

## 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 Zhan-guo 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 Shi-ji.

However, about forty years ago, a sinologist named J. I. Crump demonstrated with great persuasiveness that the Zhan-guo 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 Fei-zi, 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 Zi-xia 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 Zhan-guo ce. (Crump’s complete translation is on Library Reserve. These translations are based on Burton Watson’s.)

### The Handsome Zou Ji

Zou Ji, prime minister of the state of Qi, was very tall and handsome of face and figure. One day, he was putting on his court robes and cap, and caught sight of himself in a mirror. “Who do you think is better looking,” he asked his wife, “I or Lord Xu of Cheng-bei?”

“Why, you are far better looking!” his wife replied. “How could Lord Xu compare to you?”

Zou Ji was not entirely convinced, however, and so he put the same question to his concubine.

“Who is better looking, Lord Xu or I?”

“Lord Xu could never compare to you,” she answered.

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

“Why, Lord Xu is nowhere near as handsome as you!” said the guest.

The following day, Lord Xu himself came to call. Zou Ji stared very hard at Lord Xu and realized that his own looks could never compare to Lord Xu’s. When he went to check in the mirror it was obvious that the distance between them was great.

That night when he went to bed he thought over what had happened. “My wife said I was better looking because she was partial to me. My concubine said I was better looking because she was afraid of me. And my guest said I was better looking because he wanted to get something out of me!”

The next time he went to court and had an audience with King Wei he made this speech. “I am certainly not as good looking as Lord Xu. Yet my wife, who is partial to me, my concubine, who is afraid of me, and a guest who came to call because he wanted something from me all have 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. In this vast realm, there are none of the palace ladies and attendants who are not partial to Your Majesty, none of the court ministers who do not fear you, and no one within its four borders who does not hope to get something from you. This being so, think how great must be the deception to your face!”

“You are right!” said the King, and he issued an ordinance saying that to any among the officials or people of the state who would attack his faults to his face he would give a reward of the first class; to any who would submit a letter of reprimand he would give a

reward of the second class; to any who spread critical rumors in the marketplace that reached his ears he would give a reward of the third class.

When the notice was first issued, the officials who came forward with criticisms packed the gate of the palace until it looked like the marketplace. After several months, there were still people who came forward with criticisms, but only from time to time. By the end of a year, though the King begged for further reprimands, no one could any longer find anything to criticize.

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.

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### **Chu Zhe 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 Zhe 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.

**The dowager queen of Zhao had recently taken over management of the state when Qin made a sudden attack on Zhao. Zhao sent a request to Qi asking for aid, but Qi replied, "We will dispatch our troops only on condition that you send the lord of Chang-an to us to be a hostage in Qi as token of Zhao's good faith." The queen refused to accept this demand. Her ministers strongly remonstrated with her because of her refusal, 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 high minister Chu Zhe requested an audience with the dowager queen. She was in a rage when he appeared, and gave him only a curt bow. He entered the hall very slowly and took his place before her apologizing, "I am afraid your old servant has an injured leg and cannot walk very quickly. That is why it has been so long since I have been able to come see you. As I thought of the trouble I have had with my own health, I began to wonder whether your majesty might also be suffering from some infirmity, and so I hoped to receive this chance for an audience."

The dowager queen replied, "I myself can get about only in a sedan chair."

"And is your appetite holding up these days?" asked Chu Zhe.

"I live entirely on gruel."

"I have myself very little appetite now," replied Chu Zhe. "But I force myself to walk three or four li each day, and as result my appetite has somewhat improved and I feel better."

"I am afraid that would be quite beyond what I can do," said the dowager queen, but her anger had subsided somewhat.

"I have a son named Shu-qi," continued Chu Zhe, "my youngest, and quite worthless. But I am an old man and I confess I love him dearly. I wish that he could be granted the black robes and numbered among the guards in the king's palace. I would give all I have to see such a request granted!"

"I will be happy to arrange it," said the queen. "How old is he?"

"Only fifteen," replied Chu Zhe. "I realize that is very young, but I would like to see him taken care of before I die."

"Then do men also dote on their sons?" asked the queen.

"Why, even more than women do!"

"Oh no," said the queen laughing. "When it comes to that, women are in a class by themselves!"

"Yet, if I may say so," continued Chu Zhe, "it would seem that your majesty loves your daughter, the queen of Yan, more than you do your youngest son, the lord of Chang-an."

"In this you are mistaken," replied the queen. "I am actually much fonder of the lord of Chang-an."

Chu Zhe said, “When parents love their children they plan carefully for their futures. When you sent off your daughter to marry the king of Yan, I remember that you clung to her heels and wept, and your heart was filled with sorrow thinking about how far away she was going. After she was gone, you never ceased to think of her and whenever you offered up a sacrifice you always prayed that the marriage might be successful and that she would not be sent home in disgrace. Was this not because you hoped that her sons and grandsons would one day sit upon the throne in Yan?”

“Yes,” said the queen, “you are right.”

“Think over all the years from the time when the ruling clan of Zhao first became the lords of this state until a few generations ago. During all those years, do you recall any younger sons of the royal family who were granted estates and the title of marquis whose descendants still hold that title today?”

“No,” said the queen. “There are none.”

“And not in Zhao alone! Are there any noble families founded by younger sons of rulers in other states which are still in existence?”

“No, I have not heard of any.”

Chu Zhe went on, “Some of those ruler’s sons who were granted estates encountered disaster in their own lifetimes, while in other cases it was their sons and grandsons who met with misfortune. Could this be because every younger son who was granted a title in this way was worthless? I think not. Rather, it was because they were granted great honors without having achieved any merit to deserve them, they were given rich endowments of land without having labored for them, and they were showered with treasures. Now you have honored your son with the title lord of Chang-an and given him an estate of rich and fertile lands, showering him with precious gifts. And yet to this time you have not allowed him to do anything to win merit for the state of Zhao. If your majesty should one day pass away, how could he expect to enjoy any safety in Zhao? That is why it seems to me that you have not planned very carefully for his future, and that is why I said that you did not seem to care as much for him as you did for your daughter, the queen of Yan.”

“You are right,” replied the dowager queen. “I will leave it to you to arrange things as you see fit.”

### 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 Mo-zi (or Mohism), the later Confucians, the Daoists, the Naturalists, and the Legalists.

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**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 Zi-xu; the story of Lord Meng-chang and Feng Xuan; the biography of Lü Bu-wei.*