Defining Boundaries and Relations of Textual Units: Examples from the Literary Tool-Kit of Early Chinese Argumentation

Joachim Gentz

Introduction

At the beginning of his major work *Ten Thousand Things*, Lothar Ledderose describes a Chinese jigsaw puzzle, which he was given as a child, to introduce his ideas about the modular nature of Chinese culture in general. This puzzle had pieces without curved edges or interlocking shapes, all simple rectangles, with no fixed position for each piece. It was a puzzle that could be put together in a variety of ways: “The mountains could go into the middle of the landscape or to the right; the tower would as easily fit between the peaks as on the plain, and the rider could be placed heading toward the hills or returning. A coherent panorama invariably emerged. The trick to completing this puzzle was that, on every single piece, the horizon crossed the left and right edges exactly at mid-point. The pieces could thus be put together in ever new combinations, thousands of them, yet the continuous horizon always guaranteed an intelligible composition.”

Brian Moloughney has suggested that Chinese texts resemble this kind of Chinese jigsaw puzzle. Accordingly, the trick of making sense of an early Chinese text (the units of which had already been identified) would lie in something analogous to the horizontal line that provides a sign of connection between the pieces.

This paper will argue that similar lines of connections are drawn between units of early Chinese texts. They are constructed by internal references that are neither built on external sources nor on an internal logical unity of syllogistic forms but rather on a range of signifiers that gain their specific meaning in the textual argument through their placement in relation to, and affiliation

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with, other signifiers of the same argumentative line. Such lines of arguments are typically produced by linking textual parts, regardless of whether these parts are distinguishable formal elements from other sources or not. These lines are mostly arranged in parallels or oppositional chains. They are moulded into literary forms of parallelisms, repetitive referential signifiers, rhythmical metre, rhyme connotations, binary chains, correlative classifications, and other symmetric or regular figures that generate textual patterns. Such literary forms on the one hand structure the text into separate parts and on the other indicate the relationship of these parts to each other, thus generating meaning. I will argue that this literary arrangement of a text is an integral part of its argumentation. In many cases the argumentative line of a text can only be reconstructed in an unambiguous way through the reconstruction of its literary arrangements, which embody and encode the argument as a whole. In early Chinese texts literary forms are often used as means of providing the necessary links that classify what appear as separated units in a text as belonging to lines of arguments which run through the whole text. Reading such literary forms as arguments requires first of all an identification of the textual parts and their respective connections within an open net of possible relations.

This understanding of Chinese texts builds on my earlier idea about Chinese canonical texts consisting of single textual units. It focuses on the way these units are, first, constructed literally: how they are formally framed and, without fixed and systematic inner-textual markers of paragraphing or inter-

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