

A Survey of Research in Asian Rhetoric

This survey offers a forum for scholars who have been studying Asian rhetoric to express their views about some important issues in the discipline. Covering a variety of topics from the existing state of research in Asian rhetoric to the modes of inquiries and the development of scholarship in this area, the survey reveals that researchers must challenge the fundamental assumptions about rhetoric embedded in classical Western rhetorical theories to start a conversation between East and West. By representing different voices, the survey also invites deeper discussion of related issues among researchers in the field.

Asian rhetoric is a young discipline of rhetoric studies, its history traced back to the 1960s.¹ Starting with the seminal work by Robert Oliver (1961), research in Asian rhetoric has progressed through four decades and has yielded noticeable fruits. Gradually departing from the influence of various modes of inquiry that favor the Greco-Roman rhetorical tradition and bias against non-Western rhetorical traditions, practitioners in this field recently have started to study Asian rhetorical practices in their own social, historical, and cultural contexts (Robert Kaplan, 1987; Vernon Jensen, 1987; Mary Garrett, 1993; XiaoMing Li, 1996; Yameng Liu, 1996; George Kennedy, 1998; Xing Lu, 1998; LuMing Mao, 2000). Closely related to the development of the field of rhetoric, which gives more and more attention to the way people communicate, research in Asian rhetoric, in light of its recognition of the existence of other rhetorical traditions alongside the Western rhetorical tradition, has broadened our vision of rhetoric. To get a clear picture of this area, I surveyed several scholars who have done or have been doing research in Asian rhetoric.² The purpose of this survey is to encourage research and scholarship in an emerging but very important area in the field.

The five scholars I surveyed have been doing historical, theoretical, and empirical studies in different disciplines such as rhetoric and composition, linguistics, and communication studies, and all have made significant contributions to the developing field of Asian rhetoric. For example, Professor Vernon Jensen is one of the pioneers who opened up this new area. His study of

East Asian rhetoric has led the field to a new and more appropriate mode of inquiry—studying Asian rhetoric by examining its own concepts and contexts (1987, 1992). Professor Mary Garrett, in a series of essays published in the 1990s, studied the rhetorical practices in classical China by unpacking the implications of various argumentative speech activities in Chinese philosophical, historical, and cultural contexts. Her study of pathos in the rhetorical practices in early China provides a good example of reexamining Western rhetorical tradition through the lens of a non-Western rhetorical tradition (1993).

Professor XiaoMing Li has devoted herself to empirical studies of Asian rhetoric. In *"Good Writing" in Cross-Cultural Context* (1996), an ethnographic study of Chinese and American teachers of composition, she compared the standards of good writing in two different cultures. This study has broken the stereotype of Chinese rhetoric formed by some misinterpretations and overgeneralization in previous scholarship and has provided a new research method to studies in contrastive rhetoric. Professor Xing Lu studied Classical Chinese rhetoric by using its own terms and examining its own philosophical, political, and cultural contexts. Her daring and original scholarship represented by *Rhetoric in Ancient China, Fifth to Third Century B.C.E.: A Comparison with Classical Greek Rhetoric* (1998) provides a systematic and convincing account of classical Chinese rhetoric. Professor LuMing Mao, a linguist and rhetorician, has published extensively in Asian rhetoric. In his recent research, he has explored the conflict in ideology between the conception of Western rhetoric and the implication of Confucian discourse (2000). His new article, "Reflective Encounters: Illustrating Comparative Rhetoric," presents important scholarship in the field, applying linguistic and postmodern rhetorical theory to the research of Asian rhetoric.

The survey was composed of questions about several subtopics. Some questions were designed to get general information about the research in this field. The scholars' responses to these questions tell us in which journals their research has been published, for whom they wrote, and what kind of research is considered as important contributions to this area. Such information will be helpful to those who want to know about the evolution of this area and publish their work on Asian rhetoric. According to their responses, most of the scholars I surveyed have published in journals such as *Argumentation and Advocacy*, *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, *Rhetorica*, *Rhetoric Review*, *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, *Style*, *Western Journal of Communication*, and *World Communication*. Their audience is primarily rhetoricians and communication scholars who are interested in intercultural communications. The important research being done in Asian rhetoric includes research that is mindful of the logic of Orientalism, that studies

Asian rhetoric in its own cultural and political contexts, that appropriates Asian rhetoric for Western contexts, and that applies Asian rhetorical traditions to the study of pedagogical issues.

Other questions in the survey were set up for the scholars to give voice to their own opinions about more specific issues in Asian rhetoric. Their responses to these questions not only express their concern with the development of research in Asian rhetoric but also invite deep thought about some important issues in rhetoric. Two topics received the most attention from these scholars and solicited thought-provoking comments.

One is the approaches scholars have been using in researching Asian rhetoric. Their discussions about this issue indicate that, just as in any other new or marginalized area in the field of rhetoric, researchers in Asian rhetoric must challenge the fundamental assumptions about rhetoric embedded in classical Western rhetorical theories to start a conversation between East and West. For example, when asked about what approaches and terminologies should be used in the study of Asian rhetorics, these scholars pointed out that we need to be cautious not to impose the Western conception of rhetoric upon the description of Asian rhetorics despite the fact that they did not fully agree with each other on every aspect of this issue. Ultimately we need to answer an unavoidable question: How do we define rhetoric? There is no denying that we have to start from somewhere, but relying too heavily on classical Western rhetorical theory without transforming it from the perspectives of non-Western rhetorical traditions might perpetuate the idea that Greco-Roman rhetorical tradition is the only rhetorical tradition. Therefore, it is essential that we rewrite rhetorical theory and explore new research methodologies as these and many other scholars are trying to do.

The other topic is the development of research in Asian rhetoric. The scholars I surveyed provided valuable comments from both scholastic and administrative perspectives. Their responses show that we need more scholars who have the tools and expertise to study Asian rhetorics in their original texts and cultures. We should explore a broader scope of genres from the rhetorical perspective and encourage more interdisciplinary research in this area. Moreover, they suggest that more financial assistance and support should be provided for the study of Asian rhetoric.

Asian rhetoric is still a young and immature enterprise in the field of rhetoric. Although there are many difficulties along the road, it has the potential of growing into a strong discipline, considering the depth and significance of the subject matter itself and the achievements researchers have made in a relatively short period of time. But its development needs more attention and support from the academy. I hope that this survey will not only provide a forum for the

scholars to voice their opinions and concerns but also leave space for further and deeper discussions on Asian rhetoric among practitioners in the discipline. I hope that what this survey offers is a continuation of the dialogue between the Western rhetorical tradition and non-Western rhetorical traditions.

The Survey

The Existing State of Research in Asian Rhetoric

Question: How do you feel about the present state of the research in this field? Is it vigorous or lackadaisical? Why do you think so?

- **Mary Garrett:** I would say it is desultory. There is not yet a critical mass of scholars devoting themselves to this field. Many people turn out something occasionally, sometimes as a digression from their main line of research.
- **Vernon Jensen:** I think the present state of research in Asian rhetoric is promising (avoiding the extremes of "vigorous" and "lackadaisical"!). I am glad to see the great variety of subjects being explored, the variety of modes of inquiry, and the increasing appearance of scholars who can work in Asian languages in their own research.
- **Xing Lu:** There is still a lack of research on Asian rhetoric. We need research on other Asian rhetorical traditions; we need more comparative works between Asian rhetoric and non-Asian rhetoric.
- **LuMing Mao:** The present state of the research in this field is still quite young or nascent, and a lot needs to be done in order to avoid simplicity, to move away from Orientalism.

The Modes of Inquiry Used in Asian Rhetoric Research

Question: What modes of inquiry should be applied to the study of rhetorical traditions in Asian cultures? Why?

- **Xing Lu:** Scholars in general agree that analytical and definitional modes of thinking tend to create obstacles in rendering a more nuanced and authentic understanding in the study of rhetoric and communication of non-Western cultures. It is important to be sensitive to the implicit, multifaceted, and sometimes paradoxical nature of rhetoric embedded in Chinese philosophical, literary, and religious texts. An effort to search for a single definition of Chinese rhetoric or to try to find an equivalence from the Western terminology may fail to uncover the richness of Chinese rhetorical tradition (or any

other rhetorical traditions for that matter) and run the risk of imposing meanings of Western rhetoric onto the Chinese context.

- **LuMing Mao:** We've heard those catch words like *analytical, contextual, critical*, etc., to characterize various kinds of modes of inquiry. I am more interested in studies that are historicized and that are leery of making claims or generalizations with little or flimsy evidence. [S]uch [comparative] studies should be more mindful of local textual and contextual forces and of their concomitant assumptions—both of which can be uncommon and unexpected in relation to the dominant, to the expected. Of course, such work calls for careful, immersed study rather than some superficial comparisons that can be easily guilty of creating a forced fit or distinction. I am also nervous about those that advocate some kind of evolutionary trajectory and that transfer Western terminologies uncritically.

Question: In *Rhetoric in Ancient China, Fifth to Third Century B.C.E.: A Comparison with Classical Greek Rhetoric*, Xing Lu suggests that the Chinese term *bian* (argumentation and disputation) be used to describe the ancient Chinese rhetoric. If you are familiar with this work, what do you think of this approach? Why?

- **Mary Garrett:** Well, this is a definitional issue: How is rhetoric being conceived? As argumentation and disputation? As including epideictic? As symbolic inducement? The definition applied will determine, to what extent, what is seen and brought forward. I myself think that seeing rhetoric as argumentation and disputation is too narrow for both the Western and the Chinese situations; too many important and interesting phenomena are missed.
- **XiaoMing Li:** I have read her work only once and was much impressed by the breadth and depth of her knowledge of ancient Chinese rhetoric. [*Bian*], I think, is closer to the Western rhetorical tradition than the dictionary translation of rhetoric, *xiuci*. Using *bian* as the focal point of Chinese rhetoric helps build conceptual links between the two otherwise little-related traditions. At the same time, though, her strategy to realign Chinese tradition in accordance with the Western tradition inevitably leaves out things that don't fit in that conceptual frame yet are essential to the tradition. One obvious result of such an approach is that her study is largely confined to China's ancient political and philosophical treatise, giving only tangential attention to China's rich literary tradition. In my own research on present-day Chinese students' writing, I have found that the impact of China's literary tradition is far more palpable on their writing than the entire enterprise of philosophical treatise. For example, *sanwen*, one of the more popular genres in Chinese schools, a prose that

resembles to some extent English free verse, is a direct offshoot of a tradition that regarded poetry as the supreme genre.

- **Xing Lu:** I actually proposed "*Ming Bian*" as the close appropriation to English "rhetoric." Another appropriation could be "*Shui Bian*." Whatever terms are being used, it should be generated from the original Chinese context, not the imposition of Western meanings. This would allow a discovery and reconstruction of Chinese rhetoric with respect to Chinese contexts.
- **LuMing Mao:** I am aware of her argument. I think it is quite productive because of its emphasis on local contexts, on diachronic (I think she uses evolutionary, which I am somewhat less excited about) history, and on what she calls "a language of ambiguous similarity." On the last point, in general I agree with this kind of move, though I sense there is at least an implicit effort on her part to move Chinese terms closer to the Western counterparts—rather than, say, vice versa. I wonder why.

Question: What terminology should be used to describe rhetorical practices in Asian cultures in ancient times? Why?

- **Mary Garrett:** I would not want to dictate what terms people use. There will be pluses and minuses in every case. What is more important, I think, is their awareness of the implications of their choices, and how they communicate this to the reader.
- **LuMing Mao:** I don't think you can get away from studying those key terms used by the practitioners in their times—just like what Lu did—quite ably I might add. To build on her work, we may want to further explore how those terms in turn influenced and affected the rhetorical behaviors of their users and how they interacted with each other at different historical moments.

The Impact of Asian Rhetoric Research

Question: What impact do you think the research in this field has exerted on the study of Western rhetoric?

- **Mary Garrett:** I don't think it's had much effect at all. There is an awareness, perhaps, that another rhetorical tradition besides the Greco-Roman exists, but so little is known about it, outside of this awareness. There has been no significant impact.
- **Vernon Jensen:** Direct cause-and-effect relationship may be difficult to establish, but surely a strong correlation seems to be present as scholarship

roams more freely between East and West, bringing greater mutual understanding and respect.

- **XiaoMing Li:** I think those who are outside this small circle of Asian rhetoric scholars are in a better position to answer this question. As far as I see, all the studies on non-Western rhetoric have barely made a dent on Western rhetoric. The reasons are hard to pin down. One would think in the current multicultural environment there would be strong interest in non-Western rhetoric, yet the fact of the matter is that Euro-centrism still dominates. The vogue to do postmodern theory in the last decade may have contributed to the slighting of cultures that are perceived "ancient" rather than "modern," that tend to express their thinking in literary tropes instead of syllogism, that write in a sincere and plain manner rather than with "indirectness, elusiveness, ambiguity" and irony (Swearingen). New theories with a French accent, therefore, are adopted with great gusto, while non-Western rhetoric is accepted with polite tolerance. Of course, there are important exceptions.
- **Xing Lu:** It has helped rhetorical scholars to recognize that Western rhetoric is not the only rhetorical tradition in the course of human history; there are other rhetorical traditions out there to be explored and studied. An increased knowledge of non-Western rhetorical traditions may help expand and illuminate Western rhetorical practices such as the studies done by Mary Garrett on Pathos (1993) and Steven Combs on Sunzi (2000), both published in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*.
- **LuMing Mao:** I hope the values are obvious: Not only does it help us better understand Western rhetoric, but it also illustrates the multifaceted significances of what it means to communicate and to speak "rhetorically."

Question: How has the research being done in Asian rhetoric changed the Western perspective of argument?

- **Mary Garrett:** As far as I can tell, there has been no integration, or even fruitful comparison.
- **Vernon Jensen:** Again, a definite cause-and-effect relationship may be difficult to establish, but it seems apparent that Western perspectives of argumentation have been broadened as a result of research in Asian rhetoric.
- **Xing Lu:** I am not sure if it has changed anything in real argumentative practices. The works are mainly read by a limited group of rhetorical scholars. Unless this body of knowledge is incorporated in the curriculum of rhetorical education, no major change will take place in the West.

The Future of Asian Rhetoric Research

Question: Where is the research in Asian rhetoric taking us in the future?

- **Xing Lu:** It will help Westerners understand Asian culture and communication behavior. It will help facilitate the effective and appropriate communication between Asian and non-Asians at different levels of interaction. It will help extend our knowledge and practice in human rhetoric and communication in general.
- **LuMing Mao:** I imagine there will be more local studies of non-Western rhetorical traditions.

Question: How does your own research reflect the future in this field?

- **Xing Lu:** By introducing various modes of communication and rhetorical practices, I am hoping to achieve those goals mentioned above.
- **LuMing Mao:** My own research intends to focus precisely on local matters, on illustrating Chinese rhetorical traditions with a comparative lens.

Question: Is there any research you would like to see done in this field in the future?

- **Mary Garrett:** I think there has been an understandable but unfortunate concentration on the so-called Classical period, at the expense of the next twenty-some centuries. There was tremendous development of rhetorical practices and theories in China after 200 BCE, but very little of it has been researched and written about.
- **Vernon Jensen:** More focus on similarities between East and West to move on from earlier work that tended to highlight differences. Don't overlook Southeast Asia. More research on conflict resolution not only between East and West, but between groups within particular Asian nations. Continue exploration of the importance of the ethical dimension in Asian communication within nations and between Asian nations and between East and West. Analysis of the impact of mass media, both Western and Asian, on individual Asian nations. Continue to explore the impact of Asian ancient religion and history on contemporary Asian rhetoric and communication.
- **XiaoMing Li:** I'd like major works of Western rhetoric and our works on Chinese rhetoric to be read and criticized by local scholars in China, most of whom are far more knowledgeable of their own rhetorical tradition than us, but lack a comparative perspective because Western rhetoric, unlike other

disciplines, has not found its way into Chinese universities. I want their perspectives, presumably diverse and even contradictory to one another, to be heard. In addition, I believe that Chinese rhetoric, never a disciplinary study in China, should not be drawn according to the Western template, and the new one should include, among others, Chinese literary theories and works. I prefer Kenneth Burke's notion of rhetoric, which does not place inordinate emphasis on persuasion or style, but views rhetoric as including all of the "symbolic means of inducing cooperation . . ."

- **Xing Lu:** Yes, more studies on the history of Asian rhetoric in different time periods; more studies on rhetorical texts (ancient and contemporary); and more comparative studies of rhetoric.

Question: What do you think should be done to improve the development of research in Asian rhetoric in the future?

- **Mary Garrett:** There needs to be a core group of specialists, just as there is for Greek and Roman rhetoric, specialists who have the tools to deal with the texts and their cultures and who develop a conversation amongst themselves about these texts. In other words, there needs to be a group of authoritative voices, authoritative in the sense that the reader can go to their scholarship with some confidence.
- **Vernon Jensen:** Encourage more Asian offerings in university departments of rhetoric and communication. Increase interdisciplinary (for example, with political science, sociology, history, journalism, psychology, Asian languages) collaboration, resulting in publications reaching broader audiences and expanding our horizons. Encourage universities to provide financial assistance for research travel and study in Asia.
- **Xing Lu:** Plant interest in the area among students; organize conferences devoted to this area of research; encourage the publication of such work in scholarly journals.

Question: Is there anything else you think I should know in order to get a broader picture of this subject?

- **Mary Garrett:** The published work on Chinese rhetoric is of wildly uneven quality. Some is based on careful analysis; some is highly impressionistic. Some researchers have studied classical Chinese and can read the texts in their original language; others rely on modern Chinese translations, or entirely on English translations. In some cases individuals generalize from their own experience as native Chinese to all of Chinese history. In other cases

Orientalism (from both Westerners and Chinese) runs wild. It is very difficult for the naive reader to discern these shortcomings, and as a result, inaccurate and bizarre impressions of Chinese rhetoric are reproduced.

Notes

¹I thank Theresa Enos for giving me the idea to conduct this survey and for her encouragement and support. I also thank Ed White and Roxanne Mountford for their assistance and suggestions regarding an earlier draft of the survey questions.

²As the title indicates, this survey is about research in Asian rhetoric. Although the scholars who participated in the project have primarily done studies on Chinese rhetoric, I would like to make it clear that Asian rhetoric includes Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Korean, and many other Asian rhetorical traditions.

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Bo Wang is a PhD student in Rhetoric, Composition, and the Teaching of English Program at the University of Arizona. Her research interests include rhetorical history and theory, comparative rhetoric, composition pedagogy, and ESL writing.

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