

The rhetoric of pre-modern Chinese prose style

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Yoshikawa Koljiro writes: “Among the manifestations of China’s culture, Chinese literary style is surely one of the most distinctive. One might say that a comprehensive study of the evolution and metamorphoses of this style would constitute, in a sense, a history of Chinese literature. It is well, furthermore, to recognize the importance of style not only as a vehicle, but as a shaping factor, of philosophical attitudes and concepts.” “The Shih-shuo hsin-yü and Six Dynasties Prose Style”, in Bishop 1965: 166 (See John L. Bishop, ed. 1965. *Studies in Chinese Literature*, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press. Compare also James L. Hightower, “Some characteristics of parallel prose”, in Bishop 1965: 108-141)

What compounds our difficulty in describing Chinese rhetoric culture is the proliferation of rhetorical subtraditions. Thus we must distinguish between at least three profoundly distinct groups: 1. the popular folkloric traditions; 2. the jejune professional scientific traditions; 3. the literary traditions. Thus there are not Two Cultures, but at least three literary cultures in China which only interacted to limited extent. The compressed algebraic prose of the Mohist scientists in the 4th and 3rd centuries, for example, owes as little to the high literary conventions that informed already the Confucian Analects as do some of the non-literary and less hermetically inaccessible plain professional medical treatises. On the other hand, the vernacular tales of China never aspired to any of this scientific plainness on the one hand, or the concise parallelism of ornate artistic prose. Because of the inherent limitations in the stylistic registers of Western languages like English when compared to Chinese, this immense variety inherent in Chinese literary culture is radically reduced in European translations. In order to survey this vast landscape of rhetorical variety in China, certain simplifications are inevitable.

I shall consider the rhetoric of classical Chinese prose style from three distinct but intimately related perspectives.

First of all we must ask what the pre-modern Chinese traditions of rhetorical thought had to say about their ideals of prose style. I shall present an overview of relevant classical Chinese views on rhetoric.

Second, we must ask about traditional Chinese rhetorical practices. We must inquire into the basic conventions of literary communication the artistic principles and the history of classical Chinese artistic prose styles. I shall venture to put forward some basic hypotheses on the nature and evolution of classical Chinese prose style.

Third, one may want to ask how classical Chinese prose style contrasts with, for example, classical Latin and classical Greek prose style in order to get a clearer view of the specificities of the Chinese case. In so doing one may profit from the stupendous amount of rhetorical analysis that we have in the Western tradition and which is conveniently systematised for us in standard handbooks. In a comparatist spirit one may consider the range of rhetorical figures and tropes prominent in Western rhetoric since Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, and go on to ask how prominent they are in classical Greek and Latin, as compared with classical Chinese artistic prose. More importantly one may try to contrast the basic features in the ethnography of literary communication in classical Chinese versus Greek and Latin.

The typological and the comparative characterisation of classical Chinese prose style cannot be summarised at this stage. At best it can be intuitively and tentatively characterised on the basis of existing pioneering work, in the hope that such a preliminary characterisation will spark off the kind of detailed research that is needed to make intuitions into informed hypotheses.

1. Traditional Chinese views on rhetoric

Confucius maintained that when words get their message across, one should stop. (Analects 15.41) What was admired in Confucius was his flair for **wei yen** “subtle speech” which, without being **yin** “hidden, arcane, riddle-like” achieved that peculiar subtle variety of **ming** “translucence, perspicuousness” which became so essential to the classical Chinese aesthetic. It was of the essence of this translucent, limpid effect that it was preferably achieved with an austere economy of stylistic means, an apparent sparseness of effort, a naturalness, the elegant light touch.

This ideal of translucence and perspicuousness, then, is not an intellectual clarity brought about by elaborate explicitness, definiteness of meaning. The text is designed to inspire in the reader the congenial but active and even creative production of artistic sense. The texts do not impose meaning, they are designed to inspire the creation of sense. The creation of this sense is a social act, part of the anthropological space into which written documents inscribe themselves in China. Ideally, classical Chinese texts, sow the seeds of meaning in the reader rather than transmitting explicitly the fruits of thought. Thus ancient Chinese texts cultivate an implicit mutual understanding. They tend to be pregnant with a socially constructed meaning rather than directly expressive of a meaning exclusively imposed on the reader by the writer. Under these circumstances, literary meaning in artistic prose does not typically purport to be the product of an individual writer. It presents itself as a product of a hermeneutic process in which the reader plays an important creative part.

Thus the reading technique made proverbial by the poet **T'ao Yüan-ming** (A.D. 372 - 406) which consists in not aiming for a deep explanation (**pu ch'iu shen chieh**) is congenial to the rhetorical conventions of the language in the sense that the “bloody-minded” preciseness which aims at getting exactly the author's meaning of the author has a false ring to it in the context of the preferred Chinese rhetoric insofar as the text ideally should leave the reader free to develop its suggestiveness. The fact that many kinds of Chinese literature do not aim for this suggestiveness does not affect this point. This only goes to prove that not all Chinese prose aimed for the preferred ornate rhetoric of the culture. Indeed the **k'ao-cheng** school or School of Philological Inquiry during the **Ch'ing** dynasty (1644 - 1911) was almost maniacally dedicated to making very precise indeed all the meanings in the classics, and this school was only carrying to extremes tendencies towards explicitness that are very much present in earlier commentarial literature.

The Greeks were known in antiquity as loquacious and contentious people, and Greek texts are also semantically pugnacious: through definition and explicitness they push the reader around, aim to force an intended meaning on him, compel him or her to acknowledge an objective truth which the text sets out to make explicit, they aim to appear to give a complete picture of a certain reality.

The preferred rhetoric of Chinese texts eschews mundane pugnaciousness: the philosopher **Hsün Tzu** (ca. 300 - ca. 230 B.C.) is a striking exception when he hammers home the philosophical point that man is by nature evil, and his point was not generally well received. The pontificating repetitive itemised dogmatism in some parts of the book **Mo-tzu** (ca. fourth cent. B.C.) may have been a delight for Western interpreters of Chinese philosophy, but it was rhetorically marginal in Chinese literary culture. **Wang Ch'ung**'s (ca. 200 B.C. - ca. 100 A.D.) plain persistence of style was despised throughout the millennia. Such exceptions show up the pluralism in Chinese rhetorical practice. But below all this pluralism, there is an underlying general aesthetic core of what was perceived to be elegant. And it is this core which we must focus on before we turn first.

The ornate classical Chinese text does not tend to bully the reader pugnaciously through argument, neither does it coerce the reader by imposing meaning on him. Chinese texts tend to lay out in harmonious patterns points that cajole rather than bully. These texts suggest rather than impose meaning and they may suggest certain kinds of conclusions to be drawn from this. They leave the reader a peculiar inner fertile space of freedom (**yü ti**) in which the energy of the pregnant thought expressed in the text is designed to take root and gain a life of its own, inspired by and in the spirit

of the harmoniously patterned text which leaves the reader space to breathe freely. The preferred kind of stylistic beauty is not the flashy kind, but the superficially bland, limpid kind in which the deep aesthetic-cum-intellectual energy is all the more powerful through being imperceptive. The texts use suggestive water colour in preference to heavy oil pigments. Thus classical Chinese prose is often stylistically coterminous with poetry.

A useful concept to capture the special genius of Chinese prose style is that of polite and gentle tentativeness as opposed to the fundamentally more direct and aggressive assertiveness that is the default mode of Latin or Greek prose style.

The cantankerous bluntness in the style of ancient Greek comedy is uncongenial to mainstream Chinese literary culture, though not completely absent. So is the compelling and probing emotional explicitness in the style of ancient Greek tragedy. So is the the relentlessly probing flippantly aggressive persistence in the style of Plato's Socrates, as well as the comprehensively domineering magisterial explicitness in the style of an Aristotle or of Sextus Empiricus.

To traditional Chinese stylistic sensibilities, all such forms are **ts'u** "crude", without the pregnant inner energy of the non-coercive discourse that is **wei** "subtle". The over-explicitness of the Greek stylistic modes of comedy, tragedy and so on has something elephantine and uncouth about it: sexual explicitness is just one symptom of a perceived general inability to leave to the imagination what is much more potent when left to the imagination.

Chinese texts do not normally tend to aspire to capture a reality through some "mimesis". They gesture towards inspiring features of it sowing these seeds of inspiration in the docile and acquiescent minds of the intended audience who expect to grow through this experience. In this context "text" is esoteric through an inner cultural logic, not by cultural coincidence: the text requires a docile audience ready for aesthetic human growth.

Again, it is by an inner cultural logic that the aesthetic and intellectual seeds which are to grow in the audience must have the implicit unreleased seed-like dynamism of **wei** "subtlety". What is crudely explicit is acquired by accretion, not of integration. It can never enter as such into the core of human sensibilities. If what is crudely explicit enters the human mind on a large scale, it may grow very big like a large intellectual excrescence, but it will not affect that core "spiritual" or intellectual orientation. Things will be merely understood **chih** "understood", but not **t'i** "embodied".

"Much learning (polumathie) does not teach sense", said Heraclitus, with shadowy wisdom. He could not quite have made that caustic comment in these terms for China, where the **chih nang** 𠄎𠄎 "sack of knowledge" is traditionally despised by common consent, and where the presumed and sometimes even superimposed rhetoric of texts to be studied (**hsüeh**) is primarily designed for edification rather than for information, according to Chinese literary values.

Chinese writers were often positively obsessed with getting the facts and dates right. But what is informative and correct without purporting to be ultimately edifying morally and politically will never, for this very reason, "ascend the hall of elegant significance" (**pu shang ta ya chih tang**) The heady, bland, explicit, and analytic style of science did develop in China and was, of course, crucial for the development of the sciences, but it was not cultivated as artistic prose, as was the style of Plato in Athens, or Tacitus in Rome.

Surveying classical Greek and Latin literature as well as the Christian literary tradition in so far as it was shaped by this classical heritage, there is no doubt that in traditionalist Chinese eyes these suffer from chronic obsessive over-explicitness and and thus ultimately aesthetic and rhetorical

crudeness. It is not that one could not be subtle and discreet in the Western tradition, but personally I can forgive a learned traditional Chinese if, after the necessary intensive study of these literatures in the original Greek and Latin languages, he comes feel that subtlety in Western literature, by Chinese standards, has a disastrous tendency to be itself elephantine in its over-explicit theoretical pomposity and doctrinaire in its theoretical underpinning. For the core of traditional Chinese rhetorical aesthetics is the ethereal intellectual light touch, the aesthetic and reflective pinch of cultural salt, an acute sense of what is left unsaid - inevitably.

The virtue of this subtle indirectness is not, in my view, due to some “genius of the Chinese language” or culture: it is born of the necessity to write in an environment where it was highly dangerous to have written the wrong thing. To be sure: there are limitations to what one can write and say everywhere, Aristophanes was taken to court for what he wrote, and Socrates was condemned to death for what he said. But the degree to which writers wrote with the fear of the authorities breathing cold breath down their necks varied significantly. In a highly hierarchical and authoritarian society like that of traditional China, indirectness of discourse may well have originated as a safety measure and was perhaps only later and incidentally aestheticised, making a virtue of necessity. One can only say that it did indeed become a crucial virtue of Chinese literary style which gives this style a peculiar unreleased potency and power which is rare in what under this perspective appears as the rather crude classical European literary tradition.

From this point of view it is not a coincidence that the ethereal art of calligraphy and the rarefied spirituality of Chinese landscape painting has no pendant in the West. It is as if we are witnessing an aesthetic syndrome. It is as if the tremendous quintessentially unreleased inner potential of ethereal, rarified, evanescent sensibility cultivated to excess in Chinese calligraphy and landscape painting, and manifesting itself also in the best of Chinese prose style, was not a spiritual mode particularly cultivated in classical European literature.

And it is in the art of Chinese poetry, that these ethereal sensibilities are fully celebrated for their own sake - to the point even of becoming something of an ethereal routine. Thus, in a peculiar sense, Chinese prose style at its best has something profoundly poetic about it, indeed verges on the poetic. Just as Chinese poetry, at its best, often is like a “crude” linguistic sound-bound pre-meditation for the appreciation of the elusive spirituality of the best of Chinese calligraphy and painting.

What strikes us as elusiveness here is in fact a Chinese version of Roman urbanitas, which consists essentially in a rhetorical pose that politely presupposes a high culture of sensibility in the audience where artistic prose far from presuming to shape the thinking of the audience, limits itself to subtly stimulating what is politely assumed to be already there, and to stimulate this in what necessarily aspires to be a congenial way. The text invites the readership to tease out the meaning and significance from the text. The high point of this rhetorical technique of subtlety is the evanescent semantics of the art of calligraphy which celebrates the ethereal learned sensibility per se, as such.

Whatever is decorative in this subtle art is incidental, and manifest attractive decorativeness tends towards vulgarity in the learned Chinese perception of calligraphy. And I know of nothing whatever to even remotely compare with this in the European calligraphic tradition. For the very essence of Western calligraphy is aesthetic and decorative rather than “spiritual” and personally expressive. (And Arabic calligraphy also has very much stronger decorative elements than the Chinese.) In any case, the absence of anything whatever to compare with Chinese calligraphy in the European tradition is not just a historical coincidence, it is a telling symptom of a deep difference in the dominant communicative structures in these civilisations.

Even today, the stylistic difference registers in such genres as that of the love letter: surveys show that modern Chinese love letters are significantly more reticent, discreet and indirect than their European counterparts. Like classical Chinese texts they tentatively leave to the imagination what

Western rhetoric tends to encourage us to make more definite and explicit.

From the fourth century of the Christian era right until today, calligraphy has been an endemic aesthetic obsession among the Chinese people. Through this obsession the culture celebrates a reticent aesthetic mode which I argue was a central strain in the formation of Chinese aesthetic and rhetorical sensibilities.

Ornate Prose Rhythm

The preferred length of a breath group or colon in ornate prose rhythm was four characters, cola of six and seven characters are current, cola of three or five characters can occur but only as exceptional rhythms. Other cola are exceptional and will only occur under special circumstances.

In ornate prose the preferred rhythm is in terms of pairs of in some way similar or corresponding units in which the natural “default” emphasis is on the second member of the pair. In the simplest case the unit is simply a breath group or colon, but the correspondence can also be between larger units like a complex period. Learning to understand Chinese artistic prose is to learn to hear these rhythmic units and their modulated parallelisms as well as contrasts.

The structure of the ornate prose style can be basically described as consisting of two parts of unequal prosodic weight:

LIGHT HEAVY

in which both the light and the heavy may again consist of complex structures of the same LIGHT HEAVY type. This simple rule explains a vast number of ornate passages in ancient Chinese literature long before the flourishing of p’ien wen “parallel prose” in the early sixth century, and also long before the extensive deliberate use of parallelism in poetry and prose from around A.D. 100 onwards.

If four lines are parallel, but one deviates slightly, the deviating line is regularly the third.

Even in what we would call prose, there often is rhyme. If there are four rhyming lines in prose of which one rhyme is imperfect (or even absent), the imperfect line is again regularly the third.

In longer sequences, the generalised clear rule is that when there is deviation of any kind, semantic, rhythmic or phonetic, the penultimate line is the deviating one. It is as if the penultimate deviation prepares the reader for the end of a sequence.

Unpatterned non-parallelistic rhythms are allowable, of course, even in ornate prose, and especially in short direct speech. But as soon as such direct speech becomes long and argumentative it tends to conform to the general preferred patterns of prose style.

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CODE SWITCHING BETWEEN COLLOQUIAL AND CLASSICAL FORMS?????

A special feature that gave an extraordinary richness to much of post-Buddhist Chinese artistic prose is a varying but pervasive tendency to switch between vernacular and classical styles within a given piece of writing, even within a given sentence or phrase. The style of commentarial literature from Later Han times onwards is of special interest because it occasionally allows us to conveniently compare the classical originals with their often more colloquial later paraphrases and literary expansions. A fine early example of this is commentary by Chao Ch’i (died A.D. 429) on the book Mencius. Chao writes a meticulously over-explicit belaboured prose style which is perhaps wrongly identified as late Han colloquial Chinese, but which certainly does draw on important new features of late Han colloquial. Striking later examples of standard colloquial Chinese translations of the classics are such Yuan dynasty works as the Ta-hsüeh yao lüeh “A summary of the Great Learning”, the Chung-yung chih chieh “Direct Explanation of the Doctrine

of the Mean”, and the **Hsiao-ching chih chieh** “Direct Explanation of the Filial Piety Classic”. These translations are kept in a deliberately jejune “official” standard colloquial style, as indeed is the **Yüan tien chang** “The Legal Code of the Yüan Dynasty”. Such texts as these represent an officially promoted unadorned vernacular prose style, promoted and cultivated, partly, no doubt, for easy comprehension by non-Chinese Mongol readers of Chinese.

These styles are in marked contrast to the more sub-cultural use of colloquial styles in narrative prose especially from Tang and Song as well as from Ming and Qing times. Here the colloquialism of style, which always thrives on ample admixture of classical literary elements.

Indeed, one of the crucial rhetorical features of traditional Chinese literature is that so much of it thrives on switching between even grammatically quite distinct linguistic registers. In pre-Han times the literary style could naturally switch to archaisms and could abruptly introduce colloquial elements, but there is little evidence of a neat grammatical break between literary and colloquial forms. **Ssu-ma Ch'ien** (ca. 316 - ca. 187 B.C.) judiciously deploys colloquial forms to characterise some parts of his dialogue. However, even at this rare level of stylistic sophistication, the contrast exploited is more one of style than of grammatical structure. In a deliberate act of stylistic and rhetorical revolution the early Buddhist translators and propagators of that popular religion gradually came to move from their outlandish and often awkward colloquial-inspired “translationese” Buddhist hybrid style to a more indigenously polished, purely colloquial language with a markedly different grammar from the literary language used in secular Chinese contexts which basically purported to maintain the grammar and style of the Warring States classics. The **Shi-shuo hsin-yü** by **Liu I-ch'ing** (A.D. 467 - 520) shows an awareness of Buddhism in many places, and his work is written in a prose style that elegantly moves from the colloquial to literary styles. This book thus sets the scene for a long tradition of “informal” Chinese literature in which the grammar is not homogeneous, and where the switching from one stylistic code to an even grammatically different one becomes an endemic stylistic tendency. The effect of this code-switching may be compared to the language mixing in much European renaissance literature: Martin Luther switched from German to Latin in his Table Talk very much in the way that informal Chinese writers in the **yü-lu** “recorded sayings” tradition came to switch from the classical to the colloquial language within one and the same sentence. Thus the long series of Zen-Buddhist **yü-lu** became a crucial factor in the expansion of the range of mixed traditional Chinese prose style.

The predominantly Buddhist **pien-wen** “transformation texts” from Tang times are not written in colloquial Chinese: they developed the art of weaving together colloquial and classical elements into a highly sophisticated stylistic pattern which gave this literature an extraordinarily energetic depth of stylistic dynamism which came to inform the Chinese tradition of the short story, and then of the novel. In all these media the poet was free to use colloquial Chinese without being constrained from the use of highly classical styles.

By the time of **Chu-tzu yü-lei** “Classified saying by Master Zhu”, this mixed colloquial-classical style had not only been perfected to very considerable rhetorical and artistic effect, it had also entered the realm of serious “philosophical” literature. And Ch'en Ch'un (A.D. 411 - 470) in his **Pei-hsi tzu-i** “The Meanings of Words by Ch'en Ch'un” went so far as to write a whole book on the semantics of philosophical terms in a very heavily colloquial mixed style, which otherwise tended to be associated with informal traditions of narrative fiction and folk literature. The rhetorical message of **Chu-tzu yü-lei's** stylistic choice was clear enough: he aimed to preserve in his philosophical disquisitions something of the informal, intimate and personal touch for which Zhu Xi's discourses had become so famous. Significantly, almost all of this crucial intimate effect of

the book had to get lost in the carefully annotated English translation by Wing-tsit Chan, (Neo-Confucian Terms Explained (The Pei-hsi tzu-i), New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) It would have been possible to reproduce some of this mixed style if one could have blended English and Latin as one could do in Renaissance times. But in Europe we have very largely lost this option.

A demonstratively personal rather than merely public and political version of Confucianism was advocated by Wang Yang-ming (A.D. 1492-1529) and his *Ch'uan hsi lu* is again written in that highly attractive mixed style where the colloquial mode enlivens stiff classicalism. I count 99 instances of the colloquial word *che* "this" in that fairly short book, and in translation this *che* will have to sound exactly like the totally different standard classical *tz'u* "this".

Yüan dynasty drama has a distinctive rhetorical style all of its own and it cultivates a highly aestheticised variety of demonstratively colloquial style. For the newcomer to this demanding kind of literature, Chung-Wen Shih, *A Study and Translation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972 provides a singularly helpful bilingual introduction. In this important play, the prose style is quite predominantly vernacular and seems to positively delight in the unruly quirks of *Yüan* dynasty argot. Such an aestheticising celebration of stylised vulgarity was not part of the Buddhist use of vernacular styles.

Thus the rhetorical style of such plays are in neat contrast to that of vernacular prose narrative of of *Sung*, *Yüan* and Ming times, with their tendency towards much milder counterpoint mixture of fairly straightforward koiné standard spoken Chinese, classical Chinese, and a seasoning of occasional popular argot. For a novel like *Chin P'ing Mei* this characterisation still holds, although the mimetic popular seasoning has become notoriously prominent in that novel.

The prose style of the *Ming* and *Ch'ing* narrative varies from the almost purely classical *Liao-chai chih i*, which has only highly localised brief slips into the colloquial medium but purports to be pure oral folklore, and novels like the *Shui-hu chuan* which is written in a judicious mixture of colloquial and classical styles with the former clearly setting the overall tone. The difference in effect between the classical and the colloquial is not necessarily one between the formal and the informal - the *Liao-chai* is in many ways every bit as unconventional, erotic, and informal, as the *Shui-hu* -, but it is between the classical reticence and pregnancy of diction and vernacular loquacity.

Commentaries on the classics written in the classical mode can be long-winded, but in rhetorical style these classical commentaries are rather different from the vernacular one's which give more room to personal reaction to a text in addition to scholarly elucidation. In particular, the *k'ou i* "oral meaning" commentaries which see themselves in the tradition of the *p'ing* "appreciation" tradition provide good examples of this.

Not surprisingly, it turns out that the the history of Chinese rhetoric cannot be separated from the detailed history of Chinese literary genres, since many rhetorical features are genre-specific. And yet, it will turn out that many other rhetorical features appear to be remarkably general and applicable right across the literary tableau.

RHETORICAL IDEALS

Let me turn to a more mundane survey of Chinese discourse about their rhetorical ideals. Ever since Confucius, the ideal of *yüeh* "conciseness" and *chien* "simplicity, conciseness" of diction, the cultivation of *wei* "subtlety, discreteness, indirectness of communication" have remained the dominant stylistic ideal throughout the long history of classical Chinese literature. However, one

must remember that even on this basic point there was no lack of disagreeing scholars. For example, **Ku Yen-wu** (A.D. 1613- 1682) argued straightforwardly and famously: “The main point in literary expression is getting things across, and one is not concerned with wordiness or conciseness.” In this unorthodox opinion, **Ku Yen-wu** was supported by such outstanding scholars as **Ch’ien Ta-hsin** (1728 -1804) in this very scientific attitude to style. And it is no coincidence that this stylistic stance went with a hard-nosed intellectual scepticism towards traditional scholarship as well as traditionalist stylistic ideals. Indeed, **Chang Hsüeh-ch’eng** (1738 - 1801) made a famous list of **ku wen shi pi** “ten flaws in traditional prose style” which includes many points of direct relevance to rhetoric.

It is thus important to realise that Chinese prose style was a controversial and fairly widely discussed issue in Chinese civilisation even within given genres, not a culturally automatic practice. Thus there was no one rhetoric of Chinese prose style. In considering the summary of Chinese stylistic and rhetorical ideals below one must also always keep in mind that in a large and complex culture like the Chinese whatever norms there were are bound to have been inadvertently or deliberately contravened or even argued against somewhere by someone. Endemic rhetorical discourse patterns are not like unbreakable laws of literary culture. All the more interesting it will be to look for restraints on classical Chinese rhetoric that seem to be observed by with absolute rigueur, and to distinguish these from other constraints which are occasionally broken in marginal cases.

However this may be, according to the prevalent view, what gives writings permanent value is **wen** “aesthetic patterning”. Without **wen**-patterning, words will not travel far, it was said in an old commentary, and Chinese writers aimed at insuring the reach and the longevity of their works inspired by this maxim.

Patterning is through the harmonious balancing **li** which is the structural essence of **mei** “beauty”. Thus the parallelism which **Liu Hsieh** (A.D. 501 - 543) called **li yen** “harmoniously balancing words” became the core of classical Chinese prose style. A vast range of subtle rhetorical analyses were tied, in the course of Chinese literary history, to the varied phenomena described as “parallelism”. **K’ung Ying-ta** (A.D. 601 - 645) seems to have been the first to have used the keyword **hu wen** “corresponding word” which refers to the crucial phenomenon that in corresponding words in corresponding parallel sentences must be interpreted in a way that relates them clearly to each other or harmonise with each other. This notion must be carefully distinguished from a range of other **tui wen** “corresponding expressions”.

One important kind such corresponding expressions is the **pien wen** “varied expression”, also due to **K’ung Ying-ta**, which is close to what in Western rhetoric is called *variatio* and refers to the very common and even grammatically important phenomenon that one may use words with subtly different meanings indiscriminately in parallel sentences simply for variation, in order to avoid repetition. In such contexts it would be wrong to take the second semantically differing word to be more than a synonymous stand-in for the first.

Classical Chinese words and phrases crop up in texts a little bit like cobra-snakes: whenever one sees one, one does well to look for a corresponding mate not too far away. Chinese prose is pervasively patterned through echos and resonances with the past on the one hand, but also through echos and resonances within any passage. In traditional European literature there is, of course, plenty of parallelism, but I know of no variety of European prose that shares the cobra-like quality which so pervades nearly all the widely different varieties of mainstream classical Chinese literature from the earliest times.

Apart from this penchant for parallelism, another special form of **wen** commonly discussed and widely cultivated is that of **sheng wen** “ellipsis” in the second of two parallel sentences which -

like *variatio* - can be seen as a device to avoid the cacophony of repetition under these circumstances. (In general, classical Chinese is more tolerant of repetition than Latin or Greek.) The subcommentaries to the classics by **K'ung Ying-ta** are a rich source for a wide variety of what we today would call rhetorical analysis from a time when rhetorical analysis was still very far from being established as a formal discipline in China.

Words, it was felt, needed to be harmoniously balanced in another sense: they needed to find a balance between **chih** “substantial informative content” and **wen** “aesthetic patterning”, and this aesthetic patterning was ideally through natural and balanced parallelism. At least this was the Confucian ideal. In Warring States times the prosaic Mohists as well as the hard-nosed Legalists naturally argued for informative substance at the expense of aesthetics. **Wang Ch'ung** (€‡ B.C. - ca. A.D./,,) was the first to argue in extenso about plain unadorned communicativeness in prose style - and was duly disregarded by nearly everyone in the aesthetic community throughout history. The Taoists, on the other hand, tended to cultivate **wen** as an end in itself and through their example (notably the book **Chuang-tzu** they exercised a pervasive overt and covert influence over literary standards in China.

We can easily see that in China as in the West stylistic ideals were controversial in many ways. None the less, a great deal was above - or below - controversy. In order to qualify as **ya yen** “dignified words, ornate words” and to be truly beautiful, the harmony achieved and the means by which it is achieved has to appear to be **tzu-jan** “spontaneous, uncontrived, self-driven, natural”. Originating in the “Taoist” tradition this notion of spontaneity became an integral part of the common aesthetic heritage of the Chinese. It is through the notion of the natural in style and the link of this naturalness to what is natural in nature that stylistic beauty, in the Chinese conception of things, attains to a cosmic dimension of significance. Stylistic beauty becomes coterminous with cosmic beauty. **Ch'en I-tseng** (Yüan dynasty) was among the literary critics who became famous for continuing the advocacy of spontaneity as a standard for literary excellence. **Huang T'ing-chien** (A.D. 1045 - 1105) focussed on the possibility to make elegant, elevated use of vulgar elements.

Related to the stylistic ideal of naturalness is that of concreteness of reference, as when Mencius says that speaking of what is near one's meaning should reach far.

Liu Hsiang (‡· - ° B.C.) was the first to note down explicitly that in order to achieve all these aesthetic effects, **tz'u pu k'e pu hsiu** “formulations must be deliberately cultivated and worked on”, and by such effort what was acquired was **wei tz'u chih shu** “the art of literary composition” Especially that natural flair of effortlessness needed to be achieved by strenuous efforts of literary and aesthetic self-cultivation - in ancient times as in modern times.

Ssu-ma Ch'ien saw the energy of inner emotion and of **tzu hsien** “self-expression” through writing as the underlying factor making for great literature. To him it was the purity of **chih** “moral aspiration” which gave a fragrance (**fang**) to one's use of words.

The prosaic explanation of comparison (that it arises from the straightforward expression not making things clear enough) was supplemented by an elaborate sub-classification of the aesthetics of comparison.

There was a general prejudice against what was **hua** “elaborate, over-elaborate” and for the **p'u** “plain, unpretentious”.

In prose style the standard rhetorical pose to strike was that of **shu erh pu tso** “transmitting and not

creating” what one wrote. But here again, the situation is far from simple. Already **Wang Ch’ung** (€‡ B.C. - ca. A.D./,,) opposes plagiarism or traditionalism of formulation and recommends originality not only of thought but also of literary formulation. **Lu Chi** (A.D. €fl/ - <, <), in a more poetic mode, recommends freshness and originality of diction as against the rehearsal of the old. He is even afraid that what he genuinely feels in his breast may be a rehash of something old and that it therefore may need to be rejected. This feeling towards plagiarism was continued, among others, by such famous literary figures as Han Yü (A.D. ‡fl° - °€>) and **Li Ao** (ca. 772 - ca. 841). **Chiao Jan** (died 789), in his **Shih p’ing** “Appreciation of Poetry” castigates three types of literary thievery: stealing a phrase, stealing an idea, and the less manifest stealing of a literary mode (**t’ou shih**).

The first Chinese book which as a whole is of some persistent interest from the point of view of the history of Chinese rhetoric is the **Wen hsin tiao lung** by **Liu Hsieh** (A.D. >flfi - fi€€) to which we have already alluded above on the occasion of parallelism. This book deals also in some detail with such rhetorical devices as comparison (**pi yü**) hyperbole (**k’ua shih**), quotation and allusion (**shih lei**), comic effects (**hsieh yin**), indirect suggestive meaning (**yin hsiu**), and it distinguishes between: **yen tuei** “verbal parallelism” versus **shih tuei** “parallelism of facts”, and **cheng tuei** “straight parallelism” versus **fan tuei** “inverse parallelism” between opposites.

Liu Hsieh was already well aware that different genres have different stylistic ideals. But the first author to have made a persistent and extensive attempt to define the rules for one particular genre is Liu Chih-chi (A.D. flfi/ - ‡€) in what must count as one of the world’s first book-length studies of historiography, the **Shih t’ung** “Comprehensive Study of Historiography”. For historiography he emphasises the need for conciseness, the need to be concrete and unadorned in one’s diction, the need to use current, plain language and to avoid anachronisms (**hsi yen**), the use of precise terminology, the consistent and well-considered use of terminology of moral approval or disapproval, the need to avoid parallelism, hyperbole, and the judicious observance of taboos.

Ch’en K’uei (A.D. 1128 - 1203), on the other hand, in his **Wen tse** “Principles of Literature” moved considerably closer than **Liu Hsieh** to a focus on rhetorical topics. Understandably, this book is regarded as the first classic of traditional Chinese rhetoric. Systematically, and basing himself on earlier rhetorical literature, **Ch’en Kuei** distinguishes and exemplifies no less than 10 types of drawing comparisons thus inaugurating an orgy of such classifications comprehensively summarised in Ts’ ai Tsung-yang 1993: 227-248, and with similar meticulousness, **Ch’en** goes on to classify the various uses of quotation and the poetic effects of **tao yü** “inverted ways of speaking”. In all this **Ch’en** only elaborates existing rhetorical notions. In his discussion of **ts’eng ti** “climax” **Ch’en** is more original. He distinguishes three types: 1. from small to large; 2. from subtle to unsubtle (anticlimax!); 3. from small to large.

Another important stylistic device on which **Ch’en** dwells in some detail is that of **chiao ts’uo** “emphatic repetition of the same word or phrase”. Of particular interest is his highly suggestive notion of **t’ung mu** “repetition of keywords” as a stylistic device keeping a text together.

The **Wen ching mi fu lun** (Jap: by the Japanese monk Kolbol Daishi better known as Kulkai (A.D. 774 - 835) is an extremely important source for Six Dynasties and Tang literary criticism and rhetorical analysis. One crucial observation that is first mentioned in this work is the crucial one of **shuang kuan** “double entendre”, a stylistic device which deploys a word with one main meaning but with other meanings being subsidiarily present.

For prose writings like the novel the Ming dynasty commentator **Ye Chou** had special rhetorical advice in his endnote to chapter 53 of the Novel **Shui hu chuan** Water Margin: “In all writing in the world intrinsic aesthetic interest is the most important thing. So long as something holds aesthetic interest, what need is there for descriptions to correspond to the facts, for the people described to be the real people?” Indeed, the commentaries in the **p’ing** commentaries throughout the ages are a vast reservoir of (often delightfully informal) traditional Chinese rhetorical analysis which has not been studied in any detail, except for that part of this tradition which is concerned with the classical novels of China.

Throughout Chinese history down to the early twentieth century the respectable medium of literary communication was the classical language. But even on this point a wide range of poets and critics have recommended the incorporation of colloquial and “vulgar” (**su**) elements into this medium, although a slogan like that promoted by the diplomat and poet **Huang Tsun-hsien** (1848 - 1905) to the effect that “my hand writes what my mouth says”, though followed in practice by a number of aficionados of the colloquial medium of vernacular Chinese, was never quite advocated as a revolutionary movement opposed to the predominant use of classical Chinese. It would seem that **Huang’s** provocative slogan owed something crucial to Western - Luther-inspired - stylistic as well as intellectual influence.

How to Do Things with Books: Towards an Ethnography of Written Communication in Traditional China

I now want to consider the anthropology of the use of the kinds of documents that have been handed down to us by the tradition in ancient China as a decisive factor shaping rhetorical principles and rhetorical practice. What was the natural forum for the presentation of these ancient Chinese texts? What was the nature of the public they were intended for? What were the occasions on which these texts would be used? What are the significant constraints on what they describe? (The case of the “hard” texts recovered for us by archeologists raise a host of separate problems of their own which I cannot - unfortunately - deal with here.) I shall proceed in a comparatist mode.

One striking feature of classical Chinese rhetorical practice is the extraordinary absence of basic ephemeral communicative phrases for “good morning”, “good evening”, “good night!”, “hallo!”, “good bye”, “oh, excuse me”, “thank you very much”, “how is your wife?”, “how are you today?”. Phatic communion must have been common in ancient China, but it is not recorded in classical Chinese. Classical Chinese rhetoric tends to eschews the ephemeral and inconsequential. The rhetoric of classical Chinese excludes such small talk while already the rhetoric of Homer encourages such elements of small talk.

A Greek book was often designed to represent speech directly, in a mimetic fashion. We may assume that Demosthenes held speeches of the kind that he wrote, just as we have some pretty direct evidence that Cicero wrote down public speeches that he intended to give in the Senate in pretty exactly that form, with plenty of “natural” infelicities of spontaneous speech written into the manuscript. The written document was intended for public oral performance. Public performers existed in ancient China, as did court jesters and other entertainers for whom there is a varied specific vocabulary even in pre-Buddhist Chinese. But what these performers performed was at best only indirectly connected with the traditionally transmitted books.

We do have many speeches from ancient China, especially in early classics like the **Shang-shu** and in **Tso-chuan**. The **Kuo-yü** is entirely devoted to examples of rhetoric, and the **Chan-kuo-ts’u** is predominantly about the use of oral rhetoric. But in none of these sources, or later ones, do we find ancient Chinese documents composed and written down by their authors designed for public recitation and performance. Moreover, we hear of no custom, in ancient China, for a mixed audience to gather for the **public** reading of these books, and the books themselves give every

impression of having been written for depository purposes, and secondarily for oral exposition and explanation for a captive non-hostile audience. Here is a fundamental difference between China and Greece that needs careful interpretation.

What oral performance there was of the texts we have, appears to have been directed at very small captive audiences, primarily of a master's disciples, who were intent on learning the text by heart, with a given oral explanation.

Greek manuscripts, on the other hand, were designed to be read out to a conceivably hostile or even cynical listening public even when they were not designed to be read out by the author himself on any given occasion. They were performance texts even when they did not belong to the realm of performance literature like comedy or tragedy. They were competitive texts even when they happened not to be part of the literary contests that were so important to the Greeks.

One prominent use of the Greek book was not in private reading or esoteric study, but in social public performance for a possibly impatient or even hostile audience.

The case of drama is paradigmatic here. The manuscript of a play is designed to form the basis for a public, and publicly financed, performance of a certain kind. (One can use it for silent reading, but for all we know, silent reading was not practised anywhere or at any time in classical Greece. Even private reading involved the use of the voice. It was reading **out** to oneself. One can use the script of a play for public reading, and there is good Greek evidence that plays were used in this way.)

Thus non-dramatic texts, in the Greek context, were enacted and dramatised through more or less public readings.

Against this Greek background, our question, now, is simply this: what were ancient Chinese manuscripts used for, physically, and socially? How did they enter social life?

The slender and indirect evidence we have is that they were written records noted down for depository purposes, some of which no doubt had their primary mode of existence in the memory of users as remembered by heart. A text, in pre-**Ch'in** times, was primarily something one would recite to oneself, study and learn to interpret with a master, and certainly learn by heart.

Texts of any size would often be kept in **mi fu**, secret repositories. When during the reign of Emperor **Ch'eng** (37 - 32 B.C.) a prince wanted to consult the famous historical work **Shih-chi** and applied for permission to use the book, that permission was refused by the emperor himself, on interesting grounds that need not interest us here.

It nowhere appears from the prefaces that we have to all sorts of ancient Chinese books that they were written for public performance to a listening audience. The **Huai-nan-tzu** (139 B.C.) as well as the earlier **Lü-shih ch'un-ch'iu** (249 B.C.) were never said to have been read out to the public: they were said to have been displayed as physical objects by the city gates of the capital. ???

For the rhetoric of these kinds of texts the nature of their intended social use makes all the difference. By the time we hear of oral performances of texts these were vernacular elaborations which involved translation into the vernacular idiom, they were not public readings.

The rhetorical consequences of all this are profound: The Greek writer, like his Roman counterpart, wrote in the fear that he might at any time lose his audience's attention, that their minds might wander, that they might find him insufficiently engaging or interesting. Looking at ancient Chinese books it is as if the classical Chinese writer did not need to have any such fear, since he

wrote ultimately for the archival record. He wrote as an archivist, recording what needed to be recorded, for the archival record of a philosophical school or, very often, for the imperial archival record. His purpose was typically depository. The writing was for consultation by those who felt the need to consult the work and for those who were inclined to study it and learn from it. Entertainment did not form a significant part of the purpose of writing. When these prose texts are entertaining this is incidental to them: their real purpose is archival or didactic, their rhetoric is ultimately designed towards this didactic end, even when they are overtly archival.

There was no sense in which pre-Buddhist writers competed with each other for **public** acclaim in any literary competition. Royal or official approval was the primary matter. Chinese philosophical texts were thus not in any sense in a purely literary or philosophical competition with each other. Such competition as there was tended to be for royal approval. There was no discussion anywhere in pre-Buddhist China, as far as I know, on whether **Mo-tzu** (late fifth century B.C.) or **Meng-tzu** (ca. 372 - ca. 289 B.C.) was the greater writer. There could not be, if only because neither **Mo-tzu** nor Mencius were themselves writers, for all we know. They did not, for all we know, aspire to literary excellence in the way that Plato did in his dialogues which we have, and Aristotle in his dialogues which are lost to us, but which Cicero so admired.

There was no general public to which to appeal, simply because Chinese texts were not performance texts, they were designed to be respectfully learnt and memorised and not to be critically listened to by a potentially hostile ancient Chinese general intellectual public. When Mencius criticises **Mo-tzu** we never get the impression that this criticism is based on a close study of a publicly available book in any detail. There is no detailed discussion of any extensive passages. The intended audience is one of adherents of Confucius who need to be confirmed in their opposition to the pernicious views of the Mohists.

Consider, in any case, a book like the **Mo-tzu**. Suppose that it were read to an audience of patient listeners. No matter how Mohist we suppose they were, they must have complained that the text is intolerably repetitive: it preserves up to three versions of a given chapter in many cases. This is tedious in the extreme. What the compilers of that text did was to collect three versions, for the record.

Again, there are the dialectical chapters, most of which are utterly incomprehensible to any but the most abjectly esoteric listener. Clearly, these were included for the record, not for any public reading sessions. The canons are not comprehensible without the explanations, and the explanations are not comprehensible without the canons. Whoever compiled the book never thought of it as anything other than a repository of archive material. In no sense did these texts try to compete in attractiveness with non-Mohist books.

We understand such texts when we realise that they were not performance texts in public competition with other performance texts, but quintessentially and primarily records.

Geoffrey Lloyd is quite right when he emphasises the agonistic spirit of Greece, with its Olympic contests, in contrast with China. He touches a nerve. However, one must keep in mind the fascination for moral ranking people in the **Han-shu** of the first century A.D., as well as for poetic ranking in later treatises on poetry such as the **Shih-p'ing**, and here as so often the difference between East and West is one of degree, not absolute.

What, then, is the driving force behind the extraordinary sophistication of early Chinese verse and prose style, if it was not competition for public acclaim? The background for this must be sought in the fact that all the literature we have is court literature in the sense that it sought primarily the approval of royalty or of (perhaps politically disenchanting) princely patronage. Thus the competition there was for royal favour and approval, for princely acclaim. Alternatively, the

more aestheticising approval of disgruntled circles around the court - as perhaps, in the case of such texts as the **Chuang-tzu**.

None of this is evidence against the abundantly clear fact that the public forum or constituency of this literature was basically the court milieu. That is why the study of mediaeval European literature is so eminently useful for those who study China: we are dealing with a court literature in Europe which bears natural comparison with the Chinese court literature. And since the sociology of rhetoric in mediaeval Europe has been so ably studied, this affords ample direct inspiration for sinological research.

The pre-Buddhist texts were not competing for approval by “free citizens”, aestheticising connoisseurs of literature. There was nothing like a free literary market economy in pre-Buddhist China. Literary aestheticism grew in China from the third century onwards, at a pace with fine arts like calligraphy and art as personal expression. We need to study the development of the literary public one could aim to write for in China.

Greek texts, being part of a literary market economy, read as if they were written for a general critical intellectual, and quite probably that is the kind of public for whom these texts were publicly read out and performed: a potentially hostile, rebellious, and even quite literally an impatient audience. Also the great Roman writers, like Seneca or Cicero, write with a an explicit concern for audience reaction. In pre-Buddhist Chinese texts one generally feels as if one is eaves-dropping on a discourse which was directed at a ruler and oblivious of the natural reactions of a general reading public.

When they are not written for a ruler or prince, Chinese texts to read as if they were written primarily for a captive audience of disciples, for the record and as records, without any idea of a general critical intellectual public in mind. They rarely take account of the possibility of hostile readings.

It is when one keeps this in mind that one understands the underlying dynamics leading to the specificities of Chinese prose style.

Constraints on classical Chinese prose style

Classical Chinese prose style has many features which were not focussed on by the Chinese rhetorical tradition itself, but which are none the less crucial.

If one wishes to understand the nature of authorship in ancient China, the case of puppetry is instructive: the puppeteer's role is like that of the ancient Chinese writer's. Like a puppeteer, the ancient Chinese writer records, enacts roles, but he could never speak as the puppeteer, at best as the impersonal, non-present narrator. If he spoke in his own voice he would be leaving his culturally predefined role as a writer of prose.

The puppeteer is the actor of the performance, the reproductive agent. His personality is never the subject of the performance. He never enters the performance as his own person. His person is no more than the underlying hidden agent of the performance, but never part of the object/subject described in the performance. By definition he has no voice and cannot have a voice. Having a voice would go beyond his culturally predefined role as the “puppeteer”.

This role of a puppeteer is subject to historical dynamic change. Thus he can become a masked and thus still hidden actor, or he can become an overt undisguised actor, until finally he may come to pose as speaking in his own voice, not the voice of his role, but his own voice as an actor commenting on what he enacts or records. Then, he might speak as a person, not as the actor, but still commenting on the play. Finally, he may speak no more of the content of the play, but he may purport to speak of his own feelings and opinions, at which stage he begins to stage himself, he

needs a choreography for his own self-presentation, he has to invent a self for presentation and to ritualise a literary choreography for that self, with all the complexities of rhetoric which this implies.

Part of the fascination of Chinese literature is that it allows us to trace the development of the conventions dominating - but never quite constraining - the scribal acts in that culture from an early phase in which - like the puppeteer - the scribe is craftsman who enacts something that is the work of others, via a stage where, like the masked actor, the writer presents a stylised immobile public surface which he knows his public knows is not his own, to a stage where the scribe emerges as a person, shows his own face, as it were, is still enacting and inscribing the messages of others, but taking overt responsibility for how what is being written is written. Such an overt act of taking responsibility is involved in overtly indirect speech, and such overtly indirect attributed speech remains surprisingly sparse throughout Chinese literary history. In pre-Buddhist times there are some precious and syntactically simple examples which demonstrate that indirect speech was not in some profound sense totally alien to pre-Buddhist literature, but it is abundantly clear that indirect speech is not a part of the grammatical-rhetorical repertoire of writers of Chinese in the sense that it is an integral part of basic Latin grammar. This primarily grammatical observation concerns an important symptom of what I diagnose as a basic feature of the scribal act in ancient China.

The first decisive point, then, is that the rhetorical roles of scribe and author tend not to be the same in pre-Buddhist prose literature. The scribe typically poses as reporting on an author who does not himself appear as the originator of the book which typically bears his name. Very gradually, from the the Han period onwards, this changes and writing comes to purport to express what writers themselves consider as true. But there remains a characteristically strong tendency to speak in writing through the medium of allusion and unacknowledged indirect quotation. Through implicit quotation the writer may inscribe himself into a tradition, but quite frequently a writer presents as apparently his own the formulations of others. The **Han-shu** by **Pan Ku** (A.D. 100 - 180) is a good case in point. The overlaps with the **Shi-chi** by **Ssu-ma Ch'ien** (ca. 135 - ca. 87 B.C.) are extensive, and pervasively unmarked. Remarkably, they also go unmarked in the introductions, except that **Pan Ku**, with conventionalised (but not therefore less real) modesty, claims only to have transmitted (**shu**), and unlike **Ssu-ma Ch'ien** he nowhere claims to have composed (**tso**) any of his chapters. The significant point is that even **Ssu-ma Ch'ien** himself compiled his history through extensive use of unacknowledged quotation from sources he found in the imperial repository of written material, many of which are preserved for us in other books.

In traditional China a majority of main-line prose writers construed and staged themselves as transmitters of a heritage - especially when what they were doing, in fact, was to innovate. The great master of the Chinese short story, **P'u Sung-ling** (1627 - 1704) describes himself as a **i shih** "annalist of the strange", and in general he only permits himself to speak in his own name in little notes at the end of his stories. Like the historian, the author of short stories tends to pose, in his main text, as an impartial and impersonal purveyor of literature, while the lyrical poet tends to strike a discreetly communicative pose.

Exactly because of this prevailing tendency, its opposite, the systematic quest for originality of content, style and subject matter was an obvious option for the dissenting individual in traditional China. **Li Yü** (1611 - ca. 1680) staged himself as such a dissenter in his antinomian works of fiction. He wanted the subjects of his prose writings as well as his perspectives on these subjects to be his and his alone. Even linguistically, he aimed for innovativeness and originality. By comparison, Shakespeare was deafeningly traditionalist in the choice of subject matter: practically all his plots are based on unacknowledged more or less well-known earlier sources. Shakespeare was not a plagiariser of plots, but originality in basic plot was not among his aims as a writer.

Understanding **Li Yü** properly is to understand him as a literary libertine. He revels in staging

himself as such in his writings. Just as **Li Chih** (ㄌㄧˊ ㄔㄧˊ - /ㄌㄧˊ, ㄔㄧˊ) stages himself as an intellectual libertine aiming for intellectual originality and eschewing the menial rôle of handing down and merely adapting conventional wisdom.

Moreover, for libertines like **Li Yü** and **Li Chih** their very libertinism became a subject for discussion. They were thus commentators on their own culture and on their own role within that culture. As such they differ sharply from the vast majority who construed themselves as bearers and continuators of a grand tradition.

However, one did not have to be a libertine to deviate radically from the mainstream rhetorical prose style one strikes. Thus the substantial works we have from the brush of **Wang Ch'ung** (ㄨㄥˊ ㄔㄨㄥˊ - ca. A.D. /, ,), and which are collected for us in the book **Lun-heng** strikes a basic rhetorical pose which can be conveniently symbolised by the title of one of his justly famous pieces **i ku** “Doubting the Ancient”.

In any case, the overall self-communicating reticence of prose writers is best illustrated from the history of autobiographical writing in China. Wolfgang Bauer's *Das Antlitz Chinas* (Munich: Hanser Verlag, 1990) and Pei-Yi Wu's *The Confucian's Progress. Autobiographical Writings in Traditional China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) supplement each other very well and show abundantly the tight limitations of autobiographical self-representation in the literary world of traditional Chinese prose.

But the significance of this autobiographical reticence goes far beyond the autobiographical dimension as such. For example, the scribal convention in ancient China that non-episvolary prose is presented by a writer who poses not as a person “here and now” at a certain point of time, but as a more “abstract” generalised “I” that is more elevated and construed as constant over time. Thus it takes a very long time indeed before a Chinese author **writes** that he has changed his mind. (The philosopher **Chu Hsi** (A.D. //, - /ㄔㄨˊ ㄒㄧˊ, ,) does!) In reported direct speech one does, occasionally, hear someone say that originally he had an impression that later turned out to be wrong. But no writer in pre-Buddhist times says, as far as I can remember, that he used to maintain one point of view but now has changed his mind. Reporting such a change of mind would presuppose conventions of writing in which the writer, as a here-and-now person, would have to be on stage not only as the source of what is being written, he would also have to be on stage as a subject to be discussed **as the author of such views**. The writer would have to invite the reader into the subjectivity of his creative process as personal history. This does not tend to happen in China. In traditional Chinese prose style writers do not stage themselves as being engaged in a real-time on-going process of composing the very text they are writing.

In the context of what has just been said it will not come as a surprise that in pre-Buddhist Chinese there was remarkably little thinking with the brush, that the scribal act was and remained for a very long time an act of summarising thought-out thoughts. For a general characterisation of traditional prose style this is an absolutely fundamental feature: Chinese writers hardly ever pose as writing down what happens to be currently on their minds. (**Chuang-tzu** ch. 2 provides a remarkable exception to this rule.) Prose writing never poses as mimetic of on-going thought.

The stylistic consequences of this traditional Chinese prose style are profound and pervasive. Reported speech is very rarely realistically mimetic as in Aristophanic comedy. What happens is that direct speech is habitually used in a summarising fashion in Chinese. Because direct speech is so obviously used in this way, there is no need for indirect speech as a separate mechanism marking off the summarising mode. Speech reports in traditional China are very predominantly summarising reports in direct speech. Mimetic transcription of speech occurs, very occasionally, and for very brief spells, in classical Chinese prose style. But according to the conventions of the time what we call direct reported speech is not a matter of mimetic transcription

The case of writing down one's thoughts is exactly parallel. Writing down one's thoughts is not mimetic of what one would naturally come to say in an attempt to express them through speech as one is sorting them out for oneself. What one writes down is only what one might say to summarise concisely the gist of one's thoughts. The prose style of concise summary differs interestingly from the style of the natural flow of speech. In that way the style of classical Chinese differs essentially from that of vernacular Chinese.

The proof of this radical difference is easy to find. Greek and Latin prose writers will freely cultivate aposiopesis, the falling silent abruptly in mid-sentence or mid-thought. No one with any experience in Latin is unable to come up with fitting examples, some even from the most polished metrical verses in Latin literature.

There is not a single case of aposiopesis in pre-Buddhist literature, and this rhetorical device remains absent throughout the history of classical Chinese literature, whereas in **pai-hua** vernacular literature one may, for all I know, be able to find a few instances of this mimetic device in the representation of speech. In the representation of one's own thoughts, the device of aposiopesis remains absolutely alien to the Chinese tradition, as far as I know, although I would not be in the least surprised if someone could turn up an example of this in the work of a writer of the libertine type of **Li Chih** (1611 - ca. 1680) and **Li Yü** (1611 - ca. 1680), whom I have had occasion to mention above, or of a literary figure like **Feng Meng-lung** (A.D. 1574-1646). The dates, here, are significant: late Ming and early Ch'ing times are exceptionally rich in what in the Chinese context must count as outrageous stylistic and rhetorical eccentricity.

It is not a coincidence that when looking for a writer purporting to spontaneously expressing his thoughts as they are going through his head one always finds oneself looking carefully at the same few exceptional writers, and one somehow seems to have learnt not to expect to find relevant examples in all the other mainstream authors. Maybe such a prejudice is unjustified, but its very plausibility to Chinese and Western scholars alike remains in itself significant.

A veil of discreet reticence regarding one's current on-gong thoughts remains the "default mode" of traditional Chinese prose style, and this contrasts most significantly with the loquaciousness that is the hallmark of ancient Greek style.

Epistolary and memorial styles differ sharply from general prose style in one crucial way: traditional Chinese prose style does not cultivate the fiction of a dialogue with an imagined rebellious disbelieving and disrespectful reader, the famous *lecteur rebelle*. Neither does it introduce that pernicious ghost dubbed *malignus genius* "malign spirit" by Descartes in his seminal *Meditationes*, the internalised ethereal and *advocatus diaboli* who roams far beyond the conventionalities of received wisdom, opinion and taste in his vast spaces of logical necessities and conceivabilities. The predominant style of intellectual prose in the West is ignited and provoked by a more or less dimly perceived *malignus genius* throughout. But even more importantly, there is, in the history of Western prose, a stylistic *malignus genius*, with his rollicking, hoarse and haughty laughter (internalised and feared by the author), which triggers a steady stream of - often parenthetical - metalinguistic formulations of all kinds justifying justifying what is being done stylistically against this internalised "enemy from within". Long before Descartes, Cicero is notoriously full of such material.

On a more banal level one can easily confirm that while practically all of Latin prose literature purports to be addressed to a certain person, the rhetorical mode of traditional Chinese literature is primarily directed politely at an impersonal general audience, an audience positively disposed to the message purveyed. The *malignus spiritus Sinensis*, being a rare species in Chinese prose, is a

most elusive, allusive creature living a very hidden subtle life.

Some form of implicit dialogue with the reader is introduced by the impersonal formula **huo yüe** “someone says; someone might say”, or simply by an unmarked question which **Ch'en K'uei** (A.D. 1128 - 1203) recognised as an important rhetorical device: **ta wen** “responding to questions”. The crucial point is that the questions or remarks so introduced are never clearly attributed the reader of a book qua reader of that book. The attribution tends to be more general than that even in post-Buddhist times.

The Buddhist inspired explicit address to the **tu-che** “the reader here and now who has reached this particular point of the narrative and may be getting bored etc.” is of special interest to us here. This usage is apparently limited to vernacular narrative contexts and does not seem to have spilled over into the classical rhetorical practice to any significant extent as far as I have been able to ascertain.

SUBJECTIVITY

The problem of the objective versus the subjective mode of writing is again intimately linked to the post festum summarising default mode of traditional Chinese prose style. One may feel culturally obliged to record and explain incidents by, for example, including a fictitious speech by one of the participants in the action or observers of the action at the time in terms of what one perceives as public morality and public perceptions, or one may be predisposed to express a current explicitly and vulnerably subjective attitude towards such incidents, representing the process as a matter of one's own individual subjective perception and personal sensitivity as a writer.

In pre-Buddhist times the overwhelmingly predominant mode remains the naive objective. From the third century onwards the overt mode remains the objective one, and there is no current idiom for the ubiquitous *mihi videtur* “it seems to me” in Latin. The Chinese **fang-fu** “apparently” does not have this specifically and vulnerably subjective nuance and is in no way a dominant routine rhetorical signal comparable to the Latin *mihi videtur* “it seems to me” or to the equally ubiquitous ancient Greek equivalent *phainetai moi*.

I wo kuan chih “as I see it, in my view”, it should be noted, still poses an objectively true judgment, not a statement about subjective impression or mere appearance as such. The predominant epistemological mode in traditional and classical Chinese prose style remains objective down to the twentieth century.

3. Comparisons and constraints

Languages and their associated artistic prose styles do have personalities, rather like people. Consciously or unconsciously, interpretation of a foreign literary culture involves comparisons even when one's aim is simple exposition.

Western students of Chinese who are familiar with Latin and Greek, learn to bring very different expectations to their Greek and Chinese sources: these are not prejudices or preconceptions, but expectations grown out of extensive experience with thousands of pages of ancient European and Chinese primary sources in the original languages. There is an extrovert communicative loquacity and personal expressiveness to much of Greek prose style which tends to be much more subdued and implicit in Chinese. Our classical Chinese sources and the varying ideals of prose style to which they aspire have one prevailing tendency in common: they tend to be fundamentally personally reticent and somehow delicate almost across the board. The colloquial and crudeness of Aristophanes has no parallels anywhere in Chinese literature down to Ming times. Classical Chinese texts often came to retain a touch of reticent delicacy even when they rebel against this reticent mode. Even pornographic prose tends not to be as crudely and freely vernacular in its

vulgarity as it is in Aristophanes. A dominant stylistic feature remained a certain gauze veil of *weiyen* “subtle words”.

Traditional Chinese prose style thus differs in non-trivial, philosophically and anthropologically profound ways from Greek and Roman prose style. These contrasts help to delimit the specificities of traditional Chinese literary culture.

A large number of scholars have aimed to find examples of a wide variety of rhetorical forms in traditional Chinese literature. These investigations focus on what is common between Chinese and Western rhetoric and style. And to start with it is important to remind oneself that there is a great deal of common ground. Parallelism is common in the West as it is endemic in China.

Chariotism, the clothing of a disagreeable sense with agreeable expressions is more endemic in Chinese prose, even, than in its heyday in Rome. Climax is more common than anticlimax in both literary traditions, and this was indeed noted by traditional rhetoricians.

But the exciting points are not these common features which, after all, are only to be expected. The excitement is in the surprising gaps, the points where something is endemic in one culture and seems almost scandalously absent in the other. Consider the case of the parenthesis, the asyntactic insertion of alien material into an ongoing sentence: while Cicero uses parentheses within parentheses, within parentheses, all of Chinese literature, vernacular as well as classical, seems chemically free of such parenthetical and asyntactic insertions in mid-sentence. This points to a significant feature of Chinese stylistic practice: Chinese writers rarely make parenthetical comments on what they are currently saying, they rarely “rise” to that level of stylistic self-consciousness which Cicero - as a highly professional and prolific rhetorical theoretician - over-cultivated in his writings, and which in milder forms has remained endemic in the Western literary tradition.

It is not part of Chinese style to comment on one’s style as one is using it.

It is amusing to note that what Cicero called Asianism of style is not at all well represented in traditional China. Wordy sentimental pomposity was very rarely the hallmark of anything acknowledged as fine classical Chinese style. On the other hand such “realistic” mimetic touches as the aposiopesis, the breaking off of a sentence in mid-sentence, is absent throughout all of Chinese literature.

Again, the rhetorical device of addressing inanimate objects as if they were persons (oh, you memories of my youth), personification in the vocative mode of inanimates, as well as personification quite generally are radically more sparse in Chinese than in Western prose style. And this is not a superficial observation of no philosophical consequence. The anthropological link between personification of inanimates and abstraction is manifest, and I will not develop this crucial theme in contrastive East-West intellectual history here.

?????DELEETE ALL THAT FOLLOWS?????

Here then, finally, is a ruthlessly shortened list of rhetorical devices which are current in the West, but which as a reader of classical Chinese literature one learns not to expect except in truly exceptional circumstances:

Barbarismus, the use of foreign words where one’s own language is insufficient, was rare in pre-Buddhist China, and remained marginal in Chinese prose style except in those cases where the things described are themselves foreign. In other words, Chinese prose writers were not in the habit, like Lucretius, to deplore the insufficiency of their own language.

Cacozellia, the exaggerated and ridiculous over-use of permitted and recommended literary forms,

remains marginal throughout Chinese literature.

Compensatio, compensating for something that one has just said, and which one regrets having said in this way, is current in Western prose style, but pervasively absent in Chinese.

Correctio, correcting what one has written a moment ago, is a form which slowly enters Chinese prose style only in the vernacular styles. It seems to remain alien to classical Chinese prose style.

Digressio, the deliberately “spontaneous” and explicitly acknowledged deviation from one’s proper subject, “in spite of oneself”, remains marginal in classical literature but narrative digression acquires a certain conventional status in vernacular literature. This shows up a profound difference between vernacular and classical traditions in traditional China.

Distinctio, the explicit distinction between differing meanings of a given word one is using, and the making explicit of the meaning one intends, is surprisingly rare in traditional classical Chinese prose, except in commentarial literature, where the form is occasionally found.

Epizeuxis, the spontaneous, multiple repetition of a word beyond reduplication, is rare in Chinese prose style, as is the three-fold repetition of a vocative “oh mother! mother! mother!”

E!thopoiia, the extensive dwelling on the description of character beyond the needs of the narrative context, which is common in classical Western literatures is absent in pre-Buddhist literature and remains rare in later traditional literature.

Eucharistia, the profuse ritualised expression of thanks, which is so common in Western classical literatures, is absent in pre-Buddhist literature and remains rare, again, in later literature. Thanks are expressed by the gesture of bowing with folded hands, and not by words.

Fictio, deliberate and overt coining of new words, is extremely rare in traditional Chinese literature.

Hirmus, the periodic sentence in which the sense is suspended until the end, is rare in Chinese.

Hyperbaton, the interposition between two words that grammatically belong together, of material that does not belong into this construction, is impossible in Chinese for grammatical reasons: the word order is less free than in Latin.

Improprietas, the deliberate use of a completely inappropriate word, is rare indeed.

Metanoia, the qualification of a statement one has just made by recalling it, self-correction, seems absent in traditional Chinese prose style.

Praeteritio, explicitly passing over something or rather seeming to pass over something in order to draw special attention to it is absent in pre-Buddhist Chinese, and remains rare in post-Buddhist times.

Reditus ad propositum, the explicit reverting to one’s main subject after a digression (“But I digress. Let me return to my main point.”), is rare in classical Chinese literature but characteristically common in vernacular prose.

Restrictio, the figure whereby after making a general statement one excepts a part, is rare in

traditional Chinese prose style.

Subnexio, the appending of an afterthought to a main thought one has just expressed as a further reflection on it. This again is comparatively rare in Chinese texts.

One could continue this confusing list for a very long time. The unconfusing underlying feature of all this is clear enough: literary Chinese prose style is reticent in many ways, among others also in the way it does not encourage authors to comment on the very process of their on-going literary composition. To a significantly lesser extent than in Greece or Rome do literary Chinese authors become objects of critical attention unto themselves in their texts, as they write these texts.

Chinese poetry in particular demonstrates abundantly that these Chinese authors were far from naive, stylistically. Vernacular styles show elaborate conventionalised patterns of authorial self-criticism of the very current act of composition. But when all is said and done, conventional and traditional Chinese artistic prose style remains at bottom an act of artistic summarising, and not an act of the literary dramatisation of the complex and often contradictory thinking and feeling processes that went on in the literary mind. On the whole, this dramatisation has tended to remain, in China, the domain of poetry.

Hence the immense importance in China not of prose style, but of poetic flair - even for the best of Chinese prose.