Themes and Context of Chinese Rhetoric

The Chinese rhetorical tradition can be traced to ancient times as early as 3000 years ago, but a distinctive Chinese conceptualization of rhetoric emerged in about 500 B.C.E. There are different perspectives on language art and persuasive tactics as related to morality, dialectics, rational thinking, and utilitarianism in the classical period of 5th-3rd century B.C.E. The rhetorical concepts and expressions formulated during this time by different schools of thought have influenced China and Chinese thinking for the remaining centuries. Mao Zedong, the founder of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, for example, has appropriated many Confucian concepts in his writing while simultaneously promoting a radical version of Marxism in transforming China and the Chinese people. In the following, I will provide themes and sources for Confucian rhetoric, Daoist rhetoric, and the rhetoric of Mao Zedong for those of you who would like to incorporate Chinese rhetoric in your rhetoric courses.

Confucian Rhetoric

Confucian rhetoric is largely based on the works of three major classical Confucianists: Confucius (551-479 B.C.E.), Mengzi (390-305 B.C.E.), and Xunzi (298-238 B.C.E.). Their rhetoric is characterized by a humanistic view of language, persuasion, and argumentation. The tenets of their rhetoric include moral/benevolent/virtuous characteristics in the speaker, the rectification of names (proper use of language according to one’s social position), and the ability to distinguish between good and harmful speeches. In their writing, these Confucianists used ample metaphors, analogies, juxtapositions, and dialogues. There are even some similarities between Confucian rhetoric and the rhetoric of Plato and Aristotle.

Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources:


Resnik, Michael David. Logic and Scientific Methodology in the Writing of Mencius. *International Philosophy Quarterly* 8, 212-30, 1968.


**Daoist Rhetoric**

Daoist rhetoric is represented by Laozi (500 B.C.E.-?) and Zhuangzi (369-286 B.C.E.). While Daoism presents a worldview of metaphysics, dialectics, and mysticism, its rhetorical conceptualization is unique and distinctive. Dao, literally translated as “way” or “path”
actually is a moral concept that refers to the way of natural law and the way of human development. Its core concept is “wuwei” (non-action) which means allowing things to take their own course rather than overexerting intervention or interference. In other words, Daoist rhetoric aims to achieve balance or equilibrium in one’s personal life and in governing a state. Accordingly, Daoist rhetoric is skeptical of the use of language, its limitations, and its effect; it emphasizes non-contention and deemphasizes on the power of language. Its rhetorical style is characterized by paradoxical and oxymoronic sayings to allow the reader to see the opposing view. Zhuangzi’s writing is filled with fables, parables, ironies, anecdotes, pseudo-dialogues, and humor to make his points and to inspire his readers to move away from binary thinking.

Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources:

Chung, Rueling. An examination of Taoist and Buddhist perspectives on interpersonal conflicts, emotions, and adversities. In Fred, Jandt (Ed.) *Intercultural communication: A global reader*. (pp. 38-50), Sage.


The Rhetoric of Mao Zedong

As the founder of the People’s Republic of China, Mao Zedong has been regarded as a cultural icon and national hero by many Chinese people to this day. Mao’s rhetoric has had the most impact and influence on the transformation of China and Chinese people through his writing and speeches in the modern era. His writing and speeches stretch from 1913 to 1975, addressing rhetorical exigencies in different time periods throughout China’s modern history. Mao’s rhetoric is characterized by his strategic appropriation of both symbolic resources of Confucian tradition and the radical tenets of class struggle drawn from Karl Marx’s Communist Manifesto. Always presenting himself as a patriot and moral leader, Mao’s projections of China transformation – to that of a utopian state -- gave Chinese people hope for the future. His rhetoric is filled with ethical, emotional, and rational appeals. He was adept at using simple language, concrete examples, narratives, metaphors, historical references, proverbs and adages from classical Chinese literature to make abstract theories understandable. The current President of China, Xi Jinping, has followed Mao’s rhetorical legacy in his own political speeches.

Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources:


