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Matthias L. Richter

Handling a double-edged sword: Controlling rhetoric in early China

Abstract: The present essay discusses rhetorics as an instrument of both persuasion and deception. Early Chinese political thought shows a keen awareness of the deceptive potential immanent in rhetorical skills. Multiple texts warn against certain types of rhetorical behaviour that entail a potential threat to the ruler's control over political power. Yet, at the same time rhetorical skills were also a desirable qualification. While most texts from early China discuss rhetorical skills in general terms as an asset or a threat to the ruler's power, some texts reflect rhetorical skills in more detail, describing specific types of rhetorical behaviour. This essay introduces examples of such texts that were probably first composed as pragmatic texts for application in political practice, before they were integrated into larger compilations or literary texts for argumentative purposes. The essay also shows that these pragmatic texts used a set of technical terms, some of which were no longer recognized in the later transmission, which often led to changes in the texts.

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1 Introduction

The art of speaking effectively – convincingly or persuasively, as the occasion may demand – is surely a desirable skill. No one could possibly object to it. And yet, early Chinese literature abounds with negative references to rhetorical skills. Obviously, the appreciation of such skills depends on the ends to which they are employed; and our evaluation of these ends depends on our perspective and interests. Ultimately, the conceiving of rhetoric as problematic should be understood in the greater context of the universal human ambition to gain control over one's life. As humans, we aim to shape our lives according to our own will, and consequently we need to understand and ideally control other forces that may counteract our hopes and ambitions. We have learnt to a great extent to under-

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stand forces of nature, recognise regularities in them and to some extent adapt to them or even gain control over them. Ironically, the one part of the world that is most similar to ourselves and should therefore be easiest to understand, i.e. our fellow humans, turns out to be particularly mysterious and unpredictable. This commonplace but nonetheless highly relevant observation was of course also made in early China, and we are not surprised to hear the champion of early Chinese philosophy voice it as well, for example, narrated in the *Zhuangzi* chapter “Lie Yukou” 列禦寇:

孔子曰：凡人心險於山川，難於知天；天猶有春夏秋冬夏旦暮之期，人者厚貌深情。

Confucius said, “Invariably, the heart of man is more treacherous than a torrent in a mountain gorge, more difficult to fathom than Heaven. While Heaven has set times for Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter, and for dawn and dusk, the true inner condition of man lies deep within, behind a thick outer crust.”¹

The dichotomy posited here by Confucius is one between a fundamental predictability of natural forces on the one hand and the specifically human “endless capacity for dissembling”² on the other. The ways of our natural environment may not be easy to understand. What we recognise and utilise as natural laws may be a simplification of phenomena that are in fact more complex. Hence, we need not only be prepared for surprises coming from our inscrutable fellow humans, but nature may often surprise us as well, despite our insights gained through natural sciences. But nature does not *intentionally* deceive us by displaying symptoms of something other than actual fact. Humans, on the other hand, have developed great sophistication in the art of concealing their true inner state and indicating something else to their fellow humans. Incidentally, this specific capacity to dissemble is exemplified in the very text that reports Confucius’ observation. The author of the *Zhuangzi* chapter employs a rather guileful rhetorical strategy. He assumes a naïve, straightforward posture in quoting Confucius in direct speech, letting him make profound and rather general statements about humans. As readers we follow the Master along unsuspectingly, only to find him suddenly rattle off a catalogue of instructions for the evaluation of people – quite a different kind of speech than we have come to expect from this particular source. Confucius’ alleged speech continues like this:

故有貌愿而益，有長若不肖，有順懷而達，有堅而縵，有緩而鈇。故其就義若渴者，其去義若熱。故君子遠使之而觀其忠，近使之而觀其敬，煩使之而觀其能，卒然問焉而觀其知，急與之期而觀其信，委之以財而觀其仁，告之以危而觀其節，醉之以酒而觀其側，雜之以處而觀其色。九徵至，不肖人得矣。

1 *Zhuangzi* 32: 1054.

2 This phrase is borrowed from Arthur Miller’s drama *The Crucible*. Cf. Miller 1954: 6.

So, there are those who display an earnest appearance and yet are profligate;³ those who appear to be mature and yet are unworthy; those who appear to be eagerly compliant and yet manage to reach their own goals; those who appear to be firm and yet are lax; those who appear to be at ease and yet are most anxious. So, those who seek righteousness as though thirsting for water may at any time run away from it as though fleeing fire. So, the gentleman shall employ him in a remote post to observe his loyalty; employ him at close quarters to observe his respectfulness; employ him with troublesome tasks to observe his abilities; ask him sudden questions to observe his intelligence; pressure him with time limits to see if he is reliable; entrust him with valuables to observe his humanity; confront him with dangers to observe his self-control; intoxicate him with wine to observe his inclinations; bring him into mixed company to observe his countenance. Once these nine criteria have been provided, the unworthy ones are obtained.⁴

The great teacher, who is not known for a particularly successful career in any office, is here made the mouthpiece of those who resorted to rather cunning methods in recruiting officials, as they considered their candidates as potentially untrustworthy. The textual pattern used in Confucius' speech is so widespread in early Chinese texts across genres and diverse ideological orientations and is so manifestly linked with the recruitment of officials that we can expect the audience of this *Zhuangzi* chapter to have recognised the allusion to just this context. As the diverse narratives compiled in this particular *Zhuangzi* chapter consistently reject the concept of serving as an official in any sort of government service, Confucius is obviously cited here in an ironical vein. But the ironical use of Confucius' speech is not revealed from the beginning; it surfaces only at the end, in the punch line "Once these nine criteria have been provided, the unworthy ones are obtained." The irony, while easy to overlook for modern readers, must have been much more obvious to a contemporaneous audience, who were familiar with the typical texts dealing with the recruitment of officials. In their concluding sentences these texts usually assert that the methods of evaluation of people enable one to "recognise" (*zhi* 知) or "distinguish" (*bian* 辨) those who are unfit, while the word "obtain" (*de* 得) is used only with regard to the able and worthy ones.

For example, in *Da Dai Liji* 72 ("Wen wang guan ren" 文王官人), King Wen instructs Taigong 太公 about the selection of officials as follows:

王曰：「太師！女推其往言，以揆其來行，聽其來言，以省往行，觀其陽以考其陰，察其內以揆其外，是故隱節者可知，偽飾無情者可辨，質誠居善者可得，忠惠守義者可見也。」

³ I follow Yu Yue in reading 益 (used in received orthography for *yi* < *qik) as standing for the word *yi* < *N-qik 溢. Cf. *Zhuangzi* 32: 1055. Historical pronunciations, here and in the following, follow Baxter and Sagart (Version 1.00).

⁴ *Zhuangzi* 32: 1054.

The king said, “Grand Preceptor! Infer from their past words what their future deeds will be. Listen to their future words, in order to reexamine their past deeds. Observe what they openly display to explore their obscure aspects. Probe into their innermost to assess their exterior. After this rationale, those who hide themselves behind feigned moderation can be recognised, those who artfully adorn themselves with qualities they do not really have in them can be discerned, those of substance and sincerity who abide in goodness can be obtained, and those who are true, magnanimous and preserve righteousness can be seen.”⁵

For obvious reasons, no other text than Confucius’ speech in the above *Zhuangzi* passage uses the verb “to obtain” (*de* 得) in connection with negative types of people. By concluding such an instruction with the words “and then you can obtain the unworthy ones” Confucius exposes himself to the audience’s ridicule. Consequently, the meritocratic recruitment practices that Confucius quotes in his speech are discredited as pointless, obviously implying that the best people do not even enter into the process of evaluation, as they take care not to make themselves available for service in any office.

This short *Zhuangzi* passage integrates several crucial aspects involved in the early Chinese discourse on rhetoric: first, it addresses the problem of the inscrutability of humans; second, in its own rhetorical strategy it exemplifies that language is the foremost instrument of dissimulation and deception; and third, it connects the discussion of these issues with the social context of the recruitment of officials. The present paper explores traces in early Chinese texts of cultural practices aimed at training and utilising rhetorical skills in one’s own interest, while at the same time protecting oneself against the perceived abuse of such skills by others. Both aspects are of course interrelated. The better a person is able to employ rhetorical techniques, the better he or she is able to see through potentially deceptive techniques used by others.

2 Historical context as reflected in literary context

The inscrutability of our fellow humans, the fact that they dissemble and that language plays a crucial role in their conscious self-representation are such fundamental elements of the human condition that they can hardly be said to be specific to a certain historical context. Yet, they are not necessarily a subject of discourse in a society to the same extent at all times. The textual sources available

⁵ *Da Dai Liji* 72: 62.17–19.

to us from early China suggest that reflection on human inscrutability as a problem, and consequently attempts to understand one's fellow human beings, to assess their qualities accurately, and see through their deceptions gain importance in the context of the rise of meritocracy and the resulting need to reflect on new criteria for recruiting officials.⁶ Eric Henry has convincingly demonstrated the relatedness of the motif of recognition with the context of employing people.⁷ Focusing on the recognition of talents, he discusses mainly narrative texts and such texts that use the term *zhi* 知 for the concept of recognition. The broader topic of the evaluation of individuals with a view to employing them in office, however, is present in a much broader range of early Chinese texts than those discussed by Henry.

The motif of recognition in narrative texts usually occurs in impressive tales of the discovery of special talents such as the famous founding ministers, serving to propagate the new ideal of meritocracy in hyperbolic fashion. Actual meritocratic recruitment practice could not be confined to such exceptional individuals but had to reach down to lower ranks and operate with humbler demands. The need adequately to assess the usefulness of different people with their individual potentials for various offices, each of which may require very specific skills, evidently produced a number of pragmatic texts that provided insight and instructions to those in charge of the recruitment of officials. It is impossible to gauge how many such texts existed and how extensive they were, or whether they were ever written down at all, but we can discover enough traces in transmitted literature as well as in newly discovered manuscripts to make us confident that such pragmatic texts did indeed exist.⁸

Two interrelated factors explain why the historical context from which the engagement with certain topics originated does not always become clear from our textual sources. One concerns the survival of texts: the more generally applicable a text is, even in the absence of its original historical context, the greater its chance of survival. It is mostly texts of this kind that have been transmitted to us. Pragmatic texts for specific applications were, if written down at all, either not transmitted when their application had ceased to exist, or they were, in part, used as textual material in composite texts. In these circumstances, however, the

⁶ See the still very informative study of increasing social mobility in early China by Hsu Cho-yün 1965. See also the chapters by Hsu Cho-yun and Mark Edward Lewis in Loewe & Shaughnessy 1999 (pp. 545–650) and, more recently, Pines 2009 and 2012.

⁷ Henry 1987.

⁸ For a study of just one group of texts, defined by a specific, shared textual form, see Richter 2005.

pragmatic text has become an integral part of a literary text, usually with a lower degree of historical specificity or with a changed historical referent. Nevertheless, we can expect that the original context of the textual material was still recognised by the audience of the literary text and must thus have influenced its interpretation. The other factor obscuring original historical contexts is our reading practice. We are usually more interested in what makes the text meaningful in our own world than in its specific application in the past. In other words, early Chinese texts are more readily interpreted as philosophical (or at least argumentative) texts in a broader sense than as reflections of narrowly defined practical concerns at their time. The literary form of the texts is usually already the result of such a generalising interpretation of originally more pragmatic texts in the course of history. The incorporated pragmatic text is often semantically transformed to a degree that makes its original context wholly invisible. Yet, in some cases the new literary context stills reflects the original context of the incorporated material.

The famous *Mengzi* passage discussing the “flood-like *qi*” (*haoran zhi qi* 浩然之氣) is a case in point. If we read the entire subchapter *Mengzi* 2A2 as a meaningful composition, its political context is manifest. The reception of this text, however, largely ignores its political aspects, showing how our interest in more general philosophical ideas overshadows the immediate *literary* context⁹ and, by extension, seems to render the text’s *historical* context irrelevant. Usually, the central passage of this subchapter, in which Mengzi explains the meaning of the term “flood-like *qi*” (further illustrated by the analogy of the farmer of Song, whose sons spoil the seedlings by pulling them out of the ground, hoping to hasten their growth) is read and discussed in isolation from the preceding and following text. This is not a special case at all. Systematising accounts of ancient Chinese philosophers tend to be constructed by relating representative extracts from the texts attributed to these philosophers to each other as building blocks of a consistent philosophy.¹⁰ In the field of writing the history of Chinese philosophy, discussions of complete texts with attention to their structure and functionality form a tributary stream of scholarship at best. The concept of nourishing one’s flood-like *qi* is typically discussed in conjunction with the “Gaozi” 告子 chapter, i.e. it is treated as part of the discourse about human nature in general. If we do not read

⁹ I am not using the word “literary” narrowly to refer to “belles lettres” or in contrast to philosophy; I am merely pointing out that the philosophical ideas are embedded in a narrative, if we accept a dialogue as a minimal form of narrative framing with a historical reference.

¹⁰ A. C. Graham’s account of *Mengzi* is a representative example. He says: “Mencius’ case for the goodness of human nature has to be assembled from separate discourses, some concentrated after the Kao-tzu dialogues, others scattered over the whole book.” Graham 1989: 125.

the passage in isolation, however, it becomes visible as part of a discourse about *individuals* – a discourse that conceptualises personality types and gives instructions for the diagnosis of these types, their evaluation and ranking and, ultimately, an assessment of their usefulness in a social function. This does not necessarily change our understanding of what Mengzi means by “flood-like *qi*”, except perhaps that the ability to cultivate this *qi*, despite its universality, is not a common human trait but a special quality of only a superior person.

The subchapter that contains the passage in question is phrased as a dialogue between Gongsun Chou 公孫丑 and Mengzi. It begins with the typical challenge put to ambitious idealists by those who doubt the practicability of their ideals. Gongsun Chou asks Mengzi (in a somewhat provocative tone, it would seem) whether he could remain unperturbed in his heart if given supreme political power. When Mengzi affirms that having got past the age of forty he has attained this quality, Gongsun Chou begins to question this professed steadfastness more specifically, setting the tone for the remainder of the text: the following dialogue is phrased in terms of the comparative evaluation of specific personalities, who function in this text as exemplars of certain qualities. When Gongsun Chou praises Mengzi’s unperturbed heart as a quality surpassing the bravery of Meng Ben 孟賁, a man from Wei 衛 about whom nothing is known other than that he is an exemplar of bravery, Mengzi dismisses this quality as “not difficult” (*bu nan* 不難),¹¹ since even Gaozi had achieved it before him. When his interlocutor now inquires after the method of maintaining an unperturbed heart, Mengzi continues to speak in the mode of evaluation and comparison. He names two types of unperturbed heart: the fundamentalist, uncompromising one, exemplified by Beigong You 北宮黝, who is unflinching in the face of even the most powerful, and, in contrast, the pragmatic Mengshi She 孟施舍, who is prepared to accept a defeat as a victory, if circumstances demand it.¹² Realising that one cannot always win, he does not occupy himself with fearful calculations of his adversaries’ strength but relies solely on his ability to be fearless. Having set up this complementary pair of personality types, Mengzi uses them as objects of comparison to Confucius’ disciples Zengzi 曾子 and Zixia 子夏. He praises Zengzi’s restraint, which is committed to principles, as superior to Mengshi She’s mere control over his own *qi*. Gongsun Chou’s next question is again preoccupied with compari-

¹¹ *Mengzi* 2A2: 189.

¹² Opinions about this name vary. Some consider Meng 孟 as the family name, 舍 as the personal name, and 施 as a meaningless syllable; others read Mengshi She, yet others Meng Shishe. (See *Mengzi* 2A2: 191–192.) The text itself uses She alone as personal name. Although it is possible that She is short for the personal name Shishe, a disyllabic family name Mengshi appears more likely to me.

sons: how does Mengzi compare himself to Gaozi? In reply, Mengzi cites Gaozi's view that what one cannot obtain in language one ought not to seek in one's heart and what one cannot obtain in one's heart one ought not to seek in one's *qi*.¹³ He agrees with the latter, explaining that one's *qi* must be guided and controlled by one's will (and thus ultimately one's heart), lest the *qi* run wild and lead to erratic behaviour, which in turn would negatively affect one's heart-mind. The part of Gaozi's dictum that Mengzi rejects, however, is the notion that what one cannot obtain in language, one ought not to seek in one's heart.

Several things are important to note in these exchanges, which we should not dismiss as mere preliminaries to Mengzi's exposition of his concept of nourishing the flood-like *qi*: First, the eminently political context. The concept of flood-like *qi* occurs as part of a discourse about preserving an unperturbed heart. This question is not considered with regard to human nature in general but as a condition for performing successfully in a social function. What interests Gongsun Chou is explicitly whether Mengzi can maintain such a quality in the hypothetical situation of being invested with supreme political power. Second, the discussion is conducted in a mode of evaluating and ranking qualities exemplified by representative figures. These figures, it needs to be emphasised, are discussed as exemplars of certain types with regard to certain qualifications manifested in a certain behaviour. In other words, the interest does not lie in the actual historical persons and all their individual complexity but in their narrowly defined emblematic values, which were constructed to be used as rhetorical tools. The historical narratives about these persons must have been shaped in a way that supported these emblematic values. The specific details of the narratives, however, are not as stable in the tradition as the emblematic value. Hence, we are often left with assertions of the qualities a person stands for, but we know little or nothing of the events and the person's behaviour that led to the respective assessment. While for us as modern readers the emblematic values of the figures are historically rather unspecific (e.g., Zixia: expertise in exegesis, especially of the *Odes*; Zengzi: filial piety), it is very likely that the audience of the text in early China associated a far richer historical context with these figures as political agents in a not yet remote past. The third, and for our topic most consequential, point to keep in mind is that the following exposition of the concept of nourishing one's flood-like *qi* is only one part of a two-fold argument. Asked by Gongsun Chou about his strengths, Mengzi names two: He knows how to assess speech and he is good at nourishing his flood-like *qi*.

13 「告子曰：『不得於言，勿求於心；不得於心，勿求於氣。』 [...]」 (Mengzi 2A2: 194).

Mengzi's exposition on nourishing the flood-like *qi*, including its illustration via anecdote analogy, is famous enough not to require repetition. What interests us here is Mengzi's ability to assess speech. Mengzi explains it as follows:¹⁴

「何謂知言？」曰「訛辭知其所蔽，淫辭知其所陷，邪辭知其所離，遁辭知其所窮。生於其心，害於其政；發於其政，害於其事。聖人復起，必從吾言矣。」

(Gongsun Chou:) "What is called 'understanding words'?" (Mengzi:) "From biased speech one can recognise wherein someone is obfuscated; from excessive speech one can recognise by what someone is captivated; from heterodox speech one can recognise where someone strays; from evasive speech one can recognise where someone is at his wits' end. Once engendered in his heart, it will harm his policy; once emerged in his policy, it will harm his service. Were a sage to rise again, he would surely follow my words."¹⁵

This classification of four types of speech follows a characteristic textual pattern familiar from instructions for the diagnosis and evaluation of personalities in the context of meritocratic recruitment practices. It deserves to be noted that the deficiencies that can be diagnosed from the four types of speech are not just discussed as character traits in a general sense but specifically with regard to their potential negative impact on a person's service in government. In the following, different types of rhetorical talent are distinguished: Zaiwo 宰我 and Zigong 子貢 are said to be good at persuasive speech, whereas Ran Niu 冉牛, Minzi [Qian] 閔子[騫] and Yan Hui 顏回 are said to be good at speaking about virtuous conduct.¹⁶ Apparently, the former two may be qualified for diplomatic service, and the latter three are considered better educators.¹⁷

The following dialogue culminates in an apotheosis of Confucius as the ultimate sage in human history. To the very end of the text, this dialogue continues in the mode of classifying, comparing, and ranking the qualifications of people,

¹⁴ Lau 1970: 78. Van Norden's (2008) translation as "understanding doctrines" rather obscures the political implications of the text and moves it to the area of Confucianism as a teaching tradition, which is arguably adequate for a translation such as his that presents *Mengzi* from the Neo-Confucian perspective – the main text interwoven with Song commentaries. With regard to early China, "doctrines" are not what the text is talking about; rather, it is concerned with a person's speech, indeed with rhetoric.

¹⁵ *Mengzi* 2A2: 209.

¹⁶ 宰我、子貢善為說辭，冉牛、閔子、顏淵善言德行。(*Mengzi* 2A2: 213).

¹⁷ The assessment of certain persons, and in extension their emblematic values as literary figures, can be remarkably stable across texts. The classification of the different qualities of Confucius' disciples in the *Lunyu* is largely consistent with that in *Mengzi*. Cf. *Lunyu* 11.3 (742–46): "Virtuous conduct: Yan Yuan, Minzi Qian, Ran Boniu, Zhonggong. Speech and conversation: Zaiwo, Zigong. Government affairs: Ran You, Jilu. Culture and learning: Ziyou, Zixia." (德行：顏淵、閔子騫、冉伯牛、仲弓。言語：宰我、子貢。政事：冉有、季路。文學：子游、子夏。).

as well as their alleged actual behaviour, in political contexts. Apart from the obvious goal of glorifying Confucius (and by extension Mengzi as his worthy successor), the text serves to define and thus distinguish types of personalities and different qualifications in political practice. It employs textual patterns characteristic of instructions for the diagnosis of personalities and recruitment of officials (as already seen in the examples from *Zhuangzi* and *Da Dai Liji* cited above). Toward the end of *Mengzi* 2A2, such a diagnostic pattern resurfaces in Zigong's speech: "Look at their ritual to know their government; listen to their music to know their virtue."¹⁸

To summarise, this entire *Mengzi* subchapter 2A2, although usually quoted and discussed exclusively with regard to the concept of nourishing one's flood-like *qi*, is a balanced composition in which the concepts of "nourishing one's flood-like *qi*" and "understanding speech" are discussed as two complementary concerns of equal weight. They are not presented as abstract ideals of human perfection, aloof from the mundane needs of political practice, but as essential criteria needed to assess qualifications of specific individuals.¹⁹ The short list of four types of speech named by Mengzi does not convey particularly original insights (for example, that evasive speech may indicate that someone is at his wits' end), but as a typology it could nevertheless function as a useful device, instructing someone to check people for a set of four specific deficiencies that may either have been considered as especially frequent or as the most relevant in a particular context.

The identification, classification, and ranking of qualities of people must not be underestimated as a bizarre obsession of an ancient culture.²⁰ To be sure, qualifications or deficiencies of one's fellow humans, their specific inclinations or general personalities may be something anyone can perceive intuitively and describe accordingly. But, especially as the transition from a predominantly aristocratic to an increasingly meritocratic mode of recruitment of officials created an

¹⁸ 見其禮而知其政，聞其樂而知其德。(Mengzi 2A2: 217).

¹⁹ An example of an interpretation that ties *Mengzi* 2A2 into the same discourse as the "Gaozi" chapter, is Manyul Im's article on that passage (Im 2004). Im focuses on the aspects of self-control and courage, eclipsing the *zhi yan* 知言 part of the text altogether. Although an entire section of his article is devoted to the topic of language, he does not mention Mengzi's classification of types of speech and their connectedness to political practice at all.

²⁰ Of course, such classifications are a phenomenon shared by probably all cultures. It is certainly not alien to the European tradition. Categories such as the classical Four Humours or Four Temperaments functioned as a highly relevant ordering principle in many areas. Personifications of certain characters were widely used in literature and visual arts. The fact that these largely fell out of use as ordering principles may diminish our awareness of their enormous historical significance.

ever greater need for assessing potentially large numbers of individuals, an indefinite number of individually varying descriptions of people and their qualities would have been impractical. In order to keep some control over the practice of performing such evaluations in a larger administration, certain relevant qualities, as well as criteria for ascertaining these, needed to be defined. This allowed the segmentation of the broad spectrum of individual variety in human character into definable and manageable units. Such typologies and instructions for diagnosing personalities were often communicated in the form of catalogues.

Catalogues and lists of all kinds must have played a more important part in early Chinese textual culture than the transmitted literature reflects, since such types of texts were almost completely excluded from transmission.²¹ As mentioned above, relatively short lists were sometimes used as components in literary texts. Few texts have come down to us from early China that overtly compile lists and catalogues; and when they do, they still generally put the catalogue in a dialogical frame, thus placing the text into a historical context, however imaginary, which compensates for the loss of semantic specificity that the original context provided when the respective list was still in practical use. It is to some extent possible to identify such originally independent pragmatic texts in transmitted literature and their historical context.²² Having become familiar with the particular formal features of such texts helps to discover related textual material also in such texts where it is easily overlooked, as for example the catalogue of four types of speech in the *Mengzi* passage discussed above.

3 Rhetorical skills as a potential threat to the ruler

Early Chinese texts pertaining to the assessment of personalities amply confirm that rhetorical skills were among the most important qualities to consider in subordinates, particularly candidates for office.²³ On the one hand, an agile mind

²¹ Wang Haicheng has made a pioneering study of the cultural importance of lists in early China. See Wang 2007 and Wang (forthcoming). Wang pays particular attention to *Zhou li* 周禮, the largest early Chinese compilation of lists.

²² For studies identifying elements of originally independent pragmatic texts in literary texts, inspired by the method of form criticism in Biblical studies, see Richter 2002a, 2002b, and 2005.

²³ Descriptions of different types of rhetorical talents pervade the first comprehensive, systematic treatise on the evaluation of personalities for the recruitment of officials, Liu Shao's 劉劭 *Renwu zhi* 人物志. (See Guo Mo 1987 and Shryock 1937.) For earlier texts on the same subject, see Richter 2005.

was a desired quality; on the other hand, independent, original thinkers may be more difficult to keep under control as subordinates.²⁴ One needed astute political advisers and diplomats who could convince and possibly deceive others, but it was even more crucial to recognise when one was at the receiving end of disingenuous behaviour. Consequently, early Chinese texts discuss rhetorical skills overwhelmingly in terms of their negative potential that needs to be kept well under control. Reflections on the negative potential of rhetoric reach from general warnings against clever speech to a more detailed description and categorisation of disingenuous persons. Again, the communication of such reflections as instructions for administrative practice could not rest on the usage of words in ordinary language alone in its full flexibility and ambiguity. The meaning of certain crucial terms needed to be more narrowly defined; in other words, a certain amount of technical terminology was required. Our sources confirm the existence of such a terminology.

The simplest example of this is the most generic term for potentially deceptive language, *qiao yan* 巧言. As such, there is nothing negative about this expression: “skillful words” or “clever speech” are doubtless a positive qualification. However, the expression is uniformly employed in a negative sense, which is further specified by the contexts in which it is used. The most frequent conventional pairing of *qiao yan* with another term is *qiao yan ling se* 巧言令色. It is best known from *Lunyu* 1.3 and, in identical form, 17.17:

子曰：「巧言令色，鮮矣仁。」

The Master said: “Crafty words and winning countenance – little humanity lies therein.”²⁵

Even if *Lunyu* may be considered as the *locus classicus* of this phrase, this *locus classicus* should not be mistaken for its origin, and by extension Confucius for its originator. Aside from the fact that Confucius is not even identified as the master who makes this observation (after all, different masters speak in *Lunyu*), the wide distribution of this phrase across many texts, at least some of which are not likely to quote Confucius, makes it certain that this expression was common currency in early China.

Other occurrences in *Lunyu* make it clearer that what could very well be viewed as positive attributes – “clever words and winning demeanour” – is understood more narrowly as symptoms of dissimulation and deceit, hence the

²⁴ For a refutation of generalising claims that rhetoric skills were viewed negatively in early China, see Lu/Frank, 1993: 455–460.

²⁵ *Lunyu* 1.3: 16 and 17.17: 1225.

more clearly negative translation as “crafty”. In *Lunyu* 15.27 the Master warns of the morally erosive effect of crafty words:

子曰：「巧言亂德，小不忍則亂大謀。」

The Master said: “Crafty words confound virtue. He who cannot discipline himself in small matters will confound greater enterprises.”²⁶

And in *Lunyu* 5.25 the Master, now specified as Confucius, provides a further description of behaviour associated with crafty words:

子曰：「巧言、令色、足恭，左丘明恥之，丘亦恥之。匿怨而友其人，左丘明恥之，丘亦恥之。」

The Master said: “Crafty words, winning countenance, and a deferential bearing – Zuo Qiuming considered this shameful, and so do I. To befriend others while concealing one’s grudges against them – Zuo Qiuming considered this shameful, and so do I.”²⁷

While “crafty words and winning demeanour” in the previous *Lunyu* passages could be understood as innocent deficiencies, perhaps a mere lack of natural, unreserved openness, which is not ill-intentioned, however much it is considered unsound, the latter passage explicitly defines such behaviour as purposeful dissimulation. The attributes of the dishonest person are here extended to three, describing speech, countenance, and gait, respectively. Although Zhu Xi’s 朱熹 (1130–1200) interpretation of *zu gong* 足恭 as “overly polite” has gained much popularity, the literal reading, as proposed in the early eleventh century by Xing Bing 邢昺 (931–1010), is more convincing: *zu gong* refers to a dignified, respectful manner of walking.²⁸ This point merits attention, since we must always reckon with the possibility that our texts contain descriptions of something plain and concrete in words that, at some point, ceased to be common currency, which caused their reinterpretation in a more general or abstract sense. Our reading of *zu gong* as describing something concrete and directly observable is confirmed by a related passage in *Da Dai Liji* 49:

足恭而口聖，而無常位者，君子弗與也。巧言令色 [*srək]，能小行而篤 [*tʰuk]，難於仁矣。

²⁶ *Lunyu* 15.27: 1115.

²⁷ *Lunyu* 5.25: 348.

²⁸ Zhu Xi glosses “*zu* means ‘exceedingly’” (足過也). For Zhu Xi’s and Xing Bing’s commentaries, see Cheng Shude 1990: 348. For the abstract interpretation of *zu gong* 足恭 as “overly polite”, see Yang Bojun’s modern Chinese translation as “completely polite and compliant” (十足的恭順), D.C. Lau’s “utter servility”, or Li Ling’s “utterly respectful” (十分恭敬). See Yang Bojun 1980: 52; Lau 1992: 45; Li Ling 2007: 125.

They who move politely and speak wisely but have no constant position – the gentleman shall not associate with those. Crafty words and winning countenance, being able to move modestly and act deferentially – this ill beseems benevolence! ²⁹

Both parts of this passage mention rhetorical skills: “a wise way of talking” (*kou sheng* 口聖) and “crafty words” (*qiao yan* 巧言). *Da Dai Liji* adds the phrase *xiao xing* 小行 to *qiao yan ling se* exactly where *Lunyu* adds *zu gong*, which *Da Dai Liji* in turn combines with another expression for rhetorical skills, *kou sheng*. As in the case of *zu gong*, a more abstract interpretation has also been proposed for *xiao xing*: “petty behaviour”. However, it is far more plausible that in *both* cases rhetorical skills are mentioned together with a person’s manner of walking as directly observable symptoms of his personality. Hence, I follow Sun Yirang 孫詒讓 (1848–1908) in interpreting *xiao xing* as “walking in small steps, at a slow pace”, describing a respectful way of walking.³⁰

Expressions of criticism against clever rhetoric are so ubiquitous in early Chinese literature that it is impossible to cite here even the most representative examples. Hence the focus of just the one most frequent term for the phenomenon: *qiao yan*. The texts cited so far make it clear that rhetorical cleverness is usually viewed with suspicion. “Crafty words” are conventionally singled out as *the* foremost means of dissimulation or named as the first of several such means. The criticised behaviour is considered as indicative of deficient humanity (*Lunyu* 1.3 and 17.17, *Da Dai Liji* 49), as eroding one’s virtue (*luan de* 亂德, *Lunyu* 15.27) and as shameful (*chi* 恥, *Lunyu* 5.25). The most practical objection so far was the view that such behaviour is a symptom of lacking constancy (*wu chang wei* 無常位, *Da Dai Liji* 49). But all this still appears confined to the realm of individual ethics. The texts quoted above express ethical and, more generally, behavioural standards taught within certain social circles: the class of (civil or military) *shi* 士-officers who, forming the lowest stratum of nobility in a situation of increasing social mobility, found themselves in constant need of preserving their noble status. This does not seem to give the suspicion against rhetorical skills a relevance that would merit such a prominence in early Chinese literature. The greater relevance and urgency becomes apparent in other texts that explicitly discuss the potential threat of rhetoric to practical politics.

The ode “Crafty words” (*Qiao yan*, Mao 198) is very explicit in its political reference. The voice that complains to Heaven about the ills of his current government says,

²⁹ *Da Dai Liji* 49: 26.20–23.

³⁰ For the various annotations by earlier scholars, see Huang Huaixin et al 2004: 479–81. Huang prefers the more abstract interpretation for both *zu gong* and *xiao xing*.

亂之初生。僭始既涵。亂之又生。君子信讒 [...] 往來行言。心焉數之。蛇蛇碩言。出自口矣。巧言如簧。顏之厚矣。

When disorder first arose

it was because presumption had been accepted.

It increased ever more

when the lord believed slanderers. [...]

How does one figure out in one's mind

how the ones that come and go conduct their speech?

Unabashed bragging

issues from their mouths.

Crafty words just like reed flutes –

this is how impenetrable their masks are.³¹

The complaint in the ode appears to be shaped by a personal agenda: the poetic voice, an unappreciated officer, proceeds from self-vindication in the first stanza to vilification of the slanderers (stanzas two through five), whom he accuses in the sixth and last stanza to be of obscure origin and without strength or courage.

Several other texts, commonly classified as legalist, follow a less personal approach and present concrete arguments for the potential negative influence of rhetoricians on practical politics. Chapter 45, “Reliance on standards” (“Ren fa” 任法), of the heterogeneous compilation *Guanzi* 管子 says:

凡為主而不得用其法，不能適其意，顧臣而行，離法而聽貴臣，此所謂貴而威之也。富人用金玉事主而來焉，主離法而聽之，此所謂富而祿之也。賤人以服約卑敬悲色告懇其主，主因離法而聽之。此所謂賤而事之也。近者以偏近親愛有求其主，主因離法而聽之，此謂近而親之也。美者以巧言令色請其主，主因離法而聽之，此所謂美而淫之也。

Invariably, when a ruler does not get to apply his standards and realise his goals, when in his actions he heeds his ministers and, departing from his standards, listens to his esteemed ministers, this is what one calls “to be esteemed and overawe him”. When the rich use their gold and jade to prevail upon him³² and the ruler, departing from his standards, listens to them, this is what one calls “to be rich and bribe him”. When the lowly, being submissively meek and humbly respectful, plead to their ruler with piteous countenance and the ruler yields and, departing from his standards, listens to them, this is what one calls “to be lowly and take advantage of him”. When those near to him press and encroach upon the ruler as near and dear to make demands on him and the ruler yields and, departing from his standards, listens to them, this is what one calls “to be close and encroach upon him”. When

³¹ Mao 198: 95.8–18. The “thickness of face” (*yan zhi hou* 顏之厚) in the last quoted verse is here translated somewhat freely. It is reminiscent of the phrase translated as “thick outer crust” (*hou mao* 厚貌, lit. “thick exterior/demeanour”) in Confucius’ speech in *Zhuangzi* 32.

³² *Lai* 來 is here read in the fourth tone: *lài*, also written as 賚 (“to bestow presents on someone as an encouragement”). Wang Niansun 王念孫 (1744–1832, *Du shu zazhi* 讀書雜誌 5.8.3–4, p.459a) considers 來 a graphic error for 求 *qiu* (“to seek”, “make demands [of the ruler]”). Cf. also Li Xiangfeng 1965: 911–912.

beauties make requests of the ruler with crafty words and winning countenance and the ruler yields and, departing from his standards, listens to them, this is what one calls “to be beautiful and beguile him”.³³

Here the criticism is not, as in the ode, directed against a ruler whose subjective judgement is clouded, which has led him to lend his ear to the wrong advisers. While the critic in the ode seemed to persuade the ruler to take *his* advice rather than that of others, the text “Reliance on Standards” counsels the ruler to make himself independent of any undue influence of his subjects. The instrument recommended to recognise and eliminate such undue influence is *fa* 法, which, although often translated as “law”, should here be understood in the sense of principles of a well-regulated administration, regulations that ensure the ruler’s successful governance.³⁴ As the point here is the non-personal, objective nature of these principles, the focus is entirely different from the texts presented earlier. Here, the problem is described not as one of correct judgement of the individual advisers but as one of allowing certain qualities or behaviour of these persons to compromise existing standards. Only by establishing standards and giving them precedence over subjective criteria can a stable power structure be maintained. This fundamental concern, i.e. the independence of a political system from fallible individuals, is more important to this text than the specific participants in political practice, including the ruler himself. The inept ruler is even described as the ultimate cause of all personal bias that undermines the objective standards of governance:

有私視也，故有不見也，有私聽也，故有不聞也，有私慮也，故有不知也。

³³ *Guanzi* 45: 111.17–21.

³⁴ Paul R. Goldin (2011) connects the fairly simple point that *fa* 法, at least in early China, usually does not refer to “law” with the more complex question of how to understand Sima Tan’s 司馬談 category *fa jia* 法家. I agree that this category is partisan in its very conception, as are, by the way, the rest of the *liu jia* 六家 (lit. “six house[hold]s”) as well. But even if we are prepared to abandon them as a hermeneutical tool, Sima Tan’s categories exist and need to be translated *somehow* in English, as an editorial note to Goldin’s article points out as well. (See Goldin 2011: 101.) A less than impressionistic solution to this problem would have to address the issue that the conventional renderings of the categories are a mix of literal (“Daoists” for *dao jia* 道家, “Mohists” for *Mo* 墨, “Yin-yang” for *yin yang* 陰陽) and interpretive translations (“Legalists” for *fa jia*, “Confucianists” for *Ru jia*, “Sophists” for *ming jia* 名家). Any attempt to resolve this greater issue would go far beyond the scope of the present article. For the present context, “autocratist” appears to be a more fitting characterisation of the ideology pronounced in the texts commonly labelled “legalist”. For influential studies of not only Sima Tan’s categories but also the concept of *jia* 家 to refer to ideological currents or factions, see Petersen 1995, Smith 2003, as well as Csikszentmihalyi and Nylan 2003.

As he looks with a personal bias, there will be something he does not see; as he listens with a personal bias, there will be something he does not hear; and as he deliberates with a personal bias, there will be something he does not understand.³⁵

It is this deficiency of the ruler that enables the self-serving behaviour of his subjects. Rhetorical skills are not regarded here as a symptom by which a certain type of person can be recognised. They are of interest as a factor that might compromise the standards of governance, *independently* of the persons involved. This general tendency of the text also means that we should not overrate the importance of the particular matches between the five categories of subordinates (esteemed, rich, lowly, close, beautiful) with the particular type of undue influence ascribed to them. The different kinds of influence (overawing, bribing, taking advantage, encroaching, beguiling) are all equally negative. For example, the method of bribing a ruler is most likely to be employed by the rich ones, while neither the rich nor the esteemed could convincingly use the Uriah Heep tactics of the lowly ones. These matches are not absolute and mutually exclusive but a mere matter of likelihood. So the text certainly does not intend to suggest that the ruler need only beware of “crafty words and winning countenance” coming from “beauties”. The “beauties” are merely the most prone to resort to this means of influence.

It is also important to note that this latter category of subjects should not be understood in a gendered sense; *mei* 美 does not have to refer to female beauty. Rather, it refers to personable individuals who are for some reason pleasant to the ruler’s eyes and ears. Whether male or female, their allure may be of an erotic nature, but it does not have to be.³⁶ There is a terminological quality to the phrase *qiao yan ling se*; this fixed collocation is consistently used in a more narrowly defined sense than the literal meaning of the individual words. This is of consequence, since attention to possible terminological uses of words increases our chances of reading texts with greater specificity and historical accuracy.³⁷

The phrase *qiao yan ling se* and variations of it are not just used in a narrowly defined sense, they also consistently appear in certain specific contexts, namely

³⁵ *Guanzi* 45: 111.24–25.

³⁶ I have therefore refrained from translating *qiao yan ling se* differently in this text than in the occurrences elsewhere. Rickett (1998: 149), on the other hand, specifies “beautiful women” and translates *ling se* 令色 as “seductive looks”.

³⁷ For an earlier study showing that terminological usage of words can point to particular historical contexts from which the texts using these words originate, see Richter 2002a. While that study focuses more narrowly on cognate texts, the argument in the present paper is that the same terminological use of words can apply to non-cognate texts from similar contexts as well.

in warnings against manipulative officials or instructions for the recruitment of officials, aiming to prevent such people from gaining a position in the first place. For example, the *Shangshu* 尚書 texts “Consultation of Gao Yao” (“Gao Yao mo” 皋陶謨) and “Decree issued to Jiong” (“Jiong ming” 冏命) are both explicitly concerned with “recognising people” (*zhi ren* 知人) and “appointing officials” (*guan ren* 官人). The Great Yu 禹 says to his adviser Gao Yao, who has pointed out the importance of recognising men to him:

知人則哲，能官人 [...] 何畏乎巧言令色孔壬。

If one recognises men, one is wise and one is able to appoint officials [...] why then would one need to fear *crafty words*, *winning countenance*, and fawning sycophants?³⁸

And King Mu’s 穆 (956–18 BCE) decree instructs Jiong:

慎簡乃僚，無以巧言令色，便辟側媚 [...] 爾無昵于儉人，充耳目之官，迪上以非先王之典。

Be cautious in choosing your officers, do not use those of *crafty words and winning countenance*, who fawn and flatter [...] do not consort with obsequious persons; when they block the passages of [his] ears and eyes, they will lead the sovereign to contravene the norms of the ancient kings.³⁹

Some texts narrow the focus from the more broadly described deceptive behaviour, i.e. speech, countenance [and gait] (*qiao yan ling se [zu gong]* 巧言令色 [足恭]), to rhetorical skills alone. The chapter “Agriculture and warfare” (“Nong zhan” 農戰) of *Shangjun shu* 商君書 proposes an altogether anti-intellectual agenda, accusing any intellectual pursuit of being potentially deceptive and detrimental to the supporting pillars of the state – agriculture and warfare:

善為國者，倉廩雖滿，不偷於農；國大民眾，不淫於言，則民樸壹。民樸壹，則官爵不可巧而取也。不可巧取，則姦不生，姦不生則主不惑。今境內之民及處官爵者，見朝廷之可以巧言辯說取官爵也，故官爵不可得而常也。是故進則曲主，退則慮私所以實其私。

He who takes good care of the state will, even when the granaries are full, not neglect agriculture and he will, even when the state is large and its people numerous, not let them be beguiled by words. Thus the people will be simple and settled (in a certain profession and social position). Once the people are simple and settled, office and rank cannot be craftily acquired. If they cannot be craftily acquired, villains will not appear. If villains do not appear, the ruler will not be confused. Now the people within our borders and those who hold office and rank see that at court one can attain office and rank on the strength of *crafty*

³⁸ *Shangshu* 4: 6.12–13.

³⁹ *Shangshu* 54: 49.26–50.1.

words and sophistic theories. For this reason, they dupe their ruler when they enter court, and when they retire from court they devise means to realise their private interest.⁴⁰

Hanfeizi 韓非子 chapter 45, “False assignments” (“Gui shi” 詭使), reads like a combination of the two main concerns voiced in the above *Guanzi* and *Shangjun shu* passages: the entire chapter is constructed along the lines of the irreconcilable antagonism between personal bias or private interest (*si* 私) on the one hand and standards (*fa* 法) and measures (*du* 度, *liang* 量) on the other. Deceitful rhetorical craft is emphasised as the single most important threat to these objective standards. This antagonism is linked with another dichotomy, that between those who contribute to agriculture and warfare on the one hand, and, again, the clever rhetoricians on the other. Clever rhetoricians are suspect on both counts: they are associated with those who consume resources without contributing to the economic and military sustenance of the state and they are identified as those whose pursuit of private interest erodes objective standards and rules.

上握度量所以擅生殺之柄也，今守度奉量之士欲以忠嬰上而不得見，巧言利辭行姦軌以倖偷世者數御。[...] 夫立法令者以廢私也，法令行而私道廢矣。私者所以亂法也。

It is by holding fast to scales and measures that the sovereign wields his power over life and death. Now, those officers who safeguard the scales, uphold the measures and loyally restrain the ruler are not granted an audience, while those who, with crafty words and apt speech, pursue their villainous ways in order to snatch advantages from everyone are frequently received (at court). [...] Now, regulations and decrees are established in order to eliminate private interest. Once regulations and decrees are carried out, the way of private interest is eliminated. Private interest is what confounds regulations.⁴¹

The harsh criticism both in *Shangjun shu* and *Hanfeizi* is directed at specialists of various kinds who live on their intellectual abilities (diviners are explicitly mentioned), and this certainly includes the followers of the Ru tradition. – In this regard it is interesting to note that an early imperial text presents us with a Ruist appropriation of exactly the same ideology. In the *Kongzi jiayu* 孔子家語 chapter 31, “Punishments and governance” (“Xing zheng” 刑政), Confucius argues in substance like the most hard-boiled autocratist (“Legalist”), thinly clad in a Ruist costume. The Confucian dress-up lies in the dialogue form characteristic of Confucius lore, in this case featuring Zhonggong 仲弓 as the interlocutor. His question about the relation between and respective proportions of punishment and governance under the evil last rulers of the Xia 夏 and Shang 商, Jie 桀 and Zhou

⁴⁰ *Shangjun shu* 3: 5.1–4. I follow Wang Shirun 王時潤 in considering the first *si* 私 in this sentence as an interpolation. Jiang Lihong 1986: 21.

⁴¹ *Hanfeizi* 45: 940.

紂, and the admired early Zhou 周 kings Cheng 成 and Kang 康, respectively, creates the impression that the text is based on historical precedent in a Ruist fashion. After this bow to the Founding Fathers, the text continues with Confucius' rather general and theoretical disquisition on punishment and governance, in which he deftly evades the historical aspect of Zhonggong's initial question. Confucius refers to no specific historical figure at all. Instead, he talks about an unspecified sage (*sheng ren* 聖人), who neither makes governance obsolete through extreme punishment, as the evil rulers did, nor makes punishment obsolete through perfect governance, as the early Zhou rulers did. The sage supposedly commands a sophisticated system of justice that allows for gradations of punishment according to different social positions, considers mitigating circumstances, and tries cases in a sophisticated judicial process with checks and balances. The second half of Confucius' speech, however, is an enumeration of crimes and uncompromising punishments. It begins as follows:

孔子曰：「巧言破律，遁名改作，執左道與亂政者，殺；作姪聲，造異服，設伎奇器以蕩上心者，殺；行偽而堅 [*k'in]，言詐而辯 [*bren?]，學非而博 [*p'ak]，順非而澤 [*f'rak]，以惑眾者，殺；假於鬼神時日卜筮以疑眾者，殺。此四誅者，不以聽。」

Confucius said, "Those who with crafty words destroy the law, who while following the letter of the law introduce changes and innovation, who hold onto heterodox methods and confound standards are to be killed; those who perform licentious music, who design bizarre garments, who set up outlandish wondrous devices, thereby swaying the sovereign's heart, are to be killed; those whose conduct is false and obdurate, whose speech is deceitful and sophistic, who are comprehensive in learning what is wrong, who are lavish in following what is wrong, thereby confusing the masses, are to be killed; those who, invoking ghosts and spirits, perform divination and oracles, thereby bewildering the masses, are to be killed. These four capital crimes are not even to be tried in court.⁴²

A long list of injunctions follows that prohibit the sale on the market of, among others, ritual vessels, military insignia, sacrificial animals, but also of more harmless things like ready-made clothes and food, or unseasonable fruit. Violators are not to be acquitted.

Despite the resemblance in the main argument, i.e. the possible erosive effect of clever rhetoric on essential regulations, the agenda of the texts from *Shangjun shu* and *Hanfeizi* on the one hand and *Kongzi jiayu* on the other could not be more different. Where the former two defend autocracy, the latter defends orthodoxy. In the autocratist texts, the resentment is directed against clever intellectuals of all colours, as they dilute central power and divert energies from the essential areas of agriculture and warfare. In *Kongzi jiayu*, the same strictness is applied to

⁴² *Kongzi jiayu* 31: 55.25–28.

areas, within court and without, that are to remain under the control of bureaucrats sailing under Ru colours. Only those types of specialists that do not belong to the circles whose interests the text serves are denounced as heterodox. Diviners are the only group mentioned explicitly.

What all the texts cited above have in common is that they warn against rhetorical cleverness on the part of subjects as detracting either from the ruler's personal authority or as compromising regulations put in place to exclude undue influence on the ruler. What these texts also have in common is that they argue on the fundamental level of political theory but offer little help in the actual business of maintaining an administration and recruiting the necessary staff.

4 Rhetorical skills as a criterion in selecting officials

That we have little direct textual evidence of instructions that were actually used to deal with the problem of the “endless capacity of dissembling”, particularly to recognise devious rhetoric, is certainly due to the necessarily selective nature of transmission. A purely practical set of instructions for selecting officials would only qualify for transmission as long as the social situation of its specific application still existed. Once this circumstance changed, a text would need to be more broadly applicable, more fundamental in nature, abstracted from the original practical use, to merit transmission. Apparently some texts were changed in this way, i.e. made more general; others exited the stage.

The encyclopedic *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 contains still recognizable pragmatic texts, the best-known probably being the “Monthly Ordinances” at the beginning of the first twelve chapters, the “line-ups” (*ji* 紀).⁴³ It also contains a text devoted to the “Assessment of people” (chapter 3.4, “Lun ren” 論人). The text is placed in the third month of spring, for which the Monthly Ordinance prescribes, among other instructions, that “the Son of Heaven displays his moral power and performs acts of generosity [...] to encourage the feudal lords, to extend invitations to famous scholar-knights, and to treat with ritual courtesy men who are worthy.”⁴⁴ The subchapter “Assessment of people” is an interesting two-part com-

⁴³ Knoblock and Riegel (2000) translate *ji* under its functional aspect as “almanacs”. The twelve ordinances belong to the relatively few fortunate instances of multiple transmission. It is closely parallel with the *Liji* 禮記 chapter “Yue ling” 月令.

⁴⁴ 天子布德行惠 [...] 勉諸侯，聘名士，禮賢者。 *Lüshi chunqiu* 3.1: 11.27–12.1. Translation taken from Knoblock and Riegel 2000: 96.

position, portraying the recruitment of officials as a two-fold pursuit, in which the unifying central force of the ruler is the primary, basic part, complemented by the actual assessment of others. This primary part is termed “mustering it in oneself” (*fan zhu ji* 反諸己), while the complementary second part of the subchapter is labelled “seeking it in others” (*qiu zhu ren* 求諸人).

In the first part, “mustering it in oneself”, the ruler is called upon, in a manner that fits the stereotype of a Daoist self-cultivation text, to summon his own inner strength. To achieve this, the exclusion of diversions is crucial, with regard to both his own impulses (“adjust your senses, restrain your desires”) as well as attempts of others to sway him (“dismiss wisdom and schemes, remove artfulness and deceit”).⁴⁵ This first part of the subchapter, which is all about “knowing the One” (*zhi yi* 知一) satisfies the autocratist requirement: the One here serves a similar function as the standards (*fa* 法) in *Hanfeizi* and *Shangjun shu* above.

Having taken this strong stand for autocracy, the complementary second part of the subchapter, “seeking it in others”, now deals with the necessary details of recruiting officials, without whom even an autocratic regime cannot be executed. The introductory words to a catalogue of instructions for assessing candidates mention crafty words and sophistic speech as the one crucial factor of which the ruler needs to remain wary:

何謂求諸人？人同類而智殊，賢不肖異，皆巧言辯辭，以自防禦，此不肖主之所以亂也。What is called “seeking it in others”? People are of the same species but differ in their intelligence, worthy and unworthy are distinct. They all use *crafty words and sophistic speech* to defend themselves; it is by these that unworthy rulers get confounded.⁴⁶

All the texts discussed so far single out rhetoric skills as the most dangerous threat to the ruler’s power, but none of them describes in any detail how to recognise devious rhetoric. The *Lüshi chunqiu* chapter goes into some more detail about how to test certain qualities in candidates, but the rhetorical ones are not among the qualities ascertained through the “eight observations” (*ba guan* 八觀) and “six tests” (*liu yan* 六驗) named toward the end of the chapter. These catalogues enumerating tests for specific qualities are a core element in instructions for the

⁴⁵ “適耳目[*C.muk], 節嗜欲[*Gok], 釋智謀[*mə], 去巧故[*kʰa-s]” *Lüshi chunqiu* 3.4: 15.1–2 (cf. Chen Qiyou 1984: 159). This language is strongly reminiscent of *Laozi*, especially chapters 12, 19, and 56. For a detailed discussion of the terminological use of *gu* 故 in the sense of “deceit” in contexts of evaluation of personalities and recruitment of officials, see Richter 2002a. The translation of this passage has been adapted from this article to reflect the distinction between diversions coming from within and without.

⁴⁶ *Lüshi chunqiu* 3.4: 15 (cf. Chen Qiyou 1984: 160).

recruitment of officials. They are widely distributed as composite elements in various early Chinese texts: the catalogue of nine criteria invoked by Confucius against the inscrutability of the human mind (cited from *Zhuangzi* 32 at the beginning of this paper) is an example of such a text; the *Da Dai Liji* chapter 49, from which we have cited a different passage, contains another such catalogue.⁴⁷

To be sure, such tests are most valuable in discovering positive as well as negative qualities in candidates, but the short instructions only name which situation or test serves best to ascertain which quality. They do not describe how the quality surfaces and how it can be recognised. To this end, one would need more detailed descriptions of personality types, segmenting, as it were, the vast continuum of human diversity into a manageable set of more or less well-defined, distinct units that can be communicated and used in administrative practice. Such descriptions should name recognizable types of behaviour rather than mere attributes such as “honest” vs. “dishonest” and so forth.

The “Techniques pertaining to ministers” (“Chen shu” 臣術, chapter two of *Shuoyuan* 說苑), contain such descriptions. The chapter follows the common guideline-exposition (*jing shuo* 經說) structure: most of the text is a collection of separate short narratives revolving around the topic of being a good minister. These narratives serve to illustrate the foundational part at the beginning of the chapter. This guideline part of the text is itself two-layered. It is structured as a frame in which the descriptions of types of ministers are embedded. It begins with the words:

人臣之術，順從而復命，無所敢專，義不苟合，位不苟尊，必有益於國，必有補於君。故其身尊而子孫保之。故人臣之行有六正六邪，行六正則榮，犯六邪則辱。夫榮辱者福禍之門也。何謂六正六邪？

The technique of the minister: he compliantly executes orders and does not dare to arrogate power, with regard to propriety he does not bond carelessly and with regard to position he does not bestow honour carelessly, without fail he will be of benefit to the state and of assistance to the lord. Therefore he will be honoured and his children and grandchildren will cherish this honour. Therefore, of the techniques of the minister, there are six upright and six wicked types. Practising the six upright types of behaviour leads to glory, committing the six wicked types of behaviour leads to disgrace. Now, glory and disgrace are the gateways to good fortune and disaster. What, then, does one call the six upright and the six wicked types?⁴⁸

And, after the detailed description of six upright and six wicked types of ministers, it concludes:

⁴⁷ The case of *Da Dai Liji* is discussed in more detail in Richter 2002b and numerous further examples of test catalogues are presented in Richter 2005.

⁴⁸ *Shuoyuan* 2: 11.14–16.

[...] 賢臣處六正之道，不行六邪之術，故上安而下治，生則見樂，死則見思，此人臣之術也。

[... A] worthy minister abides by the ways of the six upright types and does not practise the techniques of the six wicked types. Thus, the superiors are at peace and the subordinates well-regulated. When alive he excites pleasure and when deceased he is well remembered. This is the technique of the minister.⁴⁹

In the interest of brevity, suffice it to cite only the description of those types whose characterisation involves rhetorical skill. Interestingly, none of the positive types by definition possess particular rhetorical aptitude: the “sage minister” (*sheng chen* 聖臣) of extraordinary foresight, the disinterested “fine minister” (*liang chen* 良臣) with his mature counsel, the humble and diligent “true minister” (*zhong chen* 忠臣), the resourceful “intelligent minister” (*zhi chen* 智臣), the incorruptible administrator called “faithful minister” (*zhen chen* 貞臣), and the fearlessly honest “straightforward minister” (*zhi chen* 直臣). Not so the six wicked types of ministers. In two of these, rhetorical skills are the defining qualities. While the greedy, self-serving “utilitarian minister” (*ju chen* 具臣) does not seem to show any talent at all and the obsequious “sycophantic minister” (*yu chen* 諛臣), described as merely agreeing with everything the ruler says and does, is a nodder rather than a talker, rhetorical skills play a central role in the characterisation of the next two types of wicked ministers:

三曰：中實頗險，外（容）貌小謹，巧言令色，又心嫉賢，所欲進則明其美而隱其惡，所欲退則明其過而匿其美，使主妄行過任，賞罰不當，號令不行，如此者姦臣。四曰：智足以飾非，辯足以行說，反言易辭而成文章，內離骨肉之親，外妒亂朝廷，如此者讒臣也。
The third: He is malicious at his core but displays humble sincerity; he uses crafty words and winning countenance, while in his heart he begrudges the worthies, he displays the merits and hides the demerits of those whose career he wants to further, while he exposes the mistakes and obscures the merits of those whose career he wants to hinder, thereby misleading the ruler into rash actions and mistaken appointments, making rewards and punishments inappropriate and leaving orders and commands unexecuted. Such is the *villainous minister*. *The fourth:* He is intelligent enough to gloss over faults, sophistic enough to practise persuasion, he composes documents out of twisted words and facile statements, in the inner circle he alienates the ruler’s nearest and dearest, and in outer circles he vilifies and confounds the entire court. Such is the *slandering minister*.⁵⁰

The next in line, the “infringing minister” (*zei chen* 賊臣), is described as arrogating power to promote his wealth and status. Although this includes misrepresent-

⁴⁹ *Shuoyuan* 2: 12.9–10.

⁵⁰ *Shuoyuan* 2: 12.2–5.

ing the ruler's orders, this type is not explicitly credited with rhetorical skills. This is different in the case of the very worst type of wicked minister:

六曰：（諂言）〔諂主〕以邪，墜主〔於〕不義，朋黨比周，以蔽主明，入則辯言好辭，出則更復異其言語，使白黑無別，是非物間，伺候可推，因而附然，使主惡布於境內，聞於四鄰如此者亡國之臣也。

The sixth: He flatters the ruler with wicked lies, tempting him into impropriety. He forms cliques with his peers and countrymen to block the ruler's view. He enters court with *sophistic words and agreeable statements*, but coming out of court he goes back on his words and professes otherwise, blurring the distinction between black and white and muddling right and wrong together. He bides his time and then leaps at the first opportunity to let the ruler's demerit be displayed all over the country and come to the ears of the neighbouring states all around. Such is the *state-wrecking minister*.⁵¹

This *Shuoyuan* chapter is considerably more specific than the previous texts in how it captures and structures experience in the political arena so that it can be utilised in political practice. The types of behaviour described here are recognizable and distinguishable. A certain type of minister, whether positive and negative may be an asset in one position but a liability in another. The “faithful minister” may be a useful fiscal administrator but not of much use in a position that requires bold and honest criticism of the ruler's plans. The fearless “straightforward minister” may excel at criticism but he may not be a good administrator. Even a thoroughly unpleasant type like the “villainous minister” may be of use in some inconsequential administrative post, as long as his position offers no opportunity for his scheming interference in personnel policy.

Although the text views the problem from the ruler's perspective, it is easy to imagine how it can have been used in broader circles. It presents the types of ministers in a well-structured fashion and then offers narratives as historical precedents. These could be used by students of the text to identify the agents in these narratives as specimens of the types outlined in the preceding systematic part of the text. From a didactic perspective this would offer an excellent exercise in judgement of personalities.

A text that is less rigorous in its formal structure and that evidently compiles and systematises textual material from originally independent pragmatic texts is available to us in two significantly different versions: one entered the compilation *Da Dai Liji* in the first century BCE, while the other is part of another compilation, *Yi Zhoushu* 逸周書, which was presumably excavated in 280 CE from the tomb of King Xiang'ai 襄哀 (r. 318–296 BCE) of Wei 魏, a state that had played a decisive part in the economic and administrative modernisation successively imple-

⁵¹ *Shuoyuan* 2: 12.7–9.

mented in several states during the Warring States period.⁵² Even if it was indeed excavated from the tomb at Ji 汲 (hence the alternative title *Ji zhong Zhoushu* 汲冢周書), the *Yi Zhoushu* version is not necessarily “more original” than the one in *Da Dai Liji*. Both had a long history of transmission and suffered severe textual corruption. Apart from inevitable copying errors, a major reason for textual changes was that later readers (and probably copyists) clearly struggled with the text and sought to improve its readability by repairing actual or perceived damage.

Problematic or missing passages in parallel texts are often “repaired” by replacing them with the counterpart in the other text.⁵³ In the present case this is especially problematic as, despite all parallelism, there can be no doubt that they are intentionally different:⁵⁴ *Da Dai Liji* chapter 72 “King Wen on appointing officials” (“Wen wang guan ren” 文王官人, henceforth DL) is framed as a speech of King Wen, addressed to his Taishi 太師 (“Grand Preceptor”), presumably Taigong 太公. In the introductory part, the king names three catalogues as relevant for the appointment of officials: the Seven Affiliations (*qi shu* 七屬), the Nine Employments (*jiu yong* 九用), and the Six Minutiae (*liu wei* 六微). The remaining text contains the full information on these catalogues, in reverse order. The majority of the chapter (well over three quarters) is taken up by the explication of the Six Minutiae. The *Yi Zhoushu* parallel, chapter 58 “Appointing Officials” (“Guan ren jie” 官人解, henceforth YZ),⁵⁵ however, has no narrative frame enclosing the lengthy catalogues but is constructed as a short introductory dialogue between an unnamed king, whose inquiry after the criteria (*zheng* 徵) for the assessment and employment of people is answered by the Duke of Zhou. The long monologue detailing the Six Criteria (*liu zheng* 六徵) is parallel to what *Da Dai Liji* lists under Six Minutiae (六微). Both the logic of the texts and several parallels in other texts suggest that *wei* 微 in *Da Dai Liji* goes back to a graphic error for *zheng* 徵. The

52 For a still very useful compilation and discussion of traditional sources recounting such reforms, see Yang Kuan 1997: 155–278 (i.e. ch. 4–6).

53 The most recent example of this practice is the presentation of these texts in the Institute of Chinese Studies Ancient Chinese Concordance Series (*Da Dai Liji zhuzi suoyin* and *Yi Zhoushu zhuzi suoyin*). Since all emendations are made explicit in these texts, the concordances still offer us reliable versions of both texts, but the fact remains that what is presented as the main text are conflated versions on either side.

54 For a comprehensive text-critical study of these two texts and their numerous parallels in other early Chinese texts, see Richter 2005.

55 The designation *jie* is appended to the titles of all *Yi Zhoushu* chapters. It does not seem to be part of the title proper but probably goes back to an edition of the text that contained additional commentaries, possibly of a similar type as the *Guanzi* chapters 63–67, which do contain the two layers of a main text and interspersed commentaries. Chapter 63 is lost but was in all likelihood structured the same way.

final approximately twenty per cent of the *Da Dai Liji* text that are devoted to the Seven Affiliations and the Nine Employments, as well as the closing of the narrative frame, are absent from its *Yi Zhoushu* parallel.

Despite all these meaningful differences, the two parallel texts doubtless go back to a common ancestor that we cannot restore.⁵⁶ By conflating them we would create a new text without historical source value. For some passages, however, we have enough indications to allow us cautiously to conclude what the ancestral text must have looked like. Before we discuss passages pertaining to rhetoric, it is necessary to sketch the structure of the main part of the texts, the explication of the Six Criteria (Minutiae):⁵⁷

DL	YZ	
一曰觀誠[*den]	觀誠[*den]	(First:) observing sincerity;
二曰考志[*tə-s]	考言[*ŋan]	(Second:) examining intentions {words}; ⁵⁸
三曰視中[*truŋ]	視聲[*jeŋ]	(Third:) scrutinising the interior {voice};
四曰觀色[*srək]	觀色[*srək]	(Fourth:) observing countenance;
五曰觀隱[*ʔənʔ]	觀隱[*ʔənʔ]	(Fifth:) observing concealments;
六曰揆德[*tʰək]	揆德[*tʰək]	(Sixth:) measuring virtue.

The main body of text in both versions – except for the introduction and the concluding part that is only present in DL – is arranged under these six rubrics.⁵⁹ The first section of the core text (“observing sincerity”) is itself a compilation of six distinct catalogues of character traits that need to be ascertained. Each of these traits is named in connection with a group of people that should have this quality, or a situation in which it is desired, or a testing method by which it can be ascertained. Although sections three and four are both devoted to issues that certainly play a role in rhetoric, *viz.* diagnosing someone’s facial expression or voice, we shall ignore them here and concentrate on sections four, five, and six. These parts of the parallel texts not only make terse, usually condemning statements about rhetorical skills (e.g. *qiao yan* 巧言, “crafty words”, or *li ci* 利辭, “apt speech”), as we encountered them in the texts discussed so far, but they describe aspects of

⁵⁶ The philological details on which this judgement is based, including assessments of individual textual variants as well as the general degree of similarity and dissimilarity between the two parallel texts, are discussed at length in Richter 2005.

⁵⁷ *Da Dai Liji* 72: 59.13–14; *Yi Zhoushu* 58: 31.28–29.

⁵⁸ Here and in the following translations from the parallel texts the YZ variant is added in braces { }. This distinction does not imply that either DL or YZ are the superior variant.

⁵⁹ The prevalence of the number six as a structuring element in texts concerned with civil administration and the military is a topic that deserves further study beyond just its role in the most obvious examples, such as *Zhouli* 周禮 (presenting an idealized concept of government offices, entirely based on multiples of six) and *Liu tao* 六韜 (a military manual arranged in six books).

the very speech act itself. The exposition of the item “examining intentions/words” begins with the instruction “methodically engage him in dialogue to observe his intentions”.⁶⁰ This is followed by seven pairs of personality descriptions, each starting with a positive type, followed by its negative counterpart, described in closely parallel language. All of these descriptions touch upon speech in some way. The more detailed ones are as follows:

His demeanour is straightforward but not disrespectful⁶¹ {...}. His words are upright and not selfish. He does not embellish his merits, nor conceal his demerits, nor cover up his mistakes. Such a one is called *a person who has substance*.

His demeanour is smug {unctuous}. His words are artful and crafty. He embellishes what he has to show for himself. He fusses about trifles {small proofs [of his merits]} and deceitfully argues to his own advantage. Such a one is called *a person who lacks substance*.⁶²

DL	YZ
其貌直而不傷	其貌直□□□
其言正而不私	其言正而不私
不飾其美	不飾其美
不隱其惡	不隱其惡
不防其過	不防其過
曰有質者也	曰有質者也
其貌固嘔	其貌曲媚
其言工巧	其言工巧
飾其見物	飾其見物
務其小微	務其小證
以故自說	以故自說
曰無質者也	曰無質者也

The persons with or without substance are described in their rhetorical behaviour, but mostly with regard to content and goal of their speech, while not much is said about the technique and performance of the speech. This is different in the description of personality types that are categorised by their intellectual abilities:

One who, if you pose a problem to him, can deftly resolve it;⁶³ who, if you surprise him with a sudden question, gives a measured response; who is analytic by nature, without copying

⁶⁰ 方與之言以觀其志 (*Da Dai Liji* 72: 59.26; *Yi Zhoushu* 58: 32.6).

⁶¹ I follow Wang Niansun 王念孫 (1744–1832) in reading *shang* 傷 as a graphic error for *yi* 傷. Cf. *Jingyi shuwen* 13.1b.

⁶² *Da Dai Liji* 72: 60.2–4; *Yi Zhoushu* 58: 32.9–11.

⁶³ I follow Kong Guangsen’s 孔廣森 (1752–1786) emendation, who reverses the order of *jing* 驚 at the end of this sentence and the following character *jue* 決, which is confirmed by clearly intentional rhymes in both sentences (設–決, 敬–應, and probably also 物–卒). *Da Dai Liji buzhu* 10.3. As most scholars, I agree with Wang Niansun’s reading of DL *zhi* 執 (graphic error for 執 [yi <

someone else {who analyses clearly without adorning} – such a one is called *a considerate person*.

One to whom it is hard to pose a problem; to whom it is difficult to explain a matter (verbally); who understands just one thing and is unable to detach himself from it; who, when he is cornered, does not know where [the argument] comes to an end but, instead of analysing the problem, follows his own line of thought⁶⁴ {who clings to the one thing [he understands] and cannot be persuaded otherwise but follows it, not knowing when to stop} – such a one is called *a stupid and dull person*⁶⁵ {a person who is stupidly dependent on others}.⁶⁶

DL	YZ
執之以物而遯驚	設[*ŋet]之以物[*C.mut]而數決[*k ^w et]
決之以卒而度料	敬[*kren-s]之以卒[*ts ^h ut]而度應[*qəŋ-s]
不學而性辨	不文而辯
曰有慮者也	曰有慮者也
難投以物	難決以物
難說以言	難悅以
知一如不可以解也	守一而不可變
困而不知其止	因而不知止
無辨而自慎	
曰愚怒者也	曰愚依人也

One who does not err if you dazzle him with problems; who will not be intimidated if assailed with something unexpected; who is not to be moved from his firm stance on propriety, who cannot be dazzled with material and sensual temptations – such a one is called an (incorruptible and) resolute person.

⁶⁴ *ŋet-s] as *she* < *ŋet 設 and YZ *jing* < *kren-s 敬 as *jing* < *kren 驚. Furthermore, I read *she* 設 in both DL and YZ, for reasons explained further below in this paper. For the likely etymological relation between *yi* 執/藝, *shi* 勢, and *she* 設, see Schuessler 2007: 570–571, and in more detail Bai Yiping [i.e. William H. Baxter] 2010.

⁶⁴ I read 慎 [*Cə.lin-s > dzyinH > shèn] as *Cə.lun-s > zywinH > shùn 順. The pronunciations of the words are close enough in any period to make an error likely; a graphic error seems much less likely, especially in early styles of script. The entire sentence “無辨而自順” is probably a gloss of the preceding “困而不知其止”.

⁶⁵ The logic of the text makes *nù* < nuX < *n^ʰa? 怒 entirely unlikely. I read it as a phonetic error for *lu* < luX < *r^ʰa? 魯. Yu Yue 俞樾 (1821–1907) assumes the original character may have been 𠄎, an old form for *lū* < ljoX < *ra? 旅, which in his opinion explains the variant *yi* 依 in YZ as a graphic error, which has then triggered the change in YZ from *zhe* 者 to *ren* 人. Hence, he reconstructs the sentence in both versions as “曰愚魯者也”. Among the various other (often rather contrived) explanations, Sun Yirang’s 孫詒讓 explanation of the character *nu* 怒 as a loan graph for *nu* 驚 seems the most plausible in its simplicity. However, variation between the classifiers *xin* 心 and *ma* 馬 is not a common phenomenon in manuscripts (for a list of commonly interchanged character components in Warring States writing practice, see He Linyi 2003: 229–237), and a graphic error seems unlikely, as the two forms are too distinct in any style of script to be confused graphically.

⁶⁶ *Da Dai* 72: 60.6–8; *Yi Zhoushu* 58: 32.13–15.

One who is easy to sway with words, who has no tenacity of purpose, who is undecided in declining or consenting – such a one is called an irresolute person.⁶⁷

DL

營之以物[*C.mut]而不虞[*ŋ^wa-s誤]犯人以卒[*ts^hut]而[不]懼[*g^wa-s]置義而不可遷[*ts^har>tshjen]臨之以貨色而不可營[*g^wen>yweng]

曰潔廉而果敢者也

易移以言

存志不能守錮

已諾無斷

曰弱志者也

YZ

營之以物而不誤

犯之以卒而不懼

置義而不可遷

臨之貨色而不過

曰果敢者也

移易以言

志不能固

已諾無決

曰弱志者也

The preceding two pairs of personality types are obviously constructed in a largely parallel fashion. In both cases, the description of the positive type forms the basis on which the corresponding negative type is then portrayed in a less elaborate fashion. While the second pair is apparently not narrowly concerned with rhetorical skills, verbal performance does play a role in it as well: firmness of principle is praised and lacking resistance to persuasion is accordingly mentioned as a deficiency. “Declining and consenting” (*yinuo* 已諾) are technical terms referring to decision making of a superior and in all likelihood speech acts. Still, this pair is all about the qualities of resoluteness and firmness on a broader scale than just performance in discourse. The first pair, however, narrowly focuses on just that. It describes how the respective personalities react to challenges in terms of their intellectual capacities: deliberation and rhetorical dexterity.

5 The technical vocabulary

The descriptions of the two pairs of personalities (the ones defined by intellectual qualities and the one defined by purposefulness in a broader sense) both build on statements concerned with a matter/problem (*wu* 物) and something sudden (*cu* 卒). It is important to realise that pragmatic texts in the context of evaluation of personalities and recruitment of officials had their own terminology and used some words in a specialised sense. This seems to have led to some misunderstandings in the process of transmission of the two parallel texts at hand and, consequently, to textual changes that apparently aimed to correct perceived

⁶⁷ *Da Dai Liji* 72: 60.8–11; *Yi Zhoushu* 58: 32.15–17.

errors or to make better sense of what seemed to be expressed oddly. This led to differences between the two versions that make each of them a text in its own right. Such changes should not be reversed in order to homogenise the two versions by conflating them. However, this also means that in each of these versions, insofar as they were changed, we read a text that has become removed to some extent from the original meaning of the pragmatic texts compiled in the respective chapters in *Da Dai Liji* and *Yi Zhoushu*. To get closer to the original meaning of the textual material, cautious conjecture becomes necessary. An intertextual approach, including not only a comparison of the two versions but also related cognate textual material from other compilations may yield some information about the nature of such pragmatic texts as have come down to us only in their role as building blocks of larger literary texts.

To begin with the common and versatile word *wu* 物, the interpretation that naturally occurs in the description of the resolute personality as “*ying zhi yi wu er bu wu* 營之以物而不誤” is “someone who, if you surround/dazzle him with *things* (probably material objects of some value), does not err”. Accordingly, readers of the description of the considerate type in YZ may have understood “*she zhi yi wu er shuo jue* 設之以物而數決” as “someone who, if you set him up with (material) things, can soon break free from them”; in the DL version possibly further disambiguated in this direction to say “someone who, if you try to get a hold on him with (material) things, can soon break free from them” (*zhi zhi yi wu er su jue* 執之以物而遯決).⁶⁸ However, *wu* does not just mean material things; it can more broadly refer to “matters”, or narrowly to the content or substance of someone’s speech.⁶⁹ As a verb it can mean “to consider, identify, recognise, choose”.⁷⁰ In this text, *wu* is used numerous times in the special sense of “the matter under discussion” in the sense of a set topic in a disputation.

A closer look at the word *she* 設 in contexts of the evaluation of candidates for office confirms the conjecture that the original instruction in this textual unit was to set someone a challenging topic, to present him with a problem and test if he is able to solve it quickly, rather than to try to hold him or make him dependent on material objects. That the meaning of *she* here is not just the literal and neutral “to set up” becomes clear already in the fact that the object of *she* is not a thing but a person. Incidentally, this is a similar use of the verb as in English, where “to

⁶⁸ For the reversal of *jing* 驚 and *jue* 決 in this text, see footnote to the translation of the passage above.

⁶⁹ Cf. *Liji* 禮記, “Ziyi” 緇衣: 「言有物而行有格也。」 (“speech should have substance and deeds should have limitations”). *Liji* 33: 154.9–10.

⁷⁰ Cf. *Zuo zhuan* 左傳, Zhao 昭 7 (405.15): 「度厚薄，仞溝洫，物土方。」 (“[...] measured thickness, plumbed ditches, considered the territory”).

set someone up” means to put the person in a position in a process that is not controlled by this person, that the person may be unaware of, and that is in some instances designed to outsmart this person. The mechanism of how this word developed this specialised meaning in Chinese is probably a different one, however.⁷¹ *She* is frequently used in connection with catching animals by setting up traps of some sort (*she wang* 設網 or *she ju* 設置 “to set up a net”, *she xian* 設險 or *she jing* 設阱/阱 “to set up a trap/pitfall” are common combinations). The use of *she* with reference to trapping animals was so common that the verb could be used in ellipsis, making the animal the direct object and thus causing the verb itself to take on the meaning “to trap”, for example in the “edict banning nets for trapping animals” (*ling jin ju she qinshou* 令禁置設禽獸) in the summer months, mentioned in *Guanzi* chapter 40 “The Four Seasons” (“Si shi” 四時).⁷² This is not a singular occurrence; *Huainanzi* 17 reminds us that “to catch mice you must move nimbly and to catch fish you need a wide net” (*she shu zhe jidong diao yuzhe fanhang* 設鼠者機動釣魚者泛杭) and *Shangjun shu* 22 compares a policy using leniency to motivate people for fighting wars with a method of “catching mice, using a cat as bait” (*she shu er er yi li* 設鼠而餌以狸).⁷³

That *she* in this specialised sense of trapping is not only used with regard to the literal trapping of animals but also in a figurative sense for trapping humans is exemplified in *Huainanzi*’s “Fundamental guidelines” (“Ben jing” 本經, chapter eight), where the word is used in both the literal and figurative senses in close proximity and consistent language:

設機械險阻以為備。

They set up mechanisms and traps as a precaution.

逮至衰世，人眾財寡 [...] 比周朋黨，設詐譎，懷機械巧故之心，而性失矣，是以貴義。

In the age of decline, people were numerous and resources scarce [...] people banded together in cliques of peers and neighbours, they set up devious schemes, harboured a contrived, artful and deceiving heart so that their true nature got lost and propriety was esteemed.

⁷¹ For an earlier, more comprehensive discussion of this point, see Richter 2005: 151–157.

⁷² *Guanzi zhuzi suoyin* 104.14. That this renders the literal reading nonsensical is no obstacle to such ellipses. The context and the frequency of the non-elliptical use of *she* (設 + a trap + in order to catch + animal) ensure that the ellipsis is understood, just as in English “the proof is in the pudding” is at least vaguely understood in the intended sense of “empirical proof trumps theoretical projection”, even if someone might be reminded of the custom of hiding trinkets in a Christmas pudding and remain unaware of the largely obsolete full form “the proof of the pudding is in the tasting”. In Chinese I have heard “*women chi kuaizi* 我們吃筷子” used for “*women yong kuaizi chi [fan]* 我們用筷子吃[飯]” without causing a raised eyebrow. Ellipses like “*she shu* 設鼠” or “*she zhi yi wu* 設之以物” function precisely the same way.

⁷³ *Huainanzi* 17: 171.15; *Shang jun shu* 22: 28.6.

及偽之生也，飾智以驚愚，設詐以巧上。

When falsehood was born, people embellished their intelligence to startle simpletons, they set up deceptions to trick their superiors.⁷⁴

She is clearly used in a figurative sense also in the *Da Dai Liji* chapter “Abundant virtue” (“Sheng de” 盛德):

刑罰之所從生有源，不務塞其源而務刑殺之，是〔謂〕為民設陷以賊也。

There is a source whence punishments are born. If one does not strive to stop this source but strives to mutilate and kill them, this amounts to setting up traps for the people and thereby violating them.⁷⁵

While this passage is figurative in its use of the entire metaphor of setting up traps but retains the literal use of the verb *she* as “to set up”, there are other cases where the figurative use affects the verb itself as well: in *Guoyu* 國語 (“Qiyu” 齊語), a test performed on candidates for a certain office is phrased as “*she zhi yi guojia zhi huan er bu jiu* 設之以國家之患而不疚”, i.e. “[someone who] does not get perplexed if you confront him with the trouble of the state”. The phrasing in a *Guanzi* parallel to this text is “*she wen guojia zhi huan er bu jiu* 設問國家之患而不〔肉〕〔交]” (“[someone who] does not get perplexed if you trap him with questions about the troubles of the state”).⁷⁶ What *she* here really refers to is that the asking of the question (*she wen* 設問) intends to baffle the candidate; *she* does not just say that the question is “put” to the candidate in a neutral, innocent manner. This becomes even more obvious in the account of the famous wit Chunyu Kun 淳于髡 and his followers’ challenging Zou Ji 鄒忌, a man of obscure origin⁷⁷ who had risen to the post of chancellor of Qi 齊 under King Xuan 宣 (reg. 319–301). Liu Xiang 劉向 has furnished us with two versions of the anecdote. One version, in *Xinxu* 新序 chapter two, phrases the act of testing as “*she yi ci* 設以辭”, which we might translate vaguely as “put statements to him”, were it not further explained that the challengers hoped these questions would be out of Zou Ji’s intellectual reach.⁷⁸ That the questions are not innocently neutral becomes yet more obvious

⁷⁴ *Huainanzi* 8: 61.25; 62.8–10; 62.26.

⁷⁵ *Da Dai Liji* 66: 48.14–15.

⁷⁶ *Guoyu* 6: 41.20; *Guanzi zhuzi suoyin* 62.20 (ch. 20, “Xiao kuang” 小匡). The clearly erroneous character *rou* 肉 could result from a graphic error for *jiu* 疚 that occurred when a manuscript was copied that wrote the word simply as *jiu* 久, which is in early character forms similar to *rou* 肉 both in the general outline of the main component and diagonal orientation of the character. A phonetic error or *rou* < *k.nuk 肉 for *jiu* < *k^wə-s 疚/交 is unlikely.

⁷⁷ See Hsu Cho-yun 1965: 42.

⁷⁸ “鄒忌不能及” *Xin xu* 2: 8.3.

in the phrasing of the other version of the anecdote (preserved in *Shuoyuan* fragments), which characterises them as “perplexing” (*miao* 妙). Hence, we do better justice to the phrase “*wei she miao ci* 為設妙辭” – literally “set up perplexing statements for him” – by an interpretive rendering as “ensnare him with riddles”.⁷⁹ The anecdote provides three examples for the type of question that could be used to test someone’s wit and talent in solving an intellectual problem on the spot and expressing his answer well. One of Chunyu Kun’s questions inquires after the meaning of

「三人共牧一羊，羊不得食，人亦不得息，何如？」鄒忌曰：「敬諾減吏省員，使無擾民也。」

“three men herding one sheep together, without the sheep getting any food or the men getting any rest.” Zou Ji replies, “I beg to admit: ‘Reduce the number of officers and cut down on personnel, so you won’t trouble your people.’”⁸⁰

Zou Ji acquits himself just as impressively in his response to two other questions, always “as promptly as an echo” (*ru yingxiang* 如應響), leaving his challenger defeated and asserting his authority and legitimacy of position.

It is in the light of such practices of testing someone’s intellectual capabilities that we have to understand the carefully crafted description of the considerate type (note the rhyme ABA, CBC) in the “Guan ren” texts:⁸¹

設[*ɲet]之以物[*C.mut]而數決[*k^wet]

One who, if you pose a problem to him, can deftly resolve it;

驚[*kren]之以卒[*ts^hut]而度應[*qəŋ-s]

who, if you surprise him with a sudden question, gives a measured response;

不文而辯

who analyzes clearly without adorning –

曰有慮者也

such a one is called *a considerate person*.

Apparently, it was considered an important skill of the candidate to be able to respond to unexpected, sudden challenges. The character 卒 clearly stands for the word *cù* (in later orthography written as 猝), rather than *zú* (“end”, “death”,

⁷⁹ *Shuoyuan* 186.6–10.

⁸⁰ *Xin xu* 2: 8.6–7.

⁸¹ The passage is here represented in the YZ version with the emendation 敬 > 驚 already included.

“soldier”). Even in the description of the “resolute type” further down in the text, which is constructed in analogy to that of the “considerate type”, based on a text centring on the rhyming pair of terms *wu* and *cu*, this terminological use of 卒 must not be discounted. Instead of taking the more familiar reading of 卒 as *zu* in “*fan zhi yi zu er bu ju* 犯之以卒而不懼” for granted and reading the sentence to say “who is not frightened when assailed by soldiers” (or even “by death”), we should consider the possibility that the resolute type is characterised by being unperturbed in the face of sudden challenges and demands, rather than someone who bravely faces soldiers or death.

Sudden challenges, especially of an intellectual, verbal nature, seem to have been among the standard tests performed on candidates for office. The “nine criteria for obtaining the unworthy ones” that *Zhuangzi* facetiously lets Confucius recite, include the instruction to “ask him sudden questions to observe his intelligence” (*cu ran wen yan er guan qi zhi* 卒然問焉而觀其知).⁸² That this catalogue is not entirely a literary invention but based on an originally independent pragmatic text is indicated by the fact that almost identical versions of it are transmitted in military texts: one in *Liu tao* chapter 20 and one in the Song military compendium *Wujing zongyao* 武經總要.⁸³ The *Wujing zongyao* version is virtually identical with the one in *Zhuangzi*, except for three lexical and two graphic variants. The slightly different *Liu tao* version recommends similar tests:

知之有八徵：一曰問之以言以觀其辭。二曰窮之以辭以觀其變。三曰與之閒謀以觀其誠。四曰明白顯問以觀其德。五曰使之以財以觀其廉。六曰試之以色以觀其貞。七曰告之以難以觀其勇。八曰醉之以酒以觀其態。八徵皆備則賢不肖別矣。

For recognising [those whose demeanour does not match their true inner condition] there are eight tests: First, ask him about words to observe how he makes statements [concerning these]; corner him with statements and observe how versatile he is [in his rhetoric]; involve him in schemes and stratagems to observe his sincerity; make clear pronouncements and open enquiries to observe his virtue; entrust him with rich resources to observe his moderation; try him with female allure to observe his chastity; confront him with hardship to observe his courage; inebriate him with wine to observe his composure. Once all these eight tests have been performed, the worthy ones and unworthy ones are distinguished.⁸⁴

How seriously the ability of repartee was taken as a criterion of a person’s worth or usefulness shines through in more discursive or narrative texts as well. The

⁸² *Zhuangzi* 32: 1054.

⁸³ Similar catalogues occur in the narrative texts *Wu Yue chunqiu* 吳越春秋 chapter 9 (38.15–17) and *Yue jue shu* 越絕書 chapter 11 (38.27–39.1), where they are presented as instructions for the selection of worthy officers.

⁸⁴ *Liu tao* 20: 19.24–20.11.

Xunzi 荀子 chapter “The Way pertaining to ministers” (“Chen dao” 臣道) sets out with a catalogue of four broadly defined types of ministers in order of quality: the false minister (*tai chen* 慝臣), the infringing minister (*cuan chen* 篡臣), the meritorious minister (*gong chen* 功臣), and the sage minister (*sheng chen* 聖臣). Interestingly, only in the descriptions of the worst and the best type do rhetorical skills play a role. The false minister is one who, despite his utter failure in his responsibilities, “is good at swindling himself into his superior’s graces by being crafty and agile and of flattering persuasiveness” (*qiao min ning shui, shan qu chong hu shang* 巧敏佞說，善取寵乎上). The sage minister, on the other hand, is lauded for “responding to sudden challenges, meeting changes, and repartee [swift] as an echo” (*ying cu yu bian qiji ru xiang* 應卒遇變齊給如響).⁸⁵

Huainanzi 淮南子 employs Confucius in a dialogue with “someone”, giving Confucius occasion to rank three of his disciples as exemplars of three different positive qualities and still set himself up, after a humble gesture of “being unequal to them”, as the possessor of the Way. After this, an anecdote is narrated about a man who gets himself killed because he inappropriately expounds similarly lofty principles as those of Confucius to an unappreciative audience. We are then told that the audience matters for how we should construct our arguments and that

凡有道者，應卒而〔不〕乏，遭難而能免，故天下貴之。

all those who possess the Way do not fall short in their response to sudden challenges, and when they encounter difficulty, they are able to extricate themselves. Therefore they are esteemed by all the world.⁸⁶

In an elaborate description of various ranks of *Ru* 儒, *Xunzi* characterises the “great Ru” as those who emulate the former kings and who internalise their ethical standards so firmly that even among wild beasts they could still tell right and wrong apart like black and white and that

倚物怪變，所未嘗聞也，所未嘗見也，卒然起一方，則舉統類而應之無所儼作。

even when confronted with the most outlandish problems and bizarre turns, with things unseen and unheard of, you could suddenly raise one aspect of the matter and they would respond, without doubt or embarrassment, by raising the proper categories.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ *Xunzi* 13: 63.20–21.

⁸⁶ *Huainanzi* 18: 197.6.

⁸⁷ *Xunzi* 8: 33.3–5. Note the possible allusion to *Lunyu* 7.8: 子曰：「不憤不啟，不悱不發；舉一隅不以三隅反，則不復也。」(The Master said, “I do not enlighten anyone unless he is keen, nor do I help anyone to express himself unless he struggles for words. If I raise one corner of a square and he does not come back to me with the other three, I will not repeat the exercise.”).

Possibly, even the narrative introduction to *Mengzi* 孟子 1A6 reflects the convention of rulers' testing someone's wit with sudden questions:

孟子見梁襄王。出，語人曰：「望之不似人君，就之而不見所畏焉。卒然問曰：『天下惡乎定？』」

When Mengzi came out from an audience with King Xiang of Wei, he said to the people (waiting outside): "Looking from a distance he didn't look like a lord of men, and when I approached him I could not see anything awe-inspiring. Suddenly he asked, 'How is the realm to be settled? [...]'"⁸⁸

Obviously, tests of intellectual and rhetorical abilities must have been a much more common practice than their inconspicuous reflection in early Chinese literature would suggest. Similar practices, albeit in different contexts, are far more prominent in the Han and early mediaeval periods. In the light of the semantics of *she* discussed above, one might consider whether the genre *she wen* 設問 is translated satisfactorily with "hypothetical questions" or whether here, too, the quality of the questions is not primarily hypothetical but, above all, cunning and aiming to ensnare the person one challenges and test his skills of repartee to the limits. What is required in such exercises, at least in early China, is promptness of reply and that one should not "get cornered", i.e. that one can hold one's own in a dispute, without getting baffled and into an impasse. Early Chinese literature had technical terms for both.

"To be at one's wits' end" is usually expressed with the word *qiong* 窮, less often with near synonyms, such as *jiu* 疚 or *kun* 困. If it is the ruler himself who gets cornered in a dispute, this is obviously a cause for concern, as the king of Qin bemoans when he asks his advisor Gan Mao: "The envoys of Chu are in such good shape that whenever I dispute with them, I am quickly at my wits' end. What can I do about this?"⁸⁹ But, embarrassing as such a situation must be, the texts reflect that rulers (or people in commanding positions on any level) were far more concerned about subordinates who are soon at their wits' end when challenged with difficult questions. The chief reason for this is voiced in "an adage" (*yan* 諺), cited in *Huainanzi* as follows:

鳥窮則喙獸窮則犇人窮則詐。

A bird, when cornered, pecks with its beak, a quadruped charges with its horns, and a person resorts to deceit.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ *Mengzi* 1A6: 69–71.

⁸⁹ 秦王謂甘茂曰：楚客來使者多健。與寡人爭辭，寡人數窮焉。為之奈何？(*Zhanguo ce* 24.21).

⁹⁰ *Huainanzi* 11: 102.12–13. Cf. *Wenzi* 9 (47.16) 「獸窮即觸鳥窮即啄人窮即詐。」 and *Han shi waizhuan* 2 (10.5): 「獸窮則齧鳥窮則啄人窮則詐。」

In the *Mengzi* passage discussed above this was put in less drastic terms: “from evasive speech one can recognise where someone is at his wits’ end” (*dunci zhi qi suo qiong* 遁辭知其所窮).

Clearly, rhetorical skills were not universally frowned upon but also considered a desirable quality. Only autocratist texts like *Shangjun shu* and *Hanfeizi* condemn *all* such skills as a potential danger to the ruler’s monopoly on power, including the ability to argue analytically, emphasising logical distinctions (*bian* 辨/辯). In pragmatic texts as preserved especially in the two versions of “Guan ren”, *bian* is described as a positive skill. Only rhetorical skills that are used for the purpose of deception are criticised. *Qiao yan* consistently refers in *all* texts to this undesirable type of rhetoric. If not used for distortion of facts, as characteristic of the type “without substance” cited above, they are used by those who claim qualities they do not actually have, usually with the intent of occupying offices for which they are not qualified.

The section “examining intentions {words}” (*kao zhi {yan}* 考志{言}) of “Guan ren” concludes with the summary:

Being ostentatious {exaggerating} and lying, using crafty words, winning countenance and deferential bearing – this is one and the same thing. These are all cases of *pretending there is something where there is nothing*.⁹¹

DL	YZ
華如誣	華廢而誣
巧言令色足恭一也	巧言令色
皆以無為有者也	皆以無為有者也

In sum, the more pragmatic texts concerned with rhetorical performance show that, despite all wariness of rhetorical skills, repartee, the skill to respond adequately to a challenging question in a prompt and lucid manner, was a sought-after quality in officers.

Repartee was obviously valued, and several narratives assure us that many an adviser in early China profited from his quick-wittedness.⁹² At the same time, for those on the receiving end, repartee was also a suspicious quality, it could just be a well-practised pretence, rather than quick understanding that is firmly rooted in sustained reflection and keen insight – qualities described as “thoughtful” (*you lü* 有慮) and “to have substance” (*you zhi* 有質) in “Guan ren”. Prolonged

⁹¹ *Da Dai Liji* 72: 60.13–14; *Yi Zhoushu* 58: 32.19–20.

⁹² The most frequent term for repartee occurs in different forms: the most appropriate probably being *jieji* 捷給, otherwise written as *jieji* < *tsap-kəp 接給, *jieji* < *dzap-kəp 捷急, or even *jiji* < *dzəj-kəp (?) 齊給.

disputations would have been an effective way of testing whether a candidate had a well-founded way of reasoning or just a stock of impressive witticisms up his sleeve. The description in “Guan ren” of the following two types seems to reflect such a practice:

One who understands only small matters and cannot decide anything greater, who is capable only of small things but cannot achieve anything greater, who attends to small matters but does not understand the greater principles, who is fickle and self-serving [...] – such a one is called *a pretentious boaster*.

One whose advice and admonitions are inadequate and who practices the Way in an inequitable fashion – such a one is called *someone undeserving of his title*.⁹³

DL	YZ
小知而不大決	少知而不大決
小能而不大成	少能而不大成
顧小物而不知大論	規小物而不知大倫
亟變而多私	
曰華誕者也	曰華誕者也
規諫而不類	規諫而不類
道行而不平	道行而不平
曰巧名者也	曰竊名者也

In section five of “Guan ren”, which is devoted to “observing concealments” (*guan yin* 觀隱), the descriptions of those “who conceal behind a pretence of knowledge and reason” and those “who conceal behind a pretence of refinement and art” show an attention to disputation with regard to not just its arguments but also its technique:

Someone who pushes his earlier demerits into the background, who strives to be closely informed about matters (?),⁹⁴ Who pushes to the foreground and boasts about his own achievements and plays down his deficiencies. [...] ⁹⁵ Then, when his deliberation of a problem does not lead him to a solution, he pretends that he merely does not say it. When he does not really have enough in himself, he puts on a face as if he had so much more to offer. Thus he contrives to move people. [...] He only follows his own line of argument, not allowing for counter-arguments, he makes statements but does not follow through with them; no one understands their true inner condition [...]. – Such a one is *one who hides behind a pretence of knowledge and reason*.

⁹³ *Da Dai Liji* 72: 62.12–14; *Yi Zhoushu* 58: 34.8–10.

⁹⁴ This passage is badly corrupted in both versions, so the translation has to be very tentative. I follow Kong Guangsen’s supposition that *zhong fu* 忠府 was miswritten for *si fu* 思附. *Da Dai Liji buzhu* 10.5b.

⁹⁵ This last sentence “*shao qi suo bu zu* 少其所不足”, as well as further down “*gu zhi yi dong ren* 故知以動人” are probably glosses of the respective preceding sentences.

Someone who (vapidly) moves people with words, who goes through a matter without getting to the end of it {who exhausts his capacity without getting to the bottom of it}, who does not answer when you ask him and pretends that he is not cornered but puts on an appearance of having [arguments in] abundance, who has {a false} method [of arguing] that follows only his own line of reasoning. He applies this method to the matter in hand, so that when he is cornered he pretends [not to speak because] he is ever so profound.⁹⁶ – Such a one is *one who hides behind a pretence of refinement and art*.⁹⁷

DL	YZ
推前惡	
忠府知物焉	
首成功	前總唱功
少其所不足	
慮誠不及	慮誠弗及
佯為不言	佯為不言
內誠不足	內誠不足
色示有餘	色示有餘
故知以動人	
自順而不讓	自順而不讓
錯辭而不遂	措辭而弗遂
莫知其情	
如是者隱於知理者也	此隱於智理者也
素動人以言	動人以言
涉物而不終	竭而弗終
問則不對	問則不對
詳為不窮	佯為不窮
色示有餘	□貌而有餘
有道而自順	假道而自順
用之物	因之□初
窮則為深	窮則託深
如此者隱於文藝者也	如此者隱於文藝者也

These descriptions of personalities are not mere records of someone's personal experience. They break up the infinite and unmanageable variety of possible human behaviour into a finite number of types. Based on collective and collected

⁹⁶ As in the case of the two pairs of types from section two of “Guan ren”, i.e. the “considerate vs. stupid and dull” types compared with the “resolute vs. irresolute” types, these two descriptions of concealment techniques seem to be variations of one and the same. Some of the sentences of one type have very close correspondences in the other. Surely, “*qiong ze wei {tuo} shen* 窮則為{託}深” describes the same behaviour as “*lü cheng bu ji yang wei bu yan se shi you yu* 慮誠不及佯為不言色示有餘” – a person who, when he cannot respond to a challenge, smiles knowingly and pretends to have so much more profound insight in the problem than he cares to share with us.

⁹⁷ *Da Dai Liji* 72: 61.11–14; *Yi Zhoushu* 58: 33.12–14.

experience, they formulate repeated occurrences of the same behaviour as regularities, thus gaining a measure of control over the phenomenon of human inscrutability that Confucius complained about in the passage quoted at the beginning of this article. By recognising and treating rhetoric as something technical, teachable and learnable, this disconcerting skill of our fellow humans is demystified and made administrable. Such typologies to some extent relieve their users of the responsibility to devise their own interpretation of situations and people. By falling back on observable criteria, sanctioned by consensus as indications of certain personality types, they could at least complement and support their own individual impressions.

As one needed people with rhetorical skills just as much as one needed to gain and maintain control over them, it is to be expected that the insight into rhetorical techniques was not only used as an analytical tool to protect oneself against the rhetorical skills of others, but also to hone the rhetorical prowess of one's own people. The necessary training of such skills would probably have been conducted orally and not relied on written texts to any great extent. Hence there is little chance that we find direct evidence of such practices in transmitted texts. Nevertheless, some texts seem to be inspired by riddle questions of the sort that may have been used in the training of repartee. In these transmitted texts, however, we find this kind of textual material elevated onto a higher level of philosophical discourse and literary brilliance. It is impossible to tell whether elements of originally pragmatic texts were used directly as “building blocks” to compose these texts or whether such pragmatic texts merely served as an inspiration in the composition of texts that imitated or alluded to the textual forms used in the practice of repartee. Most prominently, the “Heavenly Questions” (“Tian wen” 天問) in the Chuci 楚辭 collect a similar kind of trick questions – sometimes unanswered and sometimes answered – as those put to Zou Ji in the anecdotes mentioned above. But other texts, too, offer questions that stand out either as touching upon similarly fundamental issues, or just as particularly original or tricky. The Zhuangzi chapter “Revolutions of Heaven” (“Tian yun” 天運) starts out in such a way, and arguably the rest of the chapter is still indebted to practices of training in disputation. The “Questions of Tang” (“Tang wen” 湯問) in Liezi 列子 are a similar case, and another outstanding example are the “Fu” 賦 in Xunzi. It is impossible to say how closely the riddles in these texts correspond to those used in the training of repartee, and this is not the place to dispute the possibly vain question of whether the primary purpose of these transmitted texts was to philosophise or whether they were originally composed for more mundane uses such as rhetorical training. Most probably these functions were not mutually exclusive, and this goes for other cultures and periods in history, including the present, as well.

What is worth pointing out, however, is that it is not advisable to take the primarily philosophical or literary nature of texts for granted and to apply this assumption as the only or primary interpretive key to a particular text. This is of especial importance in our interpretation of newly discovered texts from early China. Two manuscripts from the Shanghai Museum collection of unprovenanced ca. 300 BCE Chu manuscripts are a case in point. Their completely identical text (as far as the fragmented state of the manuscripts allows us to ascertain) is titled *Fan wu liu xing* 凡物流形 (“All beings flow into form”). This title is found on the verso of slip three of what has been published as the B manuscript – not, however, in the A manuscript. The text consists almost exclusively of questions, most of them unanswered.⁹⁸ The reading of many parts of this text is still uncertain, due to a host of unresolved palaeographic issues, but this is not the place to discuss these. The following, fairly unproblematic part of the text shall suffice to illustrate its nature, both in terms of form and content:

凡物流形	*G ^s en	All beings flow into form,
奚得而成	*m-den	how do they get to be completed?
流形成體	*r ^s ij?	When by flowing into form their bodies are completed,
奚得而不死	*sij?	how do they get to become immortal?
既成既生	*sren	Having become completed, having been born,
奚呱而鳴	*m.reŋ	how do they howl and cry?
既本既根	*k ^s ən	Having root, having base,
奚後1/2(之)奚先	*s ^s ər	which comes after, which comes first? ⁹⁹
陰陽之尻	*ka-s	The dwellings of the light and dark, ¹⁰⁰
奚得而固	*k ^s a-s	how do they get to be fixed?
水火之和	*G ^s oj	The mingling of water and fire,
奚得而不危	*ŋoj	how does one get it not to be treacherous? ¹⁰¹
聞之曰	*G ^w at	I have heard it said: ¹⁰²

⁹⁸ The text presented here is based on the reconstruction by the Fudan University study group (see Fudan daxue chutu wenxian yu gu wenzi yanjiu zhongxin yanjiusheng dushu hui 2008) but is written throughout in modern orthography and with original punctuation and column breaks indicated.

⁹⁹ In both manuscripts “zhi 之” was originally omitted and later inserted into the text in what appears to be a different hand. The different shape of the character may, however, also be due to the need to squeeze it into the very small available space, so it is hard to be sure of a different hand. The small numbers of the format “1/2” in the Chinese text indicate the end of one slip (1) and beginning of another (2).

¹⁰⁰ The study group suggests an error for xù 序 (*s-la?).

¹⁰¹ The study group suggests a reading in the sense of gui 詭 (*kwai?).

¹⁰² Li Rui (2009) reads the character 聞 here and in the following text on slip 8 as “wen 聞”, instead of as “wen 問”, as Cao Jinyan 曹錦炎 does in Ma Chengyuan 2008: 227.

民人流形	*G ^s en	People flow into forms,
奚得而生 ^{2/3}	*sren	how do they get to be born?
流形成體	* _l ^s ij?	When by flowing into forms their bodies are completed,
奚失而死	*sij?	how do they slip away and die?
[...]		[...]
祭禩奚升乎	*s-təŋ *G ^s a	How does the sacrifice ascend?
如之何思餽	*pr ^s u?	In what way does one hope for satiation? ¹⁰³
順天之道乎	*l ^s u? *G ^s a	Going with the way of Heaven, ah,
奚以為首乎	*lhu? *G ^s a	what do we take to come first?
既得 ^{7/8} 百姓之和乎	*G ^s oj *G ^s a	Having obtained harmony of the Hundred Clans,
奚事之	*m-s-rəʔ-s*tə	how is it served?
敬天之盟	*mraŋ	The bond of revered Heaven,
奚得	*t ^s ək	how is it obtained?
鬼之神	*Cə.lin	The spirits of ghosts,
奚飭	*s-m-lək-s	how are they fed?
先王之智 _一	*tre-s	The wisdom of the Former Kings,
奚備	*brək-s	how is it procured?
聞之曰	*G ^w at	I have heard it said:
升 ^{8/9} 高從埤	*pe	Rising high starts from low down. ¹⁰⁴
至遠從邇	*ne?	Getting far starts from nearby.
十圍之木	*C.m ^s ok	A tree measuring ten spans around
其始生如蘗	*ŋat	once began to sprout as a small twig.
足將至千里	*rəʔ	Feet that are about to go a thousand miles
必從寸始 _L	*l _ə ʔ	must start at the first inch (of the way).
日之有 ^{9/10} 耳 _一	*C.nəʔ	As for the sun's having ears (flares / eruptive prominences): ¹⁰⁵
將何聽	*lh ^s en	What is it going to hear?
月之有軍 _一	*kun	As for the moon's having troops (a halo: *wəns 暈):
將何征	*ten	Where are they going to march?

103 餽 is in the manuscript written as <餽 below 卯>.

104 “埤” is here read as *bī* (“low”, also written as 卑) – a reading also attested in transmitted literature.

105 Cao Jinyan (Ma Chengyuan 2008: 248) reads the character “耳” (**nəʔ* > *ěr*) as the near homophonous “珥” (**nəh* > *ěr*), which apparently refers to solar flares and is conventionally mentioned together with “yun 暈”, a circular halo or a circular movement. (Cf. *Lüshi chungiu* 6.5 “Ming li 明理”: “其日有鬥蝕有倍僑有暈珥[...]其月有薄蝕有暉珥[...]”, translated by Knoblock and Riegel as “*The Sun*: There are eclipses in which it is torn apart and eaten. There are occasions when it is surrounded by vapors on its side and top. There are vapors that surround it like a halo and dangle from either side like earrings. [...] *The Moon*: There are occasions when it is eclipsed, when vapors surround it like a halo or dangle from its side like earrings [...]”, Knoblock/Riegel 2000: 168–169.) However, the context here suggests strongly that the literal meaning “ear” is in the foreground, although the reference to solar flares is clear, just as in the following verses “yun 暈” stands for the revolving movement of the moon and for its halo at the same time. Puns like these are to be expected in this kind of text.

水之東流	*r(i)u	As for the rivers' flowing eastward:
將何盈	*leŋ	What are they going to fill?
日之始出	*k-hlut	When the sun begins to emerge,
何故大而不耀	*liaukh	for what reason is it then large but does not yet glare? ¹⁰⁶

From the very beginning of its reception, i.e. when the manuscript was published in 2008, this text has been treated as a philosophical text. It has been celebrated as an early stage in the development of metaphysical thought and, in terms of genre, as a precursor of *Chuci* 楚辭. However, to suggest that the text “should be considered as belonging to the immortal oeuvre of our great ancient poet Qu Yuan”,¹⁰⁷ as its editor Cao Jinyan 曹錦炎 does, goes far beyond what we can reasonably conjecture.

It is obvious that *Fan wu liu xing* shares the peculiarity of consisting, for the most part, of questions with the “Heavenly Questions” in *Chuci* and some other early Chinese texts, as mentioned above. It is equally beyond doubt that many of the questions are profound and exactly the manner of questions philosophy is concerned with. One could argue that even if the text does not answer most of its questions, the very act of raising them is philosophical in nature, as it can teach us something about the world, or at least stimulate philosophising. One could certainly use the text to discuss these questions.

That *Fan wu liu xing* may serve as a stimulus for answering the many open questions it collects is surely true, but the nature of at least some of these questions appears to be facetious and designed to provoke witticisms rather than genuine gnosis. It seems mistaken to consider philosophising as the primary intention of this text. For example “*ji ben ji gen xi hou (zhi) xi xian* 既本既根奚後(之)

106 A passage in the “Questions of Tang” (Tang wen 湯問) of *Liezi* 列子 suggests that this riddle was widely known in early China. In A.C. Graham’s translation, the passage reads: “When Confucius was travelling in the East, he saw two small children arguing and asked them the reason. One child said he thought that the sun is nearer to us at sunrise, the other that it is nearer at noon. The first child said: ‘When the sun first rises it is as big as the cover of a car; by noon it is as small as a plate or bowl. Don’t you think it must be nearer when it is big than when it is small?’ The other child answered: ‘When the sun first rises the air is cool, by noon it is like dipping your hand in hot water. Don’t you think it must be nearer when it is hot than when it is cool?’ Confucius could not decide the question. The two children laughed: ‘Who says you are a learned man?’” (Graham 1960: 104–105; 孔子東游，見兩小兒辯鬪。問其故。一兒曰：「我以日始出時去人近，而日中時遠也。一兒以日初出遠，而日中時近也。」一兒曰：「日初出大如車蓋；及日中，則如盤盂：此不為遠者小而近者大乎？」一兒曰：「日初出滄滄涼涼；及其日中如探湯：此不為近者熱而遠者涼乎？」孔子不能決也。兩小兒笑曰：「孰為汝多知乎？」 [Yang Bojun 1979: 168–169]).

107 當屬我國古代偉大詩人屈原的不朽之作。(Ma Chengyuan 2008: 222).

奚先” cannot well be a serious question. It is obviously designed to confuse the person challenged to answer this question, which is either nonsensical (if we understand *gen* 根 as “root” and hence the questions as “Having root, having root, which comes after, which comes first?”) or obvious (if we read it as “base”: “Having root, having base, which comes after, which comes first?”). Responding to such a “problem” (*wu* 物) successfully requires us to recognise the trap that the question sets up for us (*she* 設). Otherwise we are prone to be speechless (*qiong* 窮) for at least a while, rather than delivering an impressive and probably equally witty response promptly (*jieji* 捷給/接給), perhaps even like an echo (*ru yingxiang* 如應響). Other questions are based on a pun: “As for the sun’s having ears / eruptive prominences, what is it going to hear? As for the moon’s having troops / a halo, where are they going to march?” Surely, the point of such a question is rather to challenge its audience to come up with a similarly witty answer, possibly another pun. Ruminations about the sun’s having ears and hearing something surely are not a stepping-stone in the history of Chinese philosophy. To assume that such questions were early forms of metaphysical reasoning would portray early Chinese philosophy as a rather exotic, quaint business. It seems more appropriate to consider the text as primarily pragmatic, as useful material to train repartee and impressive rhetorical performance. That the text is rhymed throughout may well be an indication of its didactic function, rather than of an ambition to create poetry in the sense of belles lettres. To read *Fan wu liu xing* as a precursor of the *Chuci* chapter “Tian wen” is ultimately a teleological approach. Acknowledging that the text is not yet well understood in its entirety, I propose provisionally to consider it as a teaching tool in the training of rhetoric, which was an essential qualification for people aspiring to government office.

The reading of early Chinese texts with attention to possible practical applications does not need to detract from the more traditional philosophical readings of the same texts. On the contrary, it adds to a diachronic perspective on these texts and helps us form a more clearly contoured view of the development of philosophical ideas, which is in part a process of abstraction from narrower, quotidian concerns. The perception and evaluation of rhetorical skills in early China seems to have been driven not just by idealistic considerations but was to a large extent a crucial part of evaluating individuals, an increasingly important concern in the advent of meritocracy.

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