

Beyond Parallelism: A Rethinking of Patterns of Coordination and Subordination in Chinese Expository Prose

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Among the papers collected in this volume dedicated to logical and rhetorical patterns of composition in Chinese texts, under the broad heading ‘literary forms of argument,’ a substantial number (those dealing with ‘palindromic structures,’ ‘topological clusters,’ ‘two and three-step exposition,’ ‘semiotic webs,’ ‘tetra-syllabic rhythms’ and the like) seem to focus on various techniques of verbal manipulation used to bind separate prose units into more complex discursive structures.¹ Most of these studies appear to take as more or less self-evident the observation that the fundamental grid of classical Chinese expository prose tends to take the form of sets of parallel utterances. Typically, these verbal strings are reeled out in sequences of equal numbers of characters, forming paired units that are to one extent or another isomorphic in their grammatical or syntactic function.² Such parallel constructions are most visible—in fact they form the aesthetic core—in *lǚshī* (‘regulated verse’) and other major modes of classical Chinese poetry, but they are by no means absent—albeit in a number of different forms—in most genres of *guwen* (‘ancient-style prose’) composition. Even in the primarily non-classical mode of traditional fiction, paired lines continue to constitute a very prominent compositional feature, especially conspicuous in the conventional use of parallel couplets as chapter titles, reflecting a loose pairing of the main narrative units comprising a given chapter. When this paradigmatic use of parallel sequences is developed to such a degree that it comes to constitute the primary feature of a part or the whole of a given piece of prose or verse, we are justified in apply-

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- 1 The terms applied to such units vary widely, including such things as ‘colon,’ ‘lemma’ and others, depending upon their scale and function in a given analysis.
 - 2 Quantitative parallelism in Chinese prose was later regularized in various modes and genres, for example in what came to be known as ‘four-six prose’ (*sìliùwen*), and in later periods produced parallel strings of extreme length in the so-called *bagu* (‘four-legged’) form used in examination essays, and in other genres of prose composition.

ing the Western term ‘parallelism,’ in which the ‘ism’ suffix serves to elevate this pattern to the level of an overarching mode of composition.³

In an early essay analysing the workings of this textual phenomenon in a comparative light: “Where the Lines Meet: Parallelism in Chinese and Western Literatures,”⁴ I attempted to lay out those aspects of Chinese parallel composition that set it apart from superficially similar patterns of discourse in other classical literatures. In this piece, I placed particular emphasis on the manner in which certain unique linguistic features of Classical Chinese allow for the rigorous quantitative matching of words in poetic couplets and prose doublets, to an extent unequalled in examples commonly termed ‘parallelism’ in other cultural contexts—except, that is, for short stretches or in playful exercises. I then proceeded to explore the ways in which Chinese prose masters move in and out of this grid with endless variations on the basic aesthetic pattern, to produce different forms and degrees of full, partial and intermittent parallelism, as well as certain kinds of paired utterances that I called ‘pseudo-parallelism,’ ‘quasi-parallelism,’ and ‘crypto-parallelism.’ Finally, I allowed myself the sweeping claim that these patterns of composition embody one of the greatest cultural achievements of old Chinese civilization, reflecting the tendency of so much of traditional Chinese thought to project a sense of the unity of the cosmos through multiple patterns of dual conceptualization, from the narrow frame of perceptual opposites to the broader coordinates of Chinese correlative thinking writ large.

With the passage of many years of study and teaching, forever struggling to reconcile examples with counter-examples, I have come to reassess the significance of parallelism as the master-mode of traditional Chinese thought and verbal art. On the one hand, I have become more familiar with the wide range of technical variants of parallel composition, including those outlined in such seminal critical writings as *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍 and *Wenjing mifulun* 文鏡秘府論 (better known by the original Japanese title *Bunkyo hifuron*). I have also gained a greater appreciation of the subtle and manifest interplay of

3 As is well known, the use of this term in the West is traced to the field of Biblical Studies, where it was first applied by the 18th-century Hebraist Robert Lowth to the poetic form of the Psalms.

4 *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 10.1/2 (July 1988): 43-60 (later reprinted in *Poetics Today* 11:3 [1990]: 523-546). See also my other discussions of parallelism in “The Prose of Our Time,” in *The Power of Culture*, ed. Willard Peterson (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1994), 206-217, “Means and Means: A Comparative Reading of Aristotle’s *Ethics* and the *Zhongyong*,” in *Early China/Ancient Greece: Thinking Through Comparisons*, ed. Steven Shankman and Stephen Durrant, (Albany: SUNY, 2002), 187-206, and in my study of the “Lici” chapter of the *Wenxin diaolong*: “Bones of Parallel Rhetoric in the *Wenxin diaolong*,” in *A Chinese Literary Mind*, ed. Cai Zongqi (Stanford University Press, 2001), 163-175.