification” or to a moment where we can see “eye to eye” with the native. For Clifford Geertz, therefore, in order to produce “anthropological knowledge of how natives think, feel, and perceive” (56), we must draw upon both experience-near and experience-distant concepts. An experience-near concept is one that natives might naturally and effortlessly use to define what they or their fellows see, feel, think, or imagine (57).
An experience-distant concept is one that specialists use to “forward their scientific, philosophic, or practical aims” (57). The use of these two sets of concepts represents, in the words of Geertz, “a continuous dialectical tacking between the most local of local detail and the most global of global structure in such a way as to bring them into simultaneous view” (69).

This methodological turn to cultural anthropology, then, reflects a growing recognition that the study of the Chinese rhetorical tradition is a process of recontextualization but also that such methodological injunctions as “in its own context” and “on its own terms” must not be taken too literally. Not only may we never achieve communion with the Other if that is what these two expressions imply, but also we simply cannot stay in the Other’s context and on the Other’s terms all the time.

The reason is at least twofold. On the one hand, our present location and what it entails will always have a profound impact upon how our knowledge is produced and consumed. On the other hand, we can only see so much or so little from the native’s point of view—let alone the fact that the native’s point of view in the study of ancient Chinese rhetoric is a couple of thousand years removed from us. So, for Geertz, only by engaging in this kind of dialectical movement can we help to reduce “the mystery of what ‘seeing things from the native’s point of view’ means” (58).

Ironically, this turn may also have turned our attention away from what may be called “the conditions of the present,” from the roles such conditions play in the representation of the Chinese rhetorical tradition or of any other non-Western rhetorical tradition, for that matter. To be more specific, as we take a methodological page from cultural anthropology, we may have tuned out those conditions that undergird the process of our study. For example, we are bound to grapple with such questions as: In whose name or on whose behalf is our study of the Chinese rhetorical tradition being carried out, and to what end? What kind of knowledge is being created through this exercise? What are those sociocultural conditions and power relations that have framed the production and consumption of this knowledge? Are the concepts and practices chosen for study more important to us here and now than to the actors there and then? Given the methodological challenges discussed above, to what extent, then, can we pursue this kind of study without privileging the European American rhetorical tradition and without holding on to a monolithic or reified idea of the Chinese rhetorical tradition? What are additional challenges and complications for those of us—Chinese and Chinese Americans—doing this sort of work in English and for a largely English-speaking academic audience on this side of the Pacific?

These questions will inflect and intrude upon our study regardless of what we say, what we do not say, or how we say it. What needs to be underscored or stated unequivocally is that addressing these questions is not the same as applying experi-
ence-distant concepts. Namely, returning to Geertz again, experience-distant concepts are those like “object cathexis” (as opposed to “love”) or “social stratification” (as opposed to “caste” and “nirvana”) that specialists use to realize their scientific, philosophical, or practical aims (57). As a result, experience-distant concepts do not address these discursive conditions because they have already been abstracted from them or, to use Bruno Latour’s term, “black boxed” in the sense that they have become stable, unproblematic, and perceived as ontological certainty to control and construct the behavior of others (15, 130–31). In short, they suffer from a structural indifference to the material conditions of the present.

One point has to be underscored here. As I have stated above, we cannot stay in the Other’s context and on the Other’s terms all the time. But this position is absolutely not the same as suggesting that we should not value or see things from the native’s point of view. What it actually tries to suggest is that there is simply a limit to seeing things from the native’s point of view. At the same time, we should not use this position as an excuse to stop going native or stop gaining as much (limited) knowledge as possible of, say, how ancient Chinese used the yin-yang polarity and the five phases to construct a political and social reality, or how indirection by way of ainos was deployed in ancient Greece by individuals speaking from an inferior, if not enslaved, position.

To assist us in this (limited) effort to engage the Other’s context and the Other’s terms in the study of the Chinese rhetorical tradition, I suggest that we focus more on discursive fields—that is, on textual spaces where related concepts and categories cluster, and where different semantic alignments and subject positions take shape. Within each discursive field, one particular concept may depend on other concepts to realize its full meaning, and the totality of meaning that emerges from any given discursive field may be greater than the meanings conveyed by individual concepts within the same field. Further, discursive fields often exist in an agonistic relationship to other discursive fields at any given time. That is to say, one field may try to delegitimize or marginalize all other fields by staking out its own ideational grounds and by claiming its doctrinal supremacy. While boundaries between different discursive fields are not always clear-cut and can often be contested, the rise and fall of any given discursive field is intimately related to the existing power structure, and to how this power is being exercised to empower or to control different knowing and speaking subjects.

Let me use the history of the word individualism in Chinese as an example. The word individualism (geren zhy, 个人主义) came into the Chinese language via the Japanese kanji translation “kojin shugi” of the English individualism at the turn of the twentieth century. It was part of the massive influx of neologisms into Chinese in the late nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth century (L. Liu 18–19). On the heels of the political revolution in 1911, which toppled the last dynasty...
in China, the New Culture Movement during and just after World War I looked to the West for ideas and inspirations in its attempt to get rid of what remained of traditional Confucian culture in the republican era (de Bary and Lufrano 350–51). This movement acted as an important social and cultural impetus for the term geren zhuyi to align with other neologisms, such as rights, independence, personal property, and democracy, to form a discursive field or what may be called “the discourse of geren zhuyi.” Such discourse represented a new (Western) ideology that challenged, and became the polar opposite of, Confucianism, and it served as a powerful weapon to delegitimize Chinese tradition, to cure China’s illness, and to transform the status quo.

Like any other discursive field, the discourse of geren zhuyi is not immune to the sociocultural forces of its time. During the communist revolution in the 1920s, it experienced a drastic transformation in meaning when it acquired the negative status of bourgeois ideology, and when it was viewed as the opposite of socialism (L. Liu 87–91). As a result, it began to be marginalized by the discourse of socialism. The concept’s negative status as bourgeois ideology became all the more solidified after the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. New “cognates”—such as autonomy (zizhu, 自主), self-centeredness (ziwo zhuyi, 自我主義), and spontaneous license (ziyou zhuyi, 自由主義)—came to be associated with the term geren zhuyi. They together began to be seen as un-Chinese, as no more than standing for a negative West (L. Liu 41).

A word or two should perhaps be said about the difference between this notion of discursive fields and M. A. K. Halliday’s notion of the semantic network, which is, according to Halliday, “a representation of semantic options, or choices in meaning” (41). These semantic options are context-specific and typically associated with given situation types. Each situation type can be further represented as “a complex of three dimensions”: field (“the ongoing social activity”), tenor (“the role relationships involved”), and mode (“the symbolic rhetorical channel”) (110). These three situational dimensions in turn activate and determine three semantic components of language: ideational (meaning as content), interpersonal (meaning as participation), and textual (meaning as texture) (46–47, 116–17)—components or metafunctions that represent functions of language “as incorporated in the linguistic system” (50, emphasis in original). So, by developing the concept of semantic network, Halliday sees the semantic system to be realized through language use determined by specific situation types, or he links options or choices in meaning up to the social context through field, tenor, and mode.

While embracing the importance of language use, the notion of discursive fields, on the other hand, seeks to emphasize that meaning lies beyond any predetermined situation type, and that it secures its uptake, so to speak, not by selecting from (existing) options or choices in the semantic network, but through the process whereby
interpretive concepts or categories within a given textual space interact with one another. Otherwise stated, meaning is being produced and consumed by the occasion of use in complicity with or in competition with existing meanings or associations. To borrow a felicitous phrase from late comparative philosopher David Hall, meaning lies “in the interstices among the meanings” (215). In addition, the notion of discursive fields does not feature the kind of neat correspondence and parallel Halliday’s semantic network offers. Instead, it recognizes, and attempts to deal with, those necessary complications or contestations that are part of any meaning-making process.

Finally, my own turn to the use of discursive fields resonates, methodologically, and up to a point, with some recent work by scholars on Chinese communication theory and on rhetorical practices in ancient China. For example, in “Chinese Perspectives on Communication,” Shuming Lu, by interviewing a group of native Chinese professionals, assembles three clusters of Chinese terms, which represent Chinese understandings of communication as, respectively, “expressive action,” “interactive process,” and “desired outcome” (59–63). Such clusters could potentially be viewed as examples of discursive fields. Similarly, Xing Lu, in Rhetoric in Ancient China, focuses on six related terms associated with language art, rational thinking, persuasion, and argumentation in ancient China (500–200 BCE). These terms are yan (言), ci (辞), jian (讞), shui/shuo (説), ming (名), and bian (辯) (89), the latter two of which, as a compound (名辯), best capture classical Chinese rhetorical experiences (93). For me, then, these six terms could be imagined as making up a discursive field, with ming bian as its core constituent—though no critical attention is given to how these terms interacted with one another as a discursive field, and to how they competed against other contemporary and/or earlier discursive fields.

Engaging the Analects: Re-presenting the Native’s Point of View

To move my argument into a specific context, I study, in this section, one central idea from the Analects by Confucius. I aim to illustrate how my focus on the conditions of the present and on discursive fields helps unravel “the mystery of what ‘seeing things from the native’s point of view’ means” (Geertz 58). In other words, I want to engage and study the Analects in an effort to address some of the methodological challenges so far discussed and to shed some new light on our perennial struggle to represent the Other in its own context and on its own terms.

I choose the Analects by Confucius in part because it has become one of the major texts people turn to for inspiration or for incrimination in the study of the Chinese rhetorical tradition. The Analects or Sayings of Confucius (Lunyu, 論語) is a collection of twenty books put together by the disciples of Confucius (551–479 BCE).
over a span of three hundred years after the Master passed away. Each book contains twenty (more or less) short chapters or paragraphs ranging from brief quotations to short dialogues. As one of the Four Books, the Analects contains the main body of Confucius’s teachings assembled by his students. It is also part of a large body of texts that were instrumental to the development of Chinese rhetoric in ancient or preimperial China and that, in the words of Yameng Liu, “had reached an impressive level of sophistication in what is readily recognizable as rhetorical thinking” (147, emphasis in original).

The central question I want to address is this: How does the Analects deal with the relationship between self and other and between individual behavior and normative conduct? My desire to engage this question is in part informed by issues that emanate from our own ongoing discourses, from our own existing relations of asymmetry—issues that, I must add, Confucius may not have entertained.

More specifically, two sets of conditions are in play here. On a microlevel, I am interested in introducing the Analects to my colleagues on this side of the Pacific as a rhetorical text. I want to challenge the perception out there that the Analects or what it espouses has directly contributed to the lack of selfhood or individualism in the Chinese rhetorical tradition. I want to speak for the Analects in its own context and on its own terms and to give back to the Analects the kind of agency it deserves and actually performs.

On a macrolevel, my turn to the Analects is in direct response to two opposing discourses that seem to be shaping much of our conversation these days. On the one hand, there is a lot of optimism expressed of late about the seemingly unstoppable march toward globalization, about its potential to bring down social and cultural barriers and to open up economic and political opportunities to a greater number of people around the world than ever before. On the other hand, there is an almost equal amount of skepticism and resistance toward globalization because of the (well-founded) fear that it may just end up reinscribing the existing relations of power and perpetuating the chasm between the haves and the have-nots. Out of such skepticism and resistance have emerged some intense efforts, at both the local and national levels across the globe, to reassert boundaries, to hold on to traditions, and to control “the power to regulate inflows of cultural products” (Chan and McIntyre xx).

I cannot help wanting to participate in this conversation in order to break away from this logjam of dichotomy, from this “either-or” disposition that has so often colored our discursive practices. I want to appeal to the Analects for possibilities or insights. In a word, I want to re-present the Analects by both anchoring it in its own context and its own terms and ascribing to it a relevance and topicality that is only made possible by who we are and where we are.
Let me start with the native’s point of view. In the beginning of Book 7 of the
*Analects*, we come across the following:

The Master said: “I transmit but do not create; I live up to what I say and I am fond of antiquity. I venture to be compared with our Old Peng.” (21; bk. 7, par. 1)

The Master said: “I accumulate knowledge quietly; I do not get bored when I study; and I do not grow weary when I teach others. For me these activities present no difficulty.” (21; bk. 7, par. 2)

In these two paragraphs, Confucius apparently only accumulates and transmits knowledge; he does not create it. Further, he associates truth only with antiquity. Can we conclude, then, that Confucius is no ally to the promotion or cultivation of individual expression and creativity?

To answer this question, or to situate these two passages in their own context and on their own terms, we must look elsewhere in the *Analects*. In Paragraph 24, Book 15, his student, Zigong, asks Confucius if there is one expression that can serve as a guide to one’s conduct throughout one’s life. Confucius replies as follows:

It is perhaps the word ‘shu’ (恕). Do not impose on others what you yourself do not want. (34)

Often translated as “reciprocity” or as “putting oneself in the other’s place,” *shu* conveys an interpersonal meaning. The Chinese character 慎 consists of two parts: the top part 如 (ru) and the bottom part 心 (xin). The meaning of 如 is “compare” (bi, 比) or “be like” (xiang, 像), and 心 stands for “heart-and-mind.” The practice of *shu* can then literally be glossed as comparing with others by using one’s own heart-and-mind. Further, *shu* requires that, in the process of performing the act of comparing (bi), one should not impose one’s needs or desires on others. Rather, one engages “comparing” (bi) through the other’s point of view and by relying upon one’s own heart-and-mind. According to Herbert Fingarette, *shu* is “to grasp analogy with the other person, and in that light to treat him [or her] as you would be treated” (383). That is to say, the analogy initiated by *shu* is the use of one’s own heart-and-mind situated within, and filtered through, the other person’s perspectives.

How, then, does one actually put *shu* into practice? Where does one develop and acquire this ability, since not everyone, according to Confucius, is capable of practicing *shu* (19; bk. 5, par. 12)? And are there any related terms or “cognates” with which *shu* is associated in the textual space provided by the *Analects*? To answer these questions, we must look beyond its own semantic boundary, and we must investigate, for example, how *shu* is aligned with other related concepts and how its meaning is joined with, and indeed becomes expanded and enriched by, these other related meanings or values. In a word, the rhetorical significance of *shu* cannot be
fully spelled out unless we step outside its semantic confines and enter its discursive field. After all, for shu to be appropriately realized, one's heart-and-mind has to be in the right place and at the right time in the presence of others.

In Book Four of the Analects, Confucius once again addresses shu or its central importance in relation to his pursuit of dao (道)—a way of becoming a humane person within the social context of internalizing the golden tradition. He states that his dao is bound together with one single or continuous strand, which his disciple Zengzi explains as “zhong shu” (忠恕) (18; par. 15). Translated as “doing one’s utmost for the other’s interests” (Lau; Fingarette), zhong (忠) adds a distinctive sense of agency to the practice of shu. What is equally revealing is that both zhong and shu share the same radical, xin (“heart-and-mind”), suggesting a semantic kinship that underscores the self’s disposition to call on his or her own “heart-and-mind” to practice shu, to exert his or her utmost to infer and serve the other’s interests.

The pairing of zhong with shu makes the latter more interpersonal and more other-oriented. Still, doing one’s utmost for the other’s interests sheds little light on the social, cultural context in which the practice of shu has to be enacted. How, then, can this apparent gap be closed? To answer this question, let us look at how, in the Analects, Confucius discusses his other two central concepts: ren (仁, “humaneness”) and li (禮, “ritual action” or “ritualized living”).

First, shu is often defined in terms of ren in the Analects. For example, when asked about the criteria one can rely upon to characterize a humane person, Confucius responds this way:

Humane persons establish others by seeking to establish themselves and enlighten others by seeking to enlighten themselves. The ability to take as analogy what is near at hand [self] can be called the method of becoming a humane person. (21; bk. 6, par. 30)

Here the practice of shu no longer just regulates how self should conduct itself in the company of others. Insofar as it is the method with which one can transform oneself into a humane person, shu becomes constitutive. As the practice of shu yields ren, its interpersonal content is now more focused, more clearly accentuated.

Second, the practice of shu is deeply informed by li or ritual action, by what David Hall and Roger Ames call “the total spectrum of social norms, customs, and mores, covering increasingly complicated relationships and institutions” (86). In other words, as it seeks to realize ren, shu cannot but enact a tradition of institutionalized human actions and procedures. Because it is virtually impossible to separate one’s participation in tradition or in institutionalized relationships from one’s effort to put oneself in the other’s place at the right time and for the right purpose, li becomes inherently tied to the practice of shu.
But what exactly are these norms, values, and relationships in which the practice of shu participates and through which it realizes its potential? For Confucius, they will have to be grounded within the immediate domain of the family. In other words, they will have to be defined and explicated in terms of five cardinal relations or *wulun* (五倫). These five relationships are between parent and child, ruler and subject, husband and wife, old and young, and friends. Of these five relations three are familial in nature, and the other two are modeled after the familial relationships. So, the relationship between ruler and subject is conceived in terms of emperor as father and subject as son, and the relationship between friends is understood in terms of elder brother and younger brother (King 58).

Central to this familial system of relations are the father-son relationship and the elder brother–younger brother relationship. The former is characterized as *xiao* (filial piety, 孝) and the latter as *di* (fraternal responsibility, 悌). The realization of these two relationships constitutes the root of humane conduct (15; bk. 1, par. 2), and is instrumental to effecting good government (16; bk. 2, par. 21; 28; bk. 12, par. 11). If the family as an interpersonal model is fundamental, norms, values, and relationships cannot but be familial, and they cannot but be hierarchical, reciprocal, and always in need of adjustment and modification. It is this familial model that becomes the immediate, indispensable framework determining the appropriateness and significance of the practice of shu and of enacted roles, values, and relationships.

The question still remains, though, of the role of language in the practice of shu. That is to say, can one use language to facilitate or advance the practice of shu—especially given the fact that Confucius is said to be thinking of giving up speaking altogether in the *Analects* (37; bk. 17, par. 19)?

Confucius has made it quite clear in the *Analects* that the practice of shu needs *xin* (making good on what one says, 信) and *yan* (speech or words, 言). The Master only opposes speech that has no chance of being “made good” (that is, *xin*). [Incidentally, “xin” (making good on what one says) has the same “pinyin” (Chinese phonetic transcription) as “xin” (heart-and-mind), but with a different tone—the latter being a distinctive, meaning-making feature in Chinese]. In other words, when speakers cannot live up to what they say, their speech becomes “glib talk” (*qiaoyan*, 巧言) and shameful (20; bk. 5, par. 25). Such speech fails to comport with humane conduct (15; bk. 1, par. 3) and makes individuals unfit as humane persons (16; bk. 2, par. 22). On the other hand, Confucius values *yan* (speech) insofar as it does not supersede or replace action (32; bk. 14, par. 27), and he sees this kind of language use as only befitting the humane person (21; bk. 7, par. 3).

Further, an integral component of practicing shu is to know others. For Confucius, anyone who does not understand *yan* would have no chance of knowing others (39; bk. 20, par. 3). One’s understanding of *yan*, on the other hand, comes
from one’s experience of both living up to one’s yan and using yan with one’s utmost effort (25; bk. 9, par. 25). To be able to live up to one’s yan is xin—a character (信) that consists of “person” (人, ren) and “speech” (言, yan). In short, to understand, to connect to, and to earn trust of, others, one has to be sincere in what one says to others; that is, one has to practice xin. Further, one’s yan has to be substantiated by concrete actions and evaluated within the context of shifting, complementary relations.

It should by now be clear that the practice of shu, situated within the spaces of these other related concepts, seeks to establish a living or individualized relationship of interconnectedness and interdependence. This relationship is to be cultivated by zhong (doing one’s utmost for the other’s interests), through li (ritualized living), and with the help of yan (speech) and xin (making good on what one says). Once established, it realizes ren (humaneness). Further, the establishment of this relationship is grounded on familial terms, on xiao (filial piety) and di (fraternal responsibility). Differently stated, if the focal meaning of shu is the ability to make inferences and connect to others so as not to impose on them what one does not want, one’s understanding of how this ability can actually be put into action depends on zhong, ren, li, xiao, di, yan, and xin. Both shu and these other “semantic siblings” form a discursive field, and they together give meaning and substance to what may be called “the discourse of shu” and to how individuals position themselves to realize and extend these reciprocal, ritualized, and humane relationships.

The discourse of shu so far developed serves as a fitting answer to the question posed earlier of whether or not Confucius, by apparently privileging imitation over creation, actually discourages or even opposes individual expression and creativity. That is to say, it would be a gross simplification to conclude that Confucius pits his reverence for antiquity against self-discovery, and that he views the relationship between self and other as one where self is forever beholden to the golden past—be our purported evidence derived from the first two passages in Book 7, or from anywhere else in the Analects for that matter. Rather, it is far more appropriate to characterize the relationship envisioned in the Analects between self and other as one of reciprocity and interconnectedness, and as further to be realized within a familial, hierarchical context through doing one’s utmost, and through performing speech that can be made good or whose uptake can be secured by a joint effort between self and other.

Now, if the past is an integral part of these enacted norms, values, and ritual actions, then what one does when one appeals to the past becomes no more than the same individual’s effort to deploy one’s heart-and-mind to infer, connect to, and speak from such a past. The relationship the person builds and enacts out of such efforts does not have to be passive or submissive. Indeed, in Paragraph 20 of the
same book (Book 7), Confucius describes both his love for antiquity and his desire for self-discovery this way:

“I am not one who was born with knowledge; I am one who, through his love of antiquity, is keen to discover knowledge. (22; bk. 7, par. 20)

In a word, for Confucius, to be a transmitter is to interact with others within the broad cultural continuity of his time. His emphasis on the transmission or passing on of (ancient) knowledge should not be characterized as evidence that he privileges imitation over creation. Rather, transmitting knowledge this way helps the individual both communicate with the tradition and expand the circle of human interrelatedness.

One may still ask: “Were there any prior and/or contemporary discursive fields that the discourse of shu was trying to identify with or to compete against given the interconnectedness of discursive fields? Or is it possible at all that it could have emerged ex nihilo?”

To begin with, Confucius lived through one of the most tumultuous and formative periods in Chinese culture. During this period, ancient China saw the steady decline and decay of the Zhou dynasty and the rise of the vassal states jockeying for power through violence and warfare. This loss of central power was further accelerated by the erosion of Zhou Li (Rites of Zhou). During the same period, however, there was increased social mobility, and many competing schools of thought emerged to fill the vacuum created by the loss of the tradition and to vie for doctrinal supremacy—hence the use of the expression “bai jia zheng ming” (contentions of One Hundred Schools of Thought, 百家爭鳴) to characterize this period.

Given the turmoil and instability that dominated his time and given his vow to follow the Western Zhou (Mote 29), Confucius saw the urgent need to restore the normative and orderly world of the Western Zhou and to reauthorize the tradition of governing embodied in the ancient sage kings. For Confucius, the ancient sage kings exercised their governing mandate not by law, force, or warfare, but by observing rites and the patterns of order that had passed on to them from their own past and ultimately from tian (天, heaven) (Schwartz 50–51). They sought to cultivate and maintain a relation of harmony between their community and the rest of the natural, cosmic order, from which the human reality might have fallen away (Schwartz 55; Ames and Rosemont 3). It comes as no surprise that Confucius spent his life trying to revive this tradition and to reanimate this harmonious relationship between self and other, between the community and the natural, cosmic order.

It follows, then, that the discourse of shu represents Confucius’s creative effort to restore this disappearing moral order and to identify with an earlier discourse that established and promoted a(n) (imagined) world where, according to Schwartz,
“Heaven in giving birth to human beings also implants in them the patterns of order which ought to govern their behavior in their relations with each other and with the spirits” (50). Such discourse could be found, for example, in the Book of Poetry, an anthology of some three hundred poems dating from the founding of the Zhou dynasty to the seventh century BCE (Schwartz 50). Further, by foregrounding the need to infer the needs of and connect to others, and by situating this relation of interdependence within the familial, hierarchical context, Confucius began to confer upon the discourse of shu a sense of authority and authenticity that was based not so much on the supernatural as on the rational, on the familial (Mote 27).

Just as utterances are never isolated or self-contained, and just as they always presuppose utterances that precede and follow them (Bakhtin 136), so the discourse of shu as a discursive field anticipated or served as a catalyst for the emergence of other discursive fields, of other schools of thought in its own time and in the succeeding centuries. None was perhaps more prominent than the rise of the School of Legalism (fajia,法家). Prefigured in the School of Mohism with its rejection of li and associated tradition soon after the death of Confucius, the School of Legalism emerged as a full-blown theory in the third and second centuries BCE (Schwartz 329; Van Norden 7). While there were some noticeable differences among different Legalists (Schwartz 339–43), this particular discourse rose to challenge the discourse of shu as it envisioned a society where penal law would be followed over ancient sage kings or personal examples, and where “‘objective’ mechanisms of ‘behavioral’ control should become automatic instruments for achieving well-defined sociopolitical goals” (Schwartz 328). To state the matter another way, the discourse of Legalism wrested agency and authority away from this reciprocal, albeit very hierarchical, relationship between self and other, and reinstalled them in the realm of law and punishment. The discourse of shu had met its discursive equal as both discourses, together with the rest of One Hundred Schools of Thoughts (baijia,百家), jostled for doctrinal supremacy or dominance during the Warring States era.

A caveat is in order. At the outset of this essay, I indicated the need to recognize and address the diversity within the Chinese rhetorical tradition. While we—Chinese and Chinese Americans, for example—may have every reason to criticize others for representing the Chinese rhetorical tradition as monolithic, uncontested, or unchanging, we should not delude ourselves into believing that we are somehow immune from the same kind of essentializing impulse that may have affected all of us one way or another. What I have done so far is to characterize the discourse of shu as an emergent discursive field that responded to the sociocultural conditions in ancient China and that created new meanings for both individuals and institutions of its time. In so doing, I have no intention of implying that such discourse was settled or uncontested. Considering the following facts, one should quickly come to the conclusion that the discourse of shu was anything but uncontested.
Fact 1: the *Analects* was assembled by Confucius’s disciples over the span of three hundred years after his death, and there were apparently eight competing Confucian sects by the third century BCE. Our modern version of the *Analects* is a synthesis of several different versions that evolved through successive interpreters in the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) (Van Norden 12–13). Fact 2: there is simply no reason to assume that what was reported or recalled by one of Confucius’s disciples would be accepted by the rest of his disciples, let alone by the Master himself. Fact 3: the composition of the *Analects* was shaped and synthesized by the political agendas of these competing Confucian sects (Van Norden 12–13). What I do want to suggest, therefore, is that the discourse of shu, situated within this fluid context, cannot help being imbued with other competing voices, and that its constitutive capability was predicated not so much upon the stability of its meaning as upon its actual uptake, secured by participating interlocutors as they practiced the discourse of shu within each and every particularizing context.

**Back to the Present: Some Concluding Remarks**

In writing this essay, I set out to accomplish three specific tasks. First, I wanted to reflect on several major methodological approaches that have for some time influenced the study of the Chinese rhetorical tradition on this side of the Pacific. My reflection aims to highlight the formidable challenges and complexities that the study of the Chinese rhetorical tradition shares and faces. I wanted to underscore the need to pay more attention to both the biases and the consequences of our own methodologies.

Second, I wanted to look into one of our recent responses to such challenges and complexities. Namely, I want to complicate Geertz’s well-known solution to “the mystery of what ‘seeing things from the native’s point of view’ means” (58). I want to interrogate this (perceived) dialectical tacking between experience-near and experience-distant concepts. On the one hand, I argue that Geertz’s solution fails to engage the process of recontextualization or to address the conditions of the present. On the other hand, I point out that we may not be able to stay in the Other’s context and on the Other’s terms all the time—both because we can only see so much or so little from the native’s point of view and because we cannot but feel the presence of the present.

Third, central to my effort to engage the conditions of the present—and indeed to write this essay—is to make our study of the Chinese rhetorical tradition more self-reflective and less afraid to interrogate its own evidence or conclusions. In particular, I want to illustrate how our study of the Chinese rhetorical tradition can be fraught with discursive tensions, relations of power asymmetry, and contingencies of meaning.
As it should be clear by now, my own turn to the *Analects* and my specific effort to articulate the discourse of *shu* are very much mobilized by the conditions of the present. By appealing to the concept of discursive fields, I want to present the discourse of *shu* as a concrete example of Confucian rhetoric, of how one particular discursive field emerged to claim doctrinal supremacy and to empower and control speaking subjects rhetorically. Further, I want to use the discourse of *shu* to help articulate a different discourse, one that cultivates not a sense of antagonism or dualism, but a culture of reciprocity. Such discourse can allow for internal ambivalences, ambiguities, and even contradictions, and it can help cultivate a much-needed space where two opposing discourses can coexist—without necessarily having one either deny the Other its own context or serve as the norm or the point of origination for the Other.

The discourse of *shu* thus constitutes a direct response to this “either-or” discourse that I referred to as part of the conditions of the present at the beginning of the section on engaging the *Analects*. By promoting a culture of reciprocity or interdependence, it not only moves away from this polarizing discourse, but also becomes a metaphor for accepting, and negotiating with, differences, ambiguities, and even contradictions. Further, by allowing two opposing discourses to carry on dialogue with each other, it may yield what communication scholars Joseph Chan and Eric Ma call “creative confrontation,” leading to “cultural blending and recreation” (14). It may spur its practitioners to take more risks, to prepare better for complexities, contingencies, and consequences.

On the other hand, we should not—this much has to be entered here—celebrate the discourse of *shu* too quickly, as though all problems would now go away. For one thing, practicing the discourse of *shu* does not mean that this “either-or” discourse in the age of globalization is going to disappear any time soon. Nor does it mean that other cultural and symbolic boundaries or divisions will soon recede or dissolve. For another, the discourse of *shu* has yet to address the relations of power that necessarily influence and inflect any relations of interdependence or reciprocity that it aims to represent and promote. Commenting on the characteristics of cultural hybridity, Chan and Ma call on us to recognize “the power of hegemonic force” within any given hybridity (15). The same recognition, I am afraid, must be extended to the discourse of *shu*, and to the rhetorical experiences we face and share as we continue to make sense of the Chinese, as well as the European American, rhetorical tradition on this side of the Pacific.

To better address the complexities my effort entails in bringing the discourse of *shu* to the twenty-first century, it is worth emphasizing that the relevance of the discourse of *shu* to the present is fueled by issues originating more from my own location and context than from Confucius, from the *Analects*. At the same time, I do submit that such relevance in turn helps to develop a richer understanding of the
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Analects and, more specifically, of its position on the relationship between self and other.

For example, as we try to bring the discourse of shu to the present, we will have to face up to the fact that this relationship of interdependence or reciprocity does not make interpersonal differences go away. Although Confucius did recognize interpersonal differences, he conceptualized them only in terms of familial hierarchy—that is, in terms of parent and child, husband and wife, and old and young. Once framed or contained within such hierarchy, these differences became predictable and easily manageable. In the end, the discourse of shu could very well be deployed to preserve the status quo and to protect asymmetries of power.

Consequently, for the discourse of shu to have any lasting impact on the conditions of the present, and on the articulation of this new discourse, differences must not be contained—either within the familial context or within the community—because they are always spread out and located in the flow of speech events and in the encounters of rhetorics. Inscribed in each and every speech event, they are implicated in the positions the self assumes as the same individual puts forth the utmost to connect with others and to face up to the complex, historically determined relations of power. Only out of this process, I want to suggest, can emerge multiple acts of signification, be they intervening, transforming, or conflicting. And only out of this process can a true dialectical tacking be realized, where we can begin to represent the native’s point of view in ways that can contribute to a discourse of reciprocity, and that can reconfigure the relations of power in the process of interconnectedness.

Notes

1. According to Aristotle, there are ten pairs of opposite terms in the Pythagorean Table of Opposites, which displays the analogy in the relationships between each pair. For example, on the side of limit, there are odd, one, right, male, resting, straight, light, good, and square; on the side of the unlimited, there are even, many, left, female, moving, curved, darkness, bad, and rectangular (21; 986a22–28). Lloyd further suggests that Aristotle draws upon the basic idea conveyed through the sustoichia. He writes, “Thus the belief that right is to be associated with male, front, upper, hot, and conversely left is to be associated with female, back, lower, cold, is given explanatory work to do in a wide variety of contexts in his [Aristotle’s] cosmology, in his embryology and elsewhere in his physics” (114–15).

2. According to Geertz, the distinction between experience-near and experience-distant concepts is originally formulated by the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut (57). In drawing upon this distinction, Geertz makes it quite clear that it is more a matter of degree than of polar opposition. For him, the real question is what roles the two concepts should play in anthropological analysis, or, as he puts it, “how, in each case, ought one to deploy them so as to produce an interpretation of the way a people lives which is neither imprisoned within their mental horizons, an ethnography of witchcraft as written by a witch, nor systematically deaf to the distinctive tonalities of their existence, an ethnography of witchcraft as written by a geometer” (57).

3. The English word analects (from the Greek analekta) means “a selection,” whereas the Chinese title Lunyu could be translated as “conversations” (de Bary and Bloom 42). And the word Confucius is a
Latinization, invented by Jesuit missionaries in the seventeenth century, of Kongfuzi (孔子), which means “Master Kong” (Van Norden 9). For a more detailed discussion of the textual history of the Analects, and especially of its composition, see Van Norden (13–18; also see Ames and Rosemont 7–10).

4. The Four Books are the Analects, the Great Learning, the Doctrine of the Mean, and the Mencius. The Great Learning was compiled by Zengzi, one of Confucius’s disciples, and the Doctrine of the Mean was attributed to Zisi, Zengzi’s student and Confucius’s grandson (483–402 BCE). These four books became fully canonized and known as the Four Books after they were compiled and annotated by Zhu Xi (1130–1200 CE), the famed Southern Song scholar-philosopher, who played a pivotal role in the development of what has come to be known as neo-Confucianism.

5. Old Peng was a legendary statesman in the Western Zhou dynasty who was believed to have lived a long life with a deep love for antiquity. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations here and elsewhere in this essay are mine, and all references are to Four Books and Five Classics.

6. The Zhou dynasty is generally divided into the Western Zhou (1045/1040?–771 BCE) and the Eastern Zhou (771–221 BCE). The latter came into existence after the Western Zhou was toppled by a coalition of Chinese and “barbarian” soldiers and after a surviving member of the royal family set up a new capital farther to the east. But the king of the Eastern Zhou was only a figurehead, as the dynasty was characterized by the escalating internecine conflicts and wars that eventually led to its demise in 221 BCE, when its titular reign was replaced by the first centralized feudal state, built by Emperor Qin. There were two subperiods within the Eastern Zhou, known as the Spring and Autumn (722–479 BCE) and the Warring States (479–221 BCE) eras. For more on the history of preimperial China, see Van Norden (4–9).

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