Confucian Rhetoric and Multilingual Writers

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Until recent years, various readings of the *Analects* were centered on verbal persuasion, closely following or drastically departing from the Greco-Roman rhetoric. Ever since Plato and Aristotle, the overarching emphasis in Western rhetoric has been placed on verbal persuasion of an audience by a speaker or a writer. Using such a rhetorical system as the index, George Kennedy in his book *Comparative Rhetoric* characterized Confucian rhetoric as being less systematic with epistemology and dialecticism and failing to develop a system of argumentation. In her book, *Rhetoric in Ancient China, Fifth to Third Century, B.C.E.*, Xing Lu, preoccupied by searching Confucian terms compatible with Western concepts in verbal persuasion, missed important elements in the text that might give rise to an alternative rhetorical framework unique to Confucius. For example, she places the concept of *li* (rites, propriety, or codes of conducts; or to ritualize or to act according to the rites), a term unavailable in Aristotelian rhetoric but central to Confucius’s rhetorical teaching, under the category of “philosophical views.” Drastically diverging from the Greco-Roman framework is LuMing’s reading of the *Analects*. Believing that non-Western rhetorical traditions may possess a nonlogical and noncausal ideology, LuMing suggests that the *Analects* embodies three important components of Confucian teaching of rhetoric, i.e., accumulating and transmitting knowledge, performing reciprocity, and acting in accordance with rites. Together they can be characterized as forming a participatory mode of discourse, or “they promote an open-ended interaction between antiquity and the present, and between the individual and an ever-expanding circle of human-relatedness” (515).

In my reading of the *Analects*, I would like to define rhetoric broadly as the art of modifying human minds and behaviors through symbols. I would argue that the *Analects* is a rhetoric on the
multimodality of ritual symbols, dealing with the rhetorical process of symbolic identification and transformation in ritualistic performance. So in some ways it shares similarity to what LuMing has called a participatory mode of discourse.

Ritual is a unique, time-honored form of cultural communication. Human beings use particular ritual configurations to elevate or symbolically fix and recreate those beliefs that are important to them. Ritual depends on the appeal of the configurations, or form, in affecting the participants, because first, “form, having to do with the creation and gratification of needs, is ‘correct’ insofar as it gratifies the needs which it creates” (Burke 138); second, the form “provides for the celebration of what is shared by participating in known sequences of coordinated action, which by definition, require—and, once enacted, implicate—the exploitation of shared rules” (Philipsen 251). The participation of those involved, either directly or indirectly, in the ritual commits them to an overt affirmation of the intended symbolic goal, thus fixing or creating reality. Further, ritual performance also opens up space for rhetorical invention. When someone performs a ritual action, he or she not only derives meaning and value from this embodiment, but also strengthens it through his or her contribution of novel meaning and value (Hall and Ames 88). Therefore, ritual exercises an “automatic” persuasion on people as long as they believe in its authority and power. In my reading of the Analects, Confucius offers a systematic deliberation on how to maximize the rhetorical efficacy of ritual symbols to perpetuate cultural values and actuate positive social change.

For Confucius, a true gentleman is a devoted practitioner of the social rites, ready to defend, strengthen and enlarge their practice. At the same time, he is destined to be a transformer, either a leader or a facilitator to the leader. As family regulator and state governor, naturally the individual self lies in the heart of Confucian ritualization. Confucius places tremendous faith in the agency of the individual for achieving what is Good. Ritualization initiates when the self tries to explore and identify the Good character within himself. To comply with the ritual codes, a true gentleman will need to watch out his acts of looking, listening, speaking, and gesturing—all human acts carry profound and powerful symbolic meanings in the society. Ritualization takes place when the self
negotiates symbolic meanings through actually performing multimodal ritual acts in both the family and in the state.

It is also a virtuous person’s responsibility to affect the others with his Goodness—to influence them, to persuade them, to transform them, and ultimately to lead them toward Goodness. The success in ritualizing the others depends, for the most part, on the consecration of the ritual performers, or the rise of true gentlemen. Once instituted by the community, a gentleman’s Goodness can be compared to wind. When the gentleman is in a leading position, Confucius says, “The essence of the gentleman is that of wind; the essence of small people is that of grass. And when a wind passes over the grass, it cannot choose but bend” (12.19).

Ritualization for both the self and the others is a life-long endeavor. It is a process of adjusting one’s mind and heart to approach the Way and exemplify the Way through one’s proper acts in both private and public spheres. It is first of all a process of constant learning and investigation for the self. Confucius emphasizes learning from the antiquity, or the study of the Songs, ritual, music, and history.

Through ritualizing the self and the others, ultimately Confucius looks for a drastic but peaceful social change—to finally achieve the otherness of contemporary Chinese society. He envisions a new society where, when the Way prevails, all orders concerning ritual, music and punitive expeditions will be issued by the Son of Heaven (tianzi). Under the right leadership, the masses do not need to bother themselves with political affairs except performing the sacred rites and music, which offer the masses an alternative parameter of life experiences where peace, harmony, and joy are thereof derived.

Although Confucius lived two thousand years ago, his thoughts have captured some essence of humanity. For our composition class, or language class in general, first, the Analects reminds us that every culture from which our multilingual students come from has its own ritual system and its own way of ritualizing its people. Before the students come to our language class, they have been receiving full-scale rhetorical education in their home community. They have learned how to influence other people through ritual symbols. They, particularly Asian students, understand that
language is just one of the many ritual acts, and oftentimes a rather weak one, to modify people’s minds and to lead them to morally appropriate actions. In our composition class, we teach so called rhetoric, or the tricks on how to maximize the power of language. I wonder whether we are crippling our students by overemphasizing one ritual over the many others, which are crucial for building strong communities. Will overemphasizing on language and downplaying other social rituals, or turning our students to typified sophists, lower their moral status in the long run? Second, if rituals are so important for building a harmonious and peaceful community, what kind of rituals can we develop among our multilingual students beside language skills in the composition classroom? Our students come from different cultural, linguistic, and racial backgrounds. What kind of rituals should we develop in our composition class, so we can bring everybody together, so racial, gender, and class issues will diminish on our campuses and beyond?
Works Cited


---. Yi Li [Rites]. <http://www.cnread.net/cnread1/gdwx/y/yiming/002/001.htm>.


