

2.4 THE RHETORICAL ARTS AND POLITICAL PERSUASION

One of the consequences of the increasing social mobility characteristic of the Warring States period was the great weight that was attached to the ability to think quickly and speak well. Cleverness of speech came to be seen as a measure of practical acumen, and those who sought to rise to high positions within their home states or who sought positions at courts abroad studied the arts of rhetoric with great earnestness. At the courts of rulers and powerful warlords, courtiers vied with one another to win or maintain the trust of those in power, who could reward and punish at their whim.

Under these conditions, the art of persuasion became an important aspect of the training of promising men. The way in which this tradition developed possesses great implications for our understanding of Classical history. The Warring States era is named after a text, the *Zhanguo ce*, or *Intrigues of the Warring States*. That text is an extensive collection of anecdotes recounting the backgrounds and consequences of court speeches delivered by ministers or visiting *shi* to rulers of the various states. These anecdotes present us with very detailed accounts of the political events of the period from the mid-fifth to late third centuries, and the text served as a basis for much of the narrative of the Warring States period that Sima Qian included in his *Shiji*.

However, about forty years ago, a sinologist named J. I. Crump demonstrated with great persuasiveness that the *Zhanguo ce* was not written as a historical record. Rather, it was a collection of imaginative accounts, some based on historical fact, others pure fiction, that were intended not for students of history but for students of rhetoric. The text was an exercise book for young men aspiring to status and wealth through rhetorical skills. Crump's hypothesis undermined our confidence in our sources for Warring States history, by suggesting how presentation of "facts" and persuasion were linked in the classical narrative, but it also opened a window to understanding the "professional" profile of rhetorical arts in early China (resembling, in some ways, the role played by Sophism in Greece during the same age).

Upon examination, sections of certain other Warring States texts that seem to preserve historical facts turn out instead to be storehouses of conventional anecdotes explicitly presented as literary tropes useful in persuasions. One very influential text, the Legalist work *Han Feizi*, includes many chapters which are collections of anecdotes ordered under headers which mark appropriate issues in convincing a ruler to adopt a Legalist point of view.

For example, in one of these chapters, "The Seven Tactics," an introductory section lists very tersely seven precepts which a ruler ought to adopt in administration, according to the tenets of Legalism. The first of these is, "Comparing and inspecting different points of view." Each of the tactics is then explained in more detail somewhat further on. In the case of the first, we read, "If the ruler does not compare things he sees and hears he will never get at the truth. If what he hears all derives from one particular conduit, he will be deceived by his ministers." Then there follow a list

of evidentiary sources, beginning, “This rule is proved by the dwarf’s dream of the cooking stove.” The main body of the chapter consists of a long series of anecdotes. The first runs like this:

Mi Zixia was a favorite of Duke Ling of Wei, who entrusted to him the administration of all public affairs. One day, the Duke’s dwarf jester said, “Your humble servant’s dream has come true!”

“What did you dream?” asked the Duke.

“Your servant dreamed of your majesty, but saw a cooking stove.”

“What!” shouted the Duke. “I have always heard that anyone who dreams of a ruler sees the sun. Why would you have seen me as a cooking stove?”

“Indeed,” replied the dwarf, “the sun shines upon everything under Heaven. Nothing can obscure it. And a ruler reigns over everyone in the state and nothing can delude him. This is why it is so that one who dreams of a ruler dreams he sees the sun. The light from a cooking stove, on the other hand, can be obscured if someone stands in front of it. Now, let us say that there were someone standing in front of your majesty. Would it not be possible for your servant to dream of your majesty as a cooking stove?”

Clearly, the tale itself is fiction, though in this case, some of the background facts are correct. The point of the tale is to provide the Legalist courtier with ammunition for convincing a ruler of the wisdom of the Legalist dictum that no ruler should allow too much power to devolve to any one minister. The text is an “insider’s” handbook – if you’re looking for just the right rhetorical trick to engage a ruler and convince of your wisdom, it seems to say, just try one of these.

The history of the Classical period has been “constructed” from thousands of anecdotes such as this one, preserved as tools of rhetoric in the texts of the various intellectual factions. It seems near impossible to determine how much of our detailed knowledge of the Warring States period is based on facts and how much on the collective imagination of courtiers whose speech-making anecdotes are actually the beginning of fiction in China.

Nevertheless, it would be correct to say that this ongoing process of recreating the past as didactic fiction was a means by which the literate class of *shi* created its own view of the Eastern Zhou era. What actually “happened,” even in the very recent past, may have had less impact on the times than the way in which character and event were re-embroidered into string after string of moral and political lessons. In some ways, the characters of this world of anecdotes – even the ones who never lived – may have had more influence on the Classical elite than the men and women as they really were.

There follow here two outstanding instances of this rhetorical tradition, both taken from the *Zhanguo ce*.

Tall and Handsome Zou Ji

Zou Ji, Prime Minister of the state of Qi, was very tall, with a lithe and handsome figure. Donning his court robes and cap, he caught sight of himself in the mirror. “Whom do you think is better looking,” he asked his wife, “Lord Xu of Chengbei or me?”

“You are far better looking!” said his wife. “How could Lord Xu compare to you?”

But Lord Xu was famous in Qi for his good looks, and still feeling uneasy about it, Zou Ji asked his concubine as well. “Who is better looking, Lord Xu or I?”

She too answered, “How could Lord Xu compare to you!”

The next morning a guest came to visit, and while sitting and talking with him Zou Ji asked, “Whom do you think is better looking, Lord Xu or me?”

“Lord Xu does not compare with you!” said the guest.

The following day, Lord Xu himself came to call. Zou Ji gazed at him for a long time and realized that he fell short of Lord Xu. When he went to observe himself again in the mirror he saw he fell far short indeed.

That night when he went to bed he lay thinking. “My wife said I was better looking because she favors me. My concubine said I was better looking because she fears me. My guest said I was better looking because he wanted something from me!”

Upon his next visit to court he appeared before King Wei and said, “I am well aware that I am not as good looking as Lord Xu. Yet my wife, who favors me, my concubine, who fears me, and a guest who came to call because he wanted something from me all told me that I am better looking than Lord Xu. Now the state of Qi is a thousand *li* square and contains within it a hundred and twenty cities. Within it there are no the palace ladies and attendants who do not favor Your Majesty, no court ministers who do not fear you, and no one within its four borders who does not want something from you. Looking at it like this, the truth must surely be hidden from your sight!”

“You are right!” said the King, and he issued an order: “Any minister, officer, or common person who will criticize my faults to my face shall receive the highest reward. Any who submit a memorial remonstrating with me shall receive a second class reward. Any who stand in the markets and utter public reproaches of me that reach my ears shall receive a reward of the third class.”

When the notice was first issued, the officials crowded into palace presenting remonstrances until the court gateway looked like a marketplace. After several months, they came only sporadically.

By the time a year had gone by, though people may have wished to say something, there was nothing left to criticize. Thereupon the states of Yan, Zhao, Han, and Wei all submitted as subjects to the court of Qi. This is called “a war won within the confines of one’s court.”

(*Zhanguo ce, Qi ce* 122)

Under what circumstances would a tale such as this one have been a useful tool for a court persuader? Note that the tale serves on two levels: it illustrates a clever persuasion, and by recounting the circumstances of that persuasion and attributing it to Zou Ji (a well known figure) it can add to the legitimacy of the actual persuader’s argument.

* * *

Chu Long Advises the Dowager Queen

The following persuasion is not one that persuaders would have used directly in remonstrating with a ruler or showing off their talents. The situation it describes would rarely have been encountered – there were very few instances of de facto power falling so openly into the hands of a woman, and the issue of protecting a son from dangers was a narrow one. It is likely that this account was preserved in the *Intrigues* because it so gracefully exemplifies a cardinal lesson of persuasion: that one’s rhetorical moves much match the mood and character of the ruler addressed. Persuasion was not simply a matter of memorizing a bag of tricks; it was an art, as this anecdote clearly intends to illustrate.

In the tale, the minister Chu Long of Zhao addresses the widow of his late ruler soon after her husband’s death. His heir apparent, her first-born son, is unready for the throne, and she has come to his assistance by managing the daily affairs at court. As indicated in the story, the state of Qi has demanded that she send her younger son, titled the Lord of Chang’an, to Qi as a hostage before it will agree to send troops to aid Zhao in repelling the armies of Qin.

When the Dowager Queen of Zhao first took charge of state affairs, Qin launched a sudden attack. Zhao sent a request for aid to Qi, but Qi replied, “We will dispatch troops only if you send the Lord of Chang’an to us as a good-faith hostage.” The Queen flatly refused. Her ministers strongly remonstrated with her, but she told them in no uncertain terms, “I will spit in the face of the next person who tells me I must send the Lord of Chang’an as a hostage!”

The General of the Left, Chu Long, requested an audience with the Dowager Queen. She was sitting in a rage awaiting him as he entered the hall. Though he made an effort to hurry, he shuffled very slowly across to stand before her. “Your aged servant has an injured leg,” he apologized. “I cannot walk very quickly. That is why it has been very long since I have been able to come see you. From my own ills I felt a sense of empathy, and concerned that your majesty might also be suffering from some ailment I have looked eagerly for an opportunity to visit your majesty.”

The Queen replied, “I myself must depend upon a sedan chair to move about.”

“May I trust that your majesty’s appetite remains healthy?”

“I live entirely on gruel.”

“I find that I am frequently without any appetite at all now,” said Chu Long, “and so I force myself to walk three or four *li* each day. It lets me find a little pleasure in my food, and it is good for my body.”

“I could not manage as much,” said the Queen. Her fierce countenance had somewhat relaxed.

Chu Long said, “I have an offspring named Shuqi, my youngest son. He is a worthless youth, but in my dotage I love him dearly and wish that he could wear the black robes of the Palace Guard. And so your aged servant makes this request at the risk of his life!”

“I am pleased to approve it,” said the Queen. “How old is he?”

“Only fifteen,” replied Chu Long. “Very young indeed. But it has been my hope to see him well taken care of before I fall by the wayside.”

“So men too dote upon their young sons?” asked the Queen.

“More than women.” replied Chu Long.

“Oh no,” laughed the Queen. “With mothers it is an extraordinary thing!”

“And yet,” continued Chu Zhe, “if I may be so bold, it seems your majesty loves your daughter, the Queen of Yan, more than your son, the Lord of Chang’an.”

“You are mistaken,” replied the Queen. “I am much fonder of the Lord of Chang’an.”

“When parents love their children,” said Chu Long, “they plan for their futures with great care. When you sent off your daughter off upon her marriage to the king of Yan, you clung to her heels and wept, bereft with grief that she was departing far away. But once she was gone, you prayed at every sacrifice saying, ‘Let her not return!’ It was not that you did not long for her, but that you were set on her future, and hoped that her sons and grandsons would one day sit upon the throne in Yan”

“Yes, that is so” said the Queen.

“Now, from the time that Zhao first became a state until three generations ago, was there any younger son of the royal family who held an estate as a marquis whose descendants still hold that title?”

“No,” said the Queen.

“And this is not only so in Zhao. In other states, are there any descendants of such younger sons still in possession of the ranks of their forbears?”

“I have not heard of any.”

“In some of those cases,” said Chu Long, “the younger son met disaster in his lifetimes; in other cases it was his sons or grandson who encountered misfortune. How could it be that every such younger son was unworthy? Misfortune came to them because they were granted high honors without having achieved any merit, awarded rich gifts of land without having worked for them, and bestowed great emblems of rank and office. Now your majesty has honored your son with the title Lord of Chang’an and given him an estate of rich and fertile lands, bestowing on him great emblems of rank and office. Yet to this day you have not allowed him to do anything to win merit for the state of Zhao. Should the unthinkable happen and your majesty suddenly pass from the scene, what support could he rely on in the state of Zhao? It is because it seemed to me that you had not planned very carefully for his future that I presumed you did not seem to care as much for him as for your daughter, the Queen of Yan.”

“All right,” replied the Dowager Queen. “I leave it to you to arrange things as you see fit.”

Thereupon the Lord of Chang’an was provided an escort of a hundred chariots and sent off as a good-faith hostage, and the troops of Qi were quickly dispatched.

(Zhanguo ce, Zhao ce 286)

The “Hundred Schools”

The arts of rhetoric did not only come to guide discourse at court. The same tradition spawned a wide range of wisdom schools, for which the period of the Warring States is justly famed. These traditions are often referred to as “The Hundred Schools of the Masters,” and they trace their origins to Confucius.

We possess a number of texts that these wisdom traditions generated, and so important did these become to the intellectual history of China that they became the emblems of the Classical age, which is sometimes thought of simply as the “Age of the Hundred Schools.”

Modern Western scholarship has tended to treat these texts as “philosophical” rather than as historical or literary, but they are not, in fact, confined to any single disciplinary interest. They represent the free play of the Classical imagination – philosophical, literary, and historical. They should be understood as a byproduct of the persuader tradition for several reasons.

First, many parts of these texts were composed as arguments that could be used to persuade rulers to adopt certain policies or employ certain types of people (including the authors) at court. They are, essentially, persuasions, although they generally argue broad points of doctrine or ideology rather than positions related to some specific situation.

Second, like many persuaders who wished to attract patronage not on the basis of their specific ideas but on the basis of their general skills in rhetoric, these texts are displays of virtuoso abilities that were often intended to induce rulers or warlords to accept the authors as retainers whether or not their ideas are acceptable as bases for court policy. Wealthy patricians often enhanced their own prestige by providing talented men with financial and other forms of support.

Third, the authors of these texts, like the “wandering persuaders” who roamed from court to court in search of employment, were usually itinerant men of learning in search of patronage. These texts represented their “dossiers.” When rulers of states announced that they were opening their courts to talented men from afar and urged those seeking honor to come seek an audience, the authors of these texts would take their places besides military experts seeking armies to lead and glib Machiavellians offering clever schemes in return for ministerial positions.

But unlike the other persuaders, the authors of these texts addressed audiences beyond the court: disciples, for whom the texts were intended as important teaching tools, potential disciples, who would be attracted by the texts and come to study with those who were masters of them (bringing some form of tuition payment with them), and authors of competing texts, whose positions the author would attempt to discredit. These are the “academic” audiences of the text, and it is because the texts were written with them in mind that they seem, in many ways, to be talking to one another.

In the following sections, we will survey the most prominent of the texts of the Hundred Schools. The schools that we will explore include the School of Mozi (or Mohism), the later Confucians, the Daoists, the Naturalists, and the Legalists.

* * *

KEY TERMS

The persuader tradition

The “Hundred Schools”

STUDY QUESTION

Pick one of the following narratives and evaluate the likely mix of fact and persuasion that it illustrates, according to your own judgment: the tale of Wu Zixu; the story of Lord Mengchang and Feng Xuan; the biography of Lü Buwei.

Sources and Further Readings

There has been too little study done of the rhetorical arts of ancient China – a sharp contrast with the case of Greece, where rhetoric early on became a self-conscious art, generating manuals and theoretical treatises by as authoritative as Aristotle. In English, J.I. Crump’s work has yet to be superseded, although both our data and the general level of scholarship has advanced considerably. Crump’s translation of the *Zhanguo ce* (titled, in Wade-Giles transcription, *Chan-kuo Ts’ e* [Oxford: 1970]) is the only complete English translation published to date, and his *Intrigues of the Warring States* (Ann Arbor: 1964) remains a useful and readable study.