6 Reading the Heavenly Mandate: Dong Zhongshu’s Rhetoric of the Way (Dao)

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Studies of Confucian rhetoric in the West have largely focused on Confucian figures in pre-imperial China.¹ The reasons for the enduring interest in this historical period, we suggest, are mainly two-fold. First, the hundreds of schools of thought during the Spring and Autumn period (770 BCE—476 BCE) and Warring States period (475 BCE—221 BCE) produced numerous philosophical texts that furnish a treasure trove for interested rhetoricians. Many existent texts have been translated into Western languages, offering Western rhetoricians, such as Robert Oliver and George Kennedy, direct access to classical Chinese thought and allowing them to compare classical Chinese and Greco-Roman rhetorics. Second, rhetoricians seem contented with knowledge of Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzhi, assuming that perspectives developed by these pre-imperial figures offer sufficient explanatory power for Confucians’ rhetorical practices in imperial China, where Confucianism gained state patronage. These two major reasons have largely defined, and unwittingly circumscribed, the purview of Confucian rhetoric known in the West.

The complacency with the knowledge of pre-imperial figures is unwarranted. Changing socio-cultural factors in China, Confucian intellectuals’ responses to new sociopolitical exigencies, and the discursive engagement between Confucian and less influential schools would necessarily lead to reformulations of Confucian rhetorical theories. Knowledge of several key figures dating from a period prior to imperial China will not suffice, if we hope to determine how Confu-
Confucian rhetoric has metamorphosed in response to, and in interaction with, evolving Chinese feudal politics, or if we hope to determine the enduring ramifications of Confucian rhetoric in modern Chinese political discourse.

Once rhetoricians move into study of Confucianism in the imperial period, they will inevitably encounter daunting challenges. First, since so many Confucian schools and intellectuals prevailed in the two thousand years of Chinese imperial history, one can easily be overwhelmed by the task of selecting representative figures and texts. Second, most texts were written in classical Chinese, a language hard to penetrate even for Chinese scholars. Even worse, few texts have been translated into Western languages yet, which discourages interested Western scholars from delving into the primary texts. Despite these challenges, which we equally face, we will venture into the territory less trodden, hoping that our endeavor will inspire more scholars to join the expedition. In this chapter, we examine a Confucian erudite named Dong Zhongshu (195 BCE—115 BCE), who became an influential statesman three hundred years after Confucius’s death. Dong is an opportune figure for our endeavor because, first, he developed his political thought by assimilating those of many other Confucian intellectuals of his age (Queen 23). His rhetorical theory, particularly his rhetorical understanding of Heaven, was representative of the then influential Gong-Yang exegetical school of Confucianism. Second, Dong played a pivotal role in establishing academic Confucianism in the Western Han Dynasty (206 BCE—24 A.D.). In the process, he had to reconfigure Confucian philosophical and rhetorical frames to suit the sociopolitical reality of his time, which creates an opportunity to examine Confucian rhetoric in early imperial China.

In this chapter, we first offer an overview of Confucian rhetoric in pre-imperial China, focusing on rhetorical frames and concepts developed by Confucius but later extended or revised by Dong Zhongshu. Then, we discuss Dong’s rhetorical theory. In Dong’s rhetorical reformulations, he underscored Heaven as a powerful interlocutor in the discourse of the Way (道 dao) and articulated a new historical topos. Dong’s theory is most concerned about how human beings could understand Heaven, the arbitrator of both the natural and human realms, and how political leaders could communicate with Him in their execution of the Heavenly mandate on earth. Since Dong developed his rhetorical theory largely through interpreting and appropriating a
Confucian classic, the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, in the spirit of the Gong-Yang exegetical school, we conclude with a brief discussion of Dong’s hermeneutics. By charting some key components of Dong’s rhetorical theory, we hope to show that Confucian rhetoric underwent a salient reformulation in the Western Han Dynasty, thus warranting further scholarly inquiries of the imperial period.

**Confucian Rhetoric in its Pre-imperial Formulations**

Although scholars have devoted much attention to Confucian rhetoric over the last several decades, they have not settled on what Confucius’s rhetorical framework truly is. They, in fact, represent a wide spectrum, from denying to affirming its existence. Those who deny its existence are not deconstructionists but scholars who have entertained Greco-Roman rhetorical precepts as their “terministic screens.” For example, Kennedy has characterized Confucius (551 BCE-479 BCE), when compared with Socrates, as being less systematic with epistemology and dialecticism and as failing to develop a system of argumentation.

Moving away from Western precepts and embracing native terms such as *ming* (rational thinking, logic, and epistemology), *bian* (argumentation, discussion, and eloquence) and *yan* (language), Xing Lu has identified some “rhetorical perspectives” expressed by Confucius. For instance, Confucius emphasized the importance of rectifying names, i.e., assuring a truthful representation of reality, particularly a clear demarcation of individuals’ social status and kinship identities, through the use of language. Such a rhetorical perspective implies that a clear prescription and maintenance of everyone’s roles and functions in society will lead to social stability and harmony. Further, as Lu correctly observes, Confucius emphasized the appropriate use of language in communication, and he developed a set of terms to describe moralized language behaviors, such as virtuous speech, trustworthy speech, upright speech, cautious speech, and correct speech.

Departing from dependence on Western traditions, LuMing Mao also recognizes three components of Confucius’s *Analects* that constitute what he calls “participatory discourse.” The text embodies three key components of Confucius’s teaching of rhetoric. First, Confucius associates truth with antiquity, and emphasizes his role in accumulating and transmitting ancient knowledge. Second, Confucius assigns a prominent orientation to others in one’s self-cultivation and moral conduct. Even a privileged individual needs to treat others the same
way as he expects others to treat him. Third, Confucius admonishes that one should act in accordance with rites to facilitate self-cultivation and to achieve both humaneness and social harmony. Together, these components “promote an open-ended interaction between antiquity and the present, and between the individual and an ever-expanding circle of human-relatedness” (515).

While we admire both Lu’s and Mao’s characterizations of Confucius’s rhetoric, we understand Confucius’s rhetoric as being a theory of the multimodality of ritual symbols, articulated to salvage the tumultuous Zhou Dynasty (ca. 1100 BCE to 221 BCE). It is a rhetorical theory on how to properly mobilize ritual symbols, including linguistic symbols, to restore a disintegrated, corrupted Chinese society to an ideal state (You). The ideal state is a perfect embodiment of dao. In metaphysical speculations of ancient China, the universe did not start from a clear distinction of different worlds, but rather from a chaotic mass. What most attracted the ancient Chinese was not something that would transcend this chaotic state, but the innermost essence of the chaos that remained hidden and mysterious. The answer to everything about this world that lay at the heart of the chaos is called dao (the Way). Among ancient Chinese philosophers, Confucius was particularly keen in seeking out dao in order to end the turmoil of the Zhou Dynasty. For him, dao offers not only the answer to how the natural world operates but, more importantly, the key to the moral-spiritual order and the prosperity of human society. Therefore, Confucius once said, “In the morning, hear the Way; in the evening, die content” (4.8). Dao is all one needs to know, thus the proper realm of Confucian ontology and epistemology.

In Confucius’s teaching, he was most concerned about human society and refrained from entering the realm of the Spirits and Heaven. For him, the desirable knowledge or wisdom (知 zi) for an individual is the complete mastery of attributes of being good, or in practical terms, seventeen kinds of rites established in the early Zhou Dynasty, six centuries before Confucius. Being good involves concern about human affairs, rather than about any supernatural or metaphysical matters. A true gentleman shows respect to the Spirits but maintains a distance from them (6.20). Any further exploration into the Spirits is discouraged by Confucius, because a gentleman takes as his sole responsibility the attempt to exemplify the desirable attributes of being good to the multitude. Heaven is the dispenser of life and death, wealth and rank
A gentleman must learn to know the will of Heaven (20.3) and submit to it patiently. However, Confucius is unwilling to discourse on “the ways of Heaven” (5.12; 9.1) with his students, probably due to his conviction that his students were not ready for this subject. He confessed that he came to understand Heaven’s will quite late in his own study: “At fifteen I set my heart upon learning . . . At fifty, I knew what were the biddings of Heaven. At sixty, I heard them with docile ear” (2.4).

Human history, as the evidence of dao, is what Confucius tuned in to “hear the Way.” Confucius saw social rites (禮 li) as an indicator of dao’s status quo in the late Zhou society. Rites are a sophisticated complex of social codes that signify what was valued the most in the Zhou society. They embody the total spectrum of social norms, customs, and mores, covering increasingly complicated relationships and institutions. The appropriate acts prescribed by the rites not only oversee ceremonial occasions, but also govern daily human interactions. Confucius praised the social rites of the past, critiqued their practice in the present, and envisioned an ideal society of rites for the future. For example, when consulted about statesmanship, Confucius referred to ritualistic features of previous dynasties as ideal practices: “One would go by the seasons of Hsia (Xia); as state-coach for the ruler one would use that of Yin, and as head-gear of ceremony wear the Chou (Zhou) hat. For music, one would take as model the succession dance, and would do away altogether with the tunes of Cheng” (15.10). State calendars, the state coach, the headgear for ceremonies, and music are all key features of state rites. In Confucius’s view, certain ritualistic features in antiquity perfectly embodied dao. Sound historical knowledge, thus, allows one to identify social rites that were practiced in alignment with dao, and to employ them for current state-making.

Due to the pivotal role that historical knowledge plays in practicing dao, Confucius served as cultural transmitter in his teaching and erudition. Allegedly, he edited several important classical documents, such as the Book of Songs, the Book of History, the Book of Rites, the Book of Music, and the Spring and Autumn Annals. These classics embody the knowledge of ancient Chinese history and tradition that Confucius believed a statesman should master. Thus, when one of his students quoted from the Book of Songs to elucidate the hardship of seeking out dao, Confucius remarked delightedly, “Now I can really begin to talk to you about the Songs, for when I allude to sayings of
the past, you see what bearing they have on what was to come after” (1.15). In his remark, Confucius emphasized the historical bearing on the present; that is, knowledge of the past can assist a statesman in making wise decisions for the present and the future.

Confucius also believed that studying history was a process of cultivating a righteous individual, a process of building a gentleman for leadership positions or for assisting rulers. Once, he recommended, “Let a man be first incited by the Songs, then given a firm footing by the study of ritual, and finally perfected by music” (8.8). By immersion in ancient songs, ritual, and music, one would gain a repertoire of approaches to expand understanding and skill in using ritual symbols, and would easily identify with the spirit of dao. The rhetorical power of the Songs, for example, in Confucius’s words, “will help you incite people’s emotions, to observe their feelings, to keep company, to express your grievances. They may be used at home in the service of one’s father, abroad, in the service of one’s prince” (17.9). Through conscientious study of historical practices of songs, ritual, and music, an individual would be initiated into the culture of ritual symbols and acquire new rhetorical agency.

While Confucius emphasized history for ritualizing gentlemen and guiding state-making, he adopted history as, using an Aristotelian term, an archetypical topos in his discursive activities. The topos works in this way: The past informs and guides the present. What happened in the past occurred because someone followed or did not follow the appropriate ritual practices or the spirit of dao. Therefore, we need to practice rituals in accordance with dao, and peace and social harmony will arrive thereafter. Historical figures and events are mentioned or implied numerous times in the Analects. On many occasions, Confucius only stated a historical figure or an event, without comment. The premise that the past informs and guides the present and the conclusion are both implied, because they are the cornerstones of his teaching and familiar to his audiences, including both his students and government officials. To quote two examples from the Analects:

The Master said, Of T’ai Po it may indeed be said that he attained to the very highest pitch of moral power. No less than three times he renounced the sovereignty of all things under Heaven, without the people getting a chance to praise him for it. (8.1)
The Master said, Duke Wen of Chin could rise to an emergency, but failed to carry out the plain dictates of ritual. Duke Huan of Ch’i carried out the dictates of ritual, but failed when it came to an emergency. (14.16)

On both occasions, Confucius brought up historical figures without stating his theses. For his students, or someone who has studied the Analects carefully, Confucius’s intent is quite unambiguous. He wanted to say that T’ai Po, Duke Wen, and Duke Huan were historical figures from whom we could learn about appropriate ritual practices. T’ai Po, the oldest son of King Tang, gave up the throne to his younger brother because he wanted to travel afar to collect medicine for his ailing father. Giving up the throne constituted the highest ritualistic expression of filial piety. In the case of Duke Wen and Duke Huan, neither ancient nor modern scholars have agreed as to which particular events made Confucius denigrate them. However, there is little doubt that Confucius intended to say that T’ai Po was a perfect example of a virtuous leader who performed in the spirit of dao, while Duke Wen and Duke Huan were imperfect as leaders for the state. Thus, Confucius encouraged his audience to emulate the great deeds of T’ai Po and avoid the weaknesses of Dukes Wen and Huan. As these two examples show, history was mobilized as an archetypical topos for Confucius to bolster his teaching. In the process, we contend, he installed a particular line of reasoning in his audiences.

We end this synoptic discussion of Confucius’s rhetoric by reiterating its several key elements. Siding with Daoists, Confucius looked up to dao as the highest world order that human beings must submit to. However, differing from Daoists, while respecting Heaven’s will, he concerned himself chiefly with human affairs in his teaching, distancing himself from natural and metaphysical matters. He believed that only through performance of rituals in alignment with dao would human society reach the ideal state of dao. He saw human history as offering individuals guidance in learning and practicing proper rituals; therefore, he compiled several important historical documents and offered his own interpretations in his teaching. He evoked history as an archetypical topos in his discourse with both his students and government officials. As we are going to show, some of these components were later dismissed and some were revised by Dong Zhongshu three hundred years later.
Dong Zhongshu was remembered as a Confucian exegete who expanded Confucian thought through his close reading of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. After the Western Han was established following the tumultuous Zhou Dynasty and the short-lived Qin Dynasty (221 BCE—206 BCE), the government took a Daoist laissez-faire approach to state-making. The Daoists emphasized non-action (无为 wuwei) in their philosophy. The Western Han government imposed lower tax rates on peasants and enforced lenient laws and regulations. The Daoist-style governance allowed the masses to gradually recuperate from the difficulties of the wars. Several decades later, Emperor Wu, who favored Confucian thought, came to the throne and saw the need to strengthen his imperial governance. Therefore, he invited Confucian intellectuals to discuss state matters with him in 134 BCE. One of those learned men was Dong Zhongshu, an adept of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* in the Gong-Yang interpretive lineage. In his three renowned responses to Emperor Wu’s enquiries, he expounded political matters grounded in his exegesis of the *Spring and Autumn* text, thus offering his view of history and state-making. At the end of his third response, Dong suggested that only the Confucian school of thought be studied and other schools be eradicated in the imperial academy. Dong’s forthright recommendations deeply impressed the emperor, who promoted Dong to serve as a regional administrator and later as a grand master of the palace. Our rendering of Dong Zhongshu’s rhetorical perspectives will be based on his three responses and on a collection of his writings called *The Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn*, which offered an extended treatment of points made in his three responses.5

Modern Chinese rhetoricians have expressed keen interest in Dong Zhongshu’s rhetoric. Quite unanimously, they concur that Dong offered important rhetorical perspectives in *The Luxuriant Dew*. For example, Dai Wanying highlights Dong’s three rhetorical perspectives. First, like Confucius, Dong addressed the relationship between substance and ornamentation (质文 zhi wen). However, while Confucius placed equal emphasis on them, Dong stressed the ultimate importance of substance. Second, Dong analyzed and interpreted Confucius’s use of hyperbole in the latter’s comments on some historical events in the *Spring and Autumn*. Third, he noted that “cautious language” (慎辞 shen ci) was widely used in the *Spring and Autumn* to accurately signify hierarchical social relations, ultimately perpetuating Confucian
morality (Yuan and Zong 33–35). Chen Guanglei and Wang Junheng note a few other perspectives by Dong, such as the rectification of names (文辞不隐情 wen ci bu yin qing), the use of concise language to capture the nature of and relations between matters (文约而法明 wen yue er fa ming), and the kairotic use of language (无通辞 wu tong ci) in the Spring and Autumn (203–213). While we agreed with these scholars about Dong’s perspectives on language use, we consider their shared definition of rhetoric as the “methods and strategies of effective language use” (Yuan and Zong 1) too narrow for our present undertaking. We define rhetoric more broadly as the use of symbols in human communication. With a broader definition, we have identified a rhetorical theory that centers on the discourse of dao between Heaven and human subjects. Besides offering his perspectives on Confucius’s use of language in the Spring and Autumn, Dong developed a rhetorical theory to facilitate humans in reading and responding to the evolving Heavenly mandate, or the inherent expression of dao.

Heaven as the Most Powerful Interlocutor

In his interpretation of the Spring and Autumn, Dong reinforced history as an archetypical topos by including Heaven as the most powerful interlocutor of dao. He concurred with Confucius that historical knowledge possesses ritualizing power for cultivating a righteous leader. He claimed, for example, that as the Book of History recorded previous kings’ achievements, it would familiarize the leader with government affairs; he also claimed that since the Spring and Autumn focused on telling apart righteous and wicked behaviors, it would teach a leader how to manage the masses morally and properly (The Luxuriant Dew 25–26). However, more emphatically than Confucius, Dong conceived the evolution of human history as directly correlating to the Heavenly mandate (天命 tian ming). He evoked Heaven as the mediator between the humans and dao, asserting that Heaven, earth, and humans share the same origin (元 yuan) (i.e., dao). In human society, the king is the son of Heaven, supposedly representing and operating in dao. Hence, the Chinese character for king (王 wang) consists of three horizontal stokes signifying Heaven, humans, and earth, with a vertical stroke signifying dao (295). On the one hand, the king needs to understand Heaven’s will by studying history and the natural world, and then needs to enact the will in his human reign. On the other hand, if the king misunderstands Heaven’s will and governs his people
ruthlessly, Heaven will warn him with natural signs, punish him and his people with natural disasters, or even dethrone him. Thus, human society as led by the king was under the constant gaze of Heaven. The rise and fall of human history was framed as a result of following or disobeying the Heavenly mandate, rather than as following or not following the appropriate rituals, as Confucius so emphasized. By promoting Heaven as the mediator of *daoj* (Dao), Dong seemed to have sidelined the mystic *daoj*; in fact, he erected a powerful arbitrating divine to prevent the emperor from enacting any ruthless behaviors. In this neo-Confucian reformulation of human history, the emperor was legitimized as the leader of the Western Han Empire, but, dialectically, was held responsible to Heaven, the omnipotent mediator between humans and *daoj*.

Dong evoked the new historical topos as consultant to Emperor Wu. For example, on one occasion, the emperor asked Dong to elucidate one of his concerns: “In terms of what the three great emperors have taught us about *daoj*, they reigned in different times and they all made mistakes. Some say that *daoj* does not change in time; but does *daoj* mean different things for the emperors?” (Yao, Book 21, 9). Emperor Wu was most concerned about how to govern the empire in the true spirit of *daoj*. Dong’s response to the emperor’s question not only reveals his thoughts on human history, but also his use of history as an archetypical topos in political discourse. Dong replied:

When *daoj* prevails, the world is devoid of corruption. Corruption rises when *daoj* falls. The *daoj* of previous emperors had its own deviations and inefficacy, thus their governance sometimes became stifled and they amended corruption with deviations. *Daoj* of the three emperors occurred in different times. It is not that their *daoj* was 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.” Shun only changed the first month of the calendar and the color of court dress to comply with the Heavenly mandate. As he largely adopted the *daoj* of Emperor Yao, why did he need to change anything else? Therefore, the emperors only changed some regulations, but not *daoj*. However, the Xia Dynasty valued loyalty, the Yin Dynasty piety, and the Zhou Dynasty culture—such change of focus is the right way to amend the corruption 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.” That means all emperors will emulate the three dynasties in their governance. The Xia followed the Yin without people speaking of any modification of ritual, because they share dao and value the same thing. The grandness of dao originates from Heaven. Heaven does not change, nor does dao. Therefore when Yu succeeded Shun, and Shun succeeded Yao, they passed the empire from one to the other, preserving the single dao. They did not have any major corruption to address; therefore we don’t talk about how they modified dao. From this perspective, when inheriting a prosperous nation, the dao of governance stays the same. When inheriting a tumultuous nation, dao needs to be adjusted.8 (11–12)

The heavy reliance on historical events and classical texts as the backing of Dong’s exposition reveals a particular line of rhetorical reasoning, or enthymeme. In Dong’s reasoning, history reflects the Heavenly mandate and dao; therefore what happened in the past can be a reference for the present and the future. This particular view of history constitutes the key premise of Dong’s rhetorical syllogism. As Dong claims in the passage, “The grandness of dao originates from Heaven. Heaven does not change, nor does dao.” In the same conversation with Emperor Wu, Dong also asked, “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 is it that the present lags far behind ancient times?” (12). In other words, the dao of Heaven does not change; therefore the dao of the ancients can be studied and restored in the present. It is due to this view of history that Dong mobilizes historical events and sages’ words as premises to back up his claim.

In Dong Zhongshu’s rhetorical reformulation, Heaven was positioned as the most powerful interlocutor in the discourse of dao. When Confucius delineated his discursive system, he respected Heaven but virtually excluded Heaven as a discursive participant. Confucius’s system chiefly involves three constitutive entities—the ritualized and learned gentleman, the ruler, and the masses. The gentleman counsels
the ruler on how to govern the country by conforming to dao, and the ruler tries to convince the masses about his legitimate leadership position through wise and humane governance and proper ritual performance. In Dong’s rhetorical formulation, Heaven was ushered into the discursive system not only as an overseer and a protector of human beings, but also as an emotionally charged arbitrator of human affairs. It is in foregrounding a transcendent interlocutor with anthropomorphic quality, we argue, that Dong’s discourse of dao departed from that of pre-imperial Confucians.

Understanding the Anthropomorphic Interlocutor

Once establishing Heaven as the fourth and the most powerful participant in the discourse of dao, Dong sought to identify the deity’s “personality”—its values, intentions, and emotions. However, Dong’s endeavor was not born out of pure scholarly interest, but from an interest in seeking state patronage for the Confucian school. Confucian scholars of the Western Han, including Dong, started to pay much more attention to the mystic power of Heaven than the pre-imperial Confucians. Sympathetic with the Confucian school, Emperor Wu trusted Heaven’s tremendous power over his human reign. As the proclaimed son of Heaven, Emperor Wu was most concerned about how to read the mind of Heaven so that he could execute the Heavenly mandate without committing errors. In one of his inquiries of Confucian scholars, he expressed puzzlement as to how his reign was legitimated by Heaven. Dong capitalized on the occasion to expound the deity’s anthropomorphic quality. The emperor’s puzzle was given as follows:

Over the last five hundred years, many kings, who upheld both culture and dao, endeavored to model previous emperors’ regulations to bring peace to their people. However, none of them could reverse (their declining) course and finally faded away. Is it because what they clung to or performed was false that they lost their legitimation? Once Heaven issues a mandate, He will not withdraw but enact it to its fullest extent? Alas, even if I model ancient sages and attend to my duties from early in the morning to late at night, it still will not help? Three generations of my family have been conferred the Heavenly mandate, but where is the evi-
Disasters and anomalies constantly occur, but where do they originate from? In terms of human lives and their propensities, some die young but some live long lives; some are benevolent while some are degraded. I often hear His name (being evoked to account for these phenomena), but I have not quite comprehended the way Heaven operates. (Yao, Book 21, 1–2)

The decline of previous kings constitutes a historical myth, which deeply perplexed the emperor. Over the prior five hundred years, many individuals were conferred the responsibility of the Heavenly mandate and rose to the throne, but none of them seemed to have successfully fulfilled the mandate. The emperor suspected that in spite of their earnest desire to bring peace to their people, the former kings must have misread the Heavenly mandate. He also hoped to rule the empire by complying with the mandate. However, he feared that he might fail to grasp the mandate and, thus, would follow the same path as the fallen kings.

In the emperor’s inquiry, it is important to note several premises that Dong equally shared. First, the emperor acknowledged Heaven as the most powerful interlocutor in the discourse of dao, who would issue mandates and, with or without human agency, enact them to their fullest extent. The emperor’s acknowledgment of Heaven’s discursive role indicates that the Confucian and Daoist notion of Heaven being the ultimate arbitrator of human realm had been popularized in the Western Han. Second, when deliberating on the historical myth, the emperor saw the failings of previous kings, the disasters and anomalies, and the various kinds of human experiences being full of symbolic meanings. They were signs not only of an existent deity, but also of his anthropomorphic values and emotions. Third, by asking his consultants these questions, the emperor supposed that humans are not passive, obedient servants of Heaven, and that there exists a responsive, interactive relationship between humans and Heaven. By fully understanding Heaven’s values, intents, and emotions and acting according to his mandate, the royal family would be legitimated by Heaven and avoid fates that previous kings experienced. But how could the son of Heaven discern the deity’s values and emotions? The emperor was perplexed, and he awaited Confucian scholars’ instruction, which Dong sought to offer in his answers.
In Dong’s rhetorical construction of Heaven, he not only affirmed Heaven’s anthropomorphic quality, but also infused Confucian morality into it. In his response to the emperor’s inquiry, he agreed with the emperor that different phenomena are signs of Heaven’s emotions and of His omnipotent power in both the natural and human realms. However, Heaven is not schizophrenic; His emotional expressions and ways of exercising power are both rational and ethical. As Dong explained, “When the state shows signs of losing dao, Heaven will admonish it by bringing some disasters. If the state does not self-reflect on its weaknesses, Heaven will alert it with anomalies. If the state continues to stay on the wrong course, harm and setbacks will ensue. Thus, Heaven expressly loves the human king with his benevolent heart (天心之仁 tian xin zhi ren), and He wants to stop human chaos” (Yao, Book 21, 2). While Dong confirmed these signs as being manifestations of Heaven’s rationality, he also interpreted them by reading Confucian morality into Heaven’s intents. Heaven’s various intents originate from a benevolent heart, which the Confucian school had long held as being the origin and the center of humanity. Unlike some religions, such as Christianity, Confucianism holds that humans are born with a pure, benevolent heart. It is through the shared benevolent heart, which Dong assigned to Heaven, that humans can understand Heaven’s values, emotions, and intents unmistakably.

To explicate the intents of Heaven, Dong mobilized the Daoist concept of yin-yang. He explained Heaven’s moral values and His strategic uses of power as manifested in nature in the following terms:

The grandness of Heaven’s dao manifests in the forces of yin and yang. The vital force of yang is virtue (德 de) and that of yin is punishment (刑 xing). Punishment aims to destroy while virtue aims to generate. Therefore, yang often resides in summer, being charged with generating and nurturing. Yin often resides in winter, being stored somewhere not for use. Thus, we see that Heaven favors virtue over punishment. Heaven lets yang rise to the top to perform major tasks of the year, and he lets yin stay below to assist yang sometimes. Without yin’s assistance, yang will not be able to complete its tasks alone. Yang is known for completing a year’s cycle. That is Heaven’s will. (Yao, Book 21, 4)
Through the dialectics of yin-yang, Dong unveiled Heaven’s rationality, or the cosmic norms. The *Dao* of Heaven governs the change of seasons. By observing how summer and winter alternate, as Dong suggested, we could understand Heaven’s moral propensity and His preferred way of governing the world (i.e., He places virtue/yang before punishment/yin in order to nourish life). Heaven’s intentions account for the fact that He loves, nurtures, and benefits all living things. Thus, as Sarah Queen states, “Tung (Dong) read the location of yin and yang during a particular season, or the direction toward which they moved, as cosmological proof of Heaven’s preference for virtue over punishment” (211). Through a Confucian reading of the natural signs, Dong ascribed Heaven a particular anthropomorphic quality, turning Heaven into a Confucian deity.

**Bettering Communication with Heaven**

Since Heaven shares a benevolent heart with humans, Dong believed that both parties were able to communicate with each other. First of all, as an erudite of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, Dong had been initiated into such an ontological frame early in his intellectual life. Chronicles like the *Spring and Autumn* consist of notices that state ritual functionaries probably announced day by day, month by month, and year by year. As ancient Chinese historians carefully documented such state affairs as court divination, ceremony, and sacrifice, Queen posits that, “the religious dimension of the *Spring and Autumn* exemplifies the ancient Chinese belief that communication between the human realm and that of Heaven was not only possible but essential to Chinese civilization” (117). With a thorough training in the Gong-Yang lineage of the *Spring and Autumn*, Dong was extremely familiar with the ritualistic means that previous kings had employed to communicate with Heaven. When he expounded his view of history to the emperor, for example, he quoted an event recorded in the *Spring and Autumn* to show the human-Heaven communication—When Emperor Shun was conferred his reign, he only changed the first month of the calendar and the color of court dress to acknowledge the Heavenly mandate (Yao, Book 21, 11). Therefore, Dong was extremely concerned about the appropriate ways that state rituals are performed because, first, state rituals were institutionalized means of communication with Heaven, and second, appropriate performance of state rituals would indicate an accurate understanding of the Heavenly
mandate and acknowledge hierarchical relations between Heaven and His human subjects.

According to The Luxuriant Dew, Dong sought to institute two state rites to reflect the relationship between Heaven and humans. First, he suggested that the king sacrifice to Heaven once a year at the suburban altar and sacrifice four times a year at the ancestral temple, and that the sacrifices at the ancestral temple follow the changes in the four seasons and the suburban sacrifice follow the beginning of the new year. Such a regimented schedule of ritual performance, according to Dong, is derived from the hierarchical relationship between Heaven and other minor deities. Heaven is the ruler of hundreds of Spirits, including the Spirit of deceased human ancestors. Heaven rules over human subjects, dead or alive. Second, Dong suggested that upon being conferred the Heavenly mandate, the emperor would need to change state regulations (改制 gai zhi), as Emperor Shun had done two thousand years before. He explained the change of state regulations as follows: “The founder of a new dynasty must shift his place of residence, assume a new title, change the beginning of the year, and alter the color of ceremonial dress—all for no other reason than that he dare not disobey the will of Heaven, and must clearly manifest [the Mandate conferred] on him.”9 The change of state regulations conveys to the supreme deity that His mandate has been received and will be enacted in the human realm. Thus, state rites served to honor the supreme leader of the universe, and to confirm human reception of His important messages.

When performing ritual acts, Dong emphasized the relationship between substance and form. Along with pre-imperial Confucians, Dong subscribed to the notion that ritual substance and ritual form ought to coexist in perfect harmony. As Confucius once admonished, only a well-balanced mixture of these two would result in a noble person (6.16). However, on occasions where such an ideal could not be realized, together with other exegetes of the Gong-Yang school, Dong expressed a preference for ritual substance. He said, “In setting out the proper sequence of the Way, the Spring and Autumn places substance first and form afterward; gives primary position to the mental attitude [of a person engaged in ritual] and secondary position to the external objects [of ritual]” (18).10 That is, it is most important to have the right mental attitude or emotions when performing a ritual. The right men-
tal attitude includes respect of both Heaven and hierarchical human relations.

To sustain such important communicative channels as the state rites, Dong argued that more exegetes of Confucian classics need to be trained. Dong made a suggestion to Emperor Wu that has shaped the Chinese educational system for more than two thousand years. He says,

> Nowadays people study different kinds of *dao* and hold different thoughts. Hundreds of schools teach different meanings about *dao*. As there is no unified thought in government and state regulations change constantly, the masses do not know which regulations to follow. I humbly think that those that fall out of the six arts and the Confucian school should be eradicated.\(^\text{11}\) When heresies die off, thoughts in government will be unified, regulations will become clear, and the masses will know what to follow. (Yao, Book 21, 13)

Misled by other schools of thought, previous emperors changed state regulations constantly, which confused the masses and failed to serve Heaven properly. Therefore, Dong believed that only through subscribing to the Confucian exegesis of Heaven and human history would the Western Han avoid ritual transgressions. Thanks to Dong’s eloquence, Emperor Wu took some of his suggestions and waged a series of reforms, one of which established the imperial academy to promote Confucian thought and to recruit Confucian scholars to study the *dao* of Heaven and earth.

**Convergence of Rhetoric and Poetics**

Dong formulated his rhetorical theory based on his interpretation of Confucius’s use of language in the *Spring and Autumn*. When reading the chronicle, Dong identified some particular ways that Confucius, the alleged author, used language in his historiography. If we define rhetoric as the art of discursive production, as opposed to poetics broadly defined as the art of discursive interpretation, then rhetoric and poetics seamlessly converged in Dong’s reading of the chronicle. Dong’s Heaven-centered historical *topos* was derived from his weighing of Confucius’s rhetorical practices manifest in the *Spring and Autumn*. His creative interpretation of Confucius’s use of language
rendered Dong not only a rhetorician but a literary critic. The *Spring and Autumn* was the surviving chronicle of the state of Lu, recording title accessions, marriages, deaths, diplomatic meetings, military campaigns, alliances, and other important events from 722 BCE to 481 BCE. To encapsulate a history of two and a half centuries with a little more than sixteen thousand Chinese characters, the entries are stylistically terse and laconic. The style offered Dong much interpretive space to expound on the text, discovering profound moral meanings in the terse language (微言大义 *wei yan da yi*).

In his interpretation of the chronicle, Dong was sensitive to Confucius’s moralization of linguistic codes. As Xing Lu and George Xu have observed, the sage valorized language for its potentially moralizing and ritualizing powers. Writing a Chinese history from the vantage point of the Lu state, Confucius used different styles to encode his feelings towards various historical events. Dong interpreted Confucius’s rhetorical strategies with an acute understanding of humanity (仁 *ren*) that centered in the teachings of Confucius and Mencius:

The *Spring and Autumn* groups the twelve kings of the Lu state into three historical periods: one that was witnessed, one that was heard of, and one that was learned as a legend by Confucius. . . . Regarding events that he witnessed, he recorded them in terse language. For events that he heard of, he lamented on the disasters that people had suffered. In terms of what was passed on as being legendary, his words were less emotionally charged. He used words in alignment with human feelings. . . . Variable human feelings correspond to elaborate or terse styles. As I have observed, Confucius used proper language to approach people close to him and to distance those far away from him in relationship. His language shows respect to the honorable but looks down upon the degraded. It treats the benign kindly and despises the frivolous. It praises the good but shows distaste for evil. It distinguishes between yin and yang (good and evil) but tells apart black and white (truth and falsity). Everything in the world has its proper nature. If two objects share the same nature, they should be joined. If not, they should be set apart.
It is good that things are joined or set apart. (*The Luxuriant Dew* 8)

This passage emphasized Confucius’s careful use of language because, as Dong believed, different feelings towards historical events need to be expressed in corresponding styles. Further, Dong suggested that proper use of language not only reflects the author’s variable feelings but also perpetuates an orderly human relationship. Through approaching those close to him and distancing those far away from him in his historiography, Confucius exemplified a morality—respecting hierarchical human relations—via language. Finally the last statement, “It is good that things are joined or set apart (偶之合之仇之匹之善矣 ou zhi he zhi chou zhi pi zhi shan yi),” rendered much interpretative power in Dong’s use. On the surface, the statement emphasizes encoding objects according to their proper nature. Since the underlying tenet is that everything in the world is related in certain ways, Dong gained sanction to read his own meanings into events recorded in the Spring and Autumn.

However, Confucius did not employ different styles simply to denote his varying feelings towards historical events; instead, as Dong argued, the entire chronicle was meant to convey the profound meanings of righteousness (義 yi). Dong explained:

Thus, the *Spring and Autumn* entertains profound meanings about righteousness. One may grasp part of them and study them in wider contexts. After examining their truthfulness, he will achieve just standards. After reading the terse language, he will understand the hidden meanings. Therefore, the chronicle recorded events that took place outside of the Lu state, but did not elaborate on them. When recording events inside Lu, the chronicle avoided kings’ given names as a way of showing respect, but never omitted events simply because the involved persons were high-ranking or righteous. This is the way that the chronicle differentiated between inside and outside, the righteous and the wicked, and the high and the low. (8)

Thus, for Dong, historical events that happened inside or outside of the Lu state, the language styles employed, and the textual strategy of avoiding kings’ given names ultimately embody profound meanings
about righteousness. The *Spring and Autumn* is more than a book of history, but also a mystic book on the meanings of righteousness. For a reader intent on grasping the meaning of righteousness, he or she needs to, first of all, understand Confucius’s rhetorical strategies used in the book. When developing his rhetorical theory on reading the Heavenly mandate, Dong first systematically studied the language strategies of Confucius, as modern Chinese rhetoricians have unfailingly noted, and then came to his own interpretation of the *Spring and Autumn*. Thus, we have argued that Dong was an excellent literary critic who harmonized rhetoric and poetics in his hermeneutic endeavor.

**Conclusion**

Since the Western Han rose as a united empire after the tumultuous Zhou and the short-lived Qin Dynasties, the emperors were eager to legitimate their reigns. Various schools of thought vied for state patronage as in previous dynasties. Dong’s rhetorical theory, which appropriated rhetorical elements from various schools, was a response to the political and cultural demands of the time. When Emperor Wu summoned Confucian scholars to inquire about the Heavenly mandate, Dong found an opportunity to articulate his rhetorical theory systematically. In Dong’s historical *topos*, Heaven was portrayed as the fourth, and also the most powerful, interlocutor in the discourse of *dao*. To comply with the mandate closely, an emperor must understand the anthropomorphic quality of Heaven—His values, intents, and emotions. An emperor must establish viable communication channels to discourse with Heaven—such as the performance of state rites and the interpretive work of Confucian erudites. Only erudites like Dong could assist the emperor in interpreting Confucian classics and reading Heaven’s will properly; then they could suggest appropriate state rites and other proper actions. Dong’s articulation of his rhetorical theory was grounded in his exegesis of the *Spring and Autumn*. In the interpretative process, he capitalized on Confucian rhetorical strategies in the chronicle to come up with a sensible discursive theory, which helped to legitimize and to strengthen Emperor Wu’s administration. Ultimately, Dong’s rhetorical theory is a discursive guide for the monarch.
Notes

1. Pre-imperial China, also called pre-Qin China, refers to China before the Qin Dynasty (221 BCE—206 BCE), after which China became a united feudal country. This statement describes chiefly the status quo of Confucian rhetoric studies in the United States. There are some important studies of Confucian intellectuals’ thoughts on language and their political discourses in the imperial period, but these studies are conducted from the perspective of education (such as Neo-Confucian Education: The Formative Stage, edited by Wm. Theodore de Bary and John W. Chaffee); or philosophy/hermeneutics (such as Sarah Queen’s study of Dong Zhongshu’s interpretation of the Spring and Autumn). We are also aware that several Chinese rhetorical histories published in mainland China have offered quite an extensive treatment of Confucian figures in imperial China, such as A Complete History of Chinese Rhetoric, edited by Zheng Zhiyi and Zong Tinghu; and the History of Chinese Rhetoric by Yuan Hui and Zong Tinghu. Compared with our present study, we find that these rhetorical histories have adopted a relatively narrow sense of the term “rhetoric,” focusing on the “methods and strategies of language use” (Yuan and Zong 1) rather than more broadly on the use of symbols for effective communication.

2. Since the text of the Spring and Autumn is terse and its contents limited, a number of exegetical schools emerged after Confucius’s death to explain and expand on its meanings. The Book of Han lists commentaries by five schools, one being the Gong-Yang exegetical school. The Gong-Yang commentary was allegedly compiled during the second century BCE. It is phrased as questions and answers.

3. Confucius mentioned Heaven many times in the Analects, though usually fleetingly. On most occasions, his comments showed the power of Heaven and his respect for His mandate. For example, Confucius said, “He who has put himself in the wrong with Heaven has no means of expiation left” (3.13); “Whatsoever I have done amiss, may Heaven avert it, may Heaven avert it!” (6.26); “There is no greatness like the greatness of Heaven, yet Yao could copy it” (8.19).

4. See Arthur Waley’s “additional notes” for divergent interpretations of Verse 14.16 (249–250).

5. The authorship of The Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn has been historically attributed to Dong Zhongshu. However, some scholars have questioned the authorship of the collection, and they suggest that only some chapters were penned by Dong (see both Arbuckle and Queen). In our rendering of Dong’s rhetorical theory, we will mainly rely on his three renowned responses to Emperor Wu’s inquiries, which were recorded in Ban Gu’s Han Shu (History of Han). We will draw on the early chapters of The Luxuriant
Dew, which are believed to be Dong’s own writings, in our discussion of the exegetic strategies that he employed to read the Spring and Autumn.

6. The English translation of this verse is taken from Arthur Waley (Confucius 193).

7. The English translation of this verse is taken from Arthur Waley (Confucius 93).

8. All Chinese sources are translated by the two of us unless specified otherwise.

9. The English translation is adopted from Queen (203).

10. The English translation is adopted from Queen (190).

11. The six arts refer to six classics allegedly edited by Confucius, including the Book of Songs, the Book of Change, the Book of History, the Book of Ritual, the Book of Music, and the Spring and Autumn.

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