

Introduction: Literary Forms of Argument in Early China

Joachim Gentz and Dirk Meyer

Methods largely shaped by Western philosophical and philological concepts have had an enormous impact on reading strategies applied to early Chinese argumentative texts. What are commonly termed philosophical texts in the Chinese context have been analysed in terms of their so-called logical capacity. Since analytical precision has been connected to Western logical techniques alone, argumentation in Chinese philosophical texts is commonly described as ambiguous and poetic rather than systematic. As a result of this, the written texts from pre-modern China available to us now have long been treated as mere repositories of ideas. This tendency in research was furthered by the fact that many early Chinese texts are made up of distinct components, building blocks or collected episodes. Fragmentation is therefore still conceived of as a common characteristic of early Chinese written philosophy. As a result, the misconception has arisen that pre-modern Chinese texts fail to generate homogenous disquisitions of thought in treatises with a coherent outlook in which consistent literary patterns establish argumentative force.

Convinced of an identical implicit logic underlying Western and Chinese arguments, Angus Graham addressed this Western-centric misconception by differentiating two stages by which to approach Chinese argumentation. First, a stage where all argumentation appears muddled, “the few pitiful examples of Chinese ‘logic’ vitiated by childish fallacies, so that there seems no hope of arriving anywhere by this path unless it leads out of the mist into a world so alien that even the laws of logic reveal themselves as Western and culturebound;” a second stage is where in Chinese argumentation, as in its Western counterpart, “the gaps fill in when the questions and assumptions are rightly identified.”¹ Looking at further developments in Western studies of Chinese philosophical argumentation (including Graham’s own “Reflections and Replies” responding to the essays dedicated to him by students and colleagues five years later),² the gaps still do not seem to have “filled in,” and it appears that the relevant ques-

1 Angus C. Graham, *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature* (Singapore: Institute of East Asian Philosophies, 1986), 1–2.

2 See Henry Rosemont, Jr., ed., *Chinese Texts and Philosophical Contexts: Essays Dedicated to Angus C. Graham* (Illinois: Open Court, 1991), 267–322.

tions and assumptions have not been rightly identified. Christoph Harbsmeier notes that “the ancient Chinese have many current forms of argument in common with their contemporary Greeks [...] but unlike in Greece, even the argumentative philosophers in ancient China did not systematically deploy the insights of the logicians and their techniques in other areas than those of formal logic.”³

From the viewpoint of formal logic, arguments in early Chinese texts have been classified as analogical reasoning or correlative thinking, as well as arguments based on associative logic or a metaphorical method of insight. Roger Ames and David Hall explain that “Chinese thinking depends upon a species of analogy which may be called ‘correlative thinking.’”⁴ They hold that “The priority of logical reasoning in the West is paralleled in China by the prominence of less formal uses of analogical, parabolic and literary discourse.”⁵ Yet, correlative thinking, analogical reasoning, and metaphor are commonly identified with poetry⁶ and semantic ambiguity.⁷ Argumentation in Chinese early texts is therefore often described as ambiguous and poetic rather than systematic and philosophical. Earlier authors have often linked Chinese thinking to the Chinese language or the Chinese writing system, which they deemed to be media that is better suited to poetic expression than logical analysis.⁸ This sentiment still prevails in recent publications. Michael Broschat stresses the “poetic qual-

3 Christoph Harbsmeier, *Language and Logic*. Science and Civilisation in China, vol. 7 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), xxiii.

4 David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, “Chinese Philosophy,” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. E. Craig (London: Routledge, 1998). URL: <http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/G001SECT2> (26.10.14).

5 Hall and Ames, “Chinese Philosophy” <http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/G001> (26.10.14).

6 Roman Jakobson, “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances,” in *Fundamentals of Language*, eds. Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle (The Hague: Mouton, 1956), 115–133. (Repr. in *On Language*, ed. Roman Jakobson, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1990, 115–133).

7 Roman Jakobson, “Linguistics and Poetics,” in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1960), 350–377, 370f.

8 This view can already be found in early Jesuit discussions and in reflections by philosophers such as Leibniz and Hegel. An early more systematic linguistic analysis undertakes Wilhelm von Humboldt in his letter to Abel-Rémusat in 1827 (transl. by Christoph Harbsmeier, *Brief an M. Abel-Rémusat über die Natur grammatischer Formen im allgemeinen und über den Geist der chinesischen Sprache im besonderen*, Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1979). See also Joseph S. Wu, “Chinese Language and Chinese Thought,” *Philosophy East and West* 19:4 (October 1969): 423–434.