

“HYPERTEXT” IN ANCIENT CHINA

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Abstract

Classical Chinese texts, written (mostly) on bamboo strips, have some features that are generally attributed to the uniqueness of modern electronic hypertext, such as non-linear, open-ended, multiaccental, interactive, and networked. Hence the term “bamboo hypertext.” Underlying those textual features is the collective workmanship characteristic of text production in ancient China. For example, Lao Zi’s *Dao De Jing* and Confucius’ *Lun Yu* (Analects) are actually compilations of writings produced and reproduced by generations of disciples over a span of decades or even centuries. While the texts bore the name of Lao Zi or Confucius as its official author, the master himself may never have contributed a single written word to the collection. In short, individual authorship/ownership of the text is basically a non-issue when it comes to the notion of collective workmanship embodied in bamboo hypertext.

Bamboo hypertext also fits into a rhetorical tradition that operates on a different philosophical basis. The fluidity of classical Chinese rhetoric is made possible by the fluidity of production and transformation of bamboo texts, as the latter imposes no physical limits on the motion of rhetoric. On the other hand, bamboo hypertext thrives also because of the open-ended, anti-logical nature of classical Chinese rhetoric, which, without suffering damages to textual “integrity,” permits—and sustains—fragmentation, continual transformation of text, reader/writer interaction, disruption of textual sequence, etc., features typically associated with the modern-day hypertext.

Keywords: Hypertext, classical Chinese text, rhetoric, logic and anti-logic

Introduction

Probably nobody would question that hypertext was first invented in Western industrial countries with the advancement of modern computer technology. Historians of writing may not agree on the exact date hypertext was born, but it seems the general consensus that it somewhere started in the 1960s, when Ted Nelson invented the term “hypertext.” A few years back, when I was in China doing research on classical Chinese rhetoric, somehow I developed a different idea about where and when hypertext was started. And I feel compelled to say hypertext was first invented in China, not in the modern age but, surprisingly enough, over two thousand years ago.

As Jay Bolter defines it, hypertext is “the interactive interconnection of a set of symbolic elements” (27). But we may also describe it as a networked discourse system with its own characteristics, such as multiaccentalism and interaction, which indicates a collective act of discourse creation in Cyberspace among many writers/readers. As a result of this collectivism, a hypertext is typically non-linear and open-ended. Rhetorically speaking, the feature of non-linearity points to the suspension of logic. Structurally, it means the text lacks unity. Because it is a network of many “come-and-go” texts, a hypertext is typically seen as fragmented and non-sequential. Hypertext’s open-endedness also implies a two-level meaning: at the rhetorical level, it suggests the text in Cyberspace is fluid—perpetually

shifting and unstable; at the structural level, it means the text resists closure and therefore has no end.

The reason I believe hypertext was first born in ancient China is because a classical Chinese text matches all those descriptions about hypertext: non-linear, open-ended, collective, multiaccental, interactive, and, above all, networked. In what follows, I wish to make my point by discussing three features of classical Chinese texts: 1) collective workmanship, 2) texts on bamboo strips, and 3) a different rhetorical tradition.

Collective Workmanship

Unlike Western logocentric rhetoric, classical Chinese rhetoric appeared predominantly non-linear. There are probably several reasons for this. One is that analytical thinking had never conquered the Chinese mind in ancient times. Another is that the *Yin-Yang* philosophy, which sees the world as a cosmological duality, had its grip on rhetoric. Still, there is one more reason to account for classical Chinese rhetoric's non-linearity: i.e., the production and circulation process of scholarly works.

Almost all the Chinese classics we have seen today, like Confucius' *Lun Yu* (Analects) and the *Zhuangzi*, can be described as "multiaccental" as they were generally a collection of short essays, paragraphs, and sentences written and rewritten by the disciples, or disciples of the disciples, of Confucius and Zhuang Zi over a span of decades or even centuries. While the texts bore the name of Confucius or Zhuang Zi, as its official author as a token of respect from those disciples, as Mark Lewis suggests (53), the master himself may never have contributed a single written word to the collection (though it is popularly believed that those quotations by Confucius or Zhuang Zi had the master's imprint one way or another).²⁵ The result was, after the texts had passed through numerous hands, they would invariably become inconsistent or self-contradictory in both meaning and purpose (i.e., non-linear rhetorically): Different disciples would use the master as a source of ethos to create their own texts (or agenda, using today's political terminology) with degrees of deviation and variance from the predecessors depending on the then social climate and scholarly trends.

So, we can say Confucius' *Analects* and the *Zhuangzi* were indeed a mixture of fragmented texts created through a collective authorship that transcended both time and space.²⁶ This would help explain why those classical texts are essentially multiaccental. Like modern hypertext, a typical classical Chinese work experienced no such thing as a single author controlling the text (the masters were already dead in most cases), or a single voice or line of argument asserting dominance over others. Because classical Chinese texts are "marred" by inconsistencies and self-contradictions due to the lack of a single authorship, as seen in almost all the classics,²⁷ traditional Chinese hermeneutics, known as *kao zhen* and *xun gu*, is largely a debate about what the author tried to say in a text, which could be interpreted contrarily due to the text's "slippery" nature.

Texts on Bamboo Strips

It is important to know that, before paper was invented, a typical Chinese book was actually written on bamboo strips that were strung together by cords (occasionally on silk), which, for physical reasons, would impose limits on the size of a book: Too many bamboo strips would make the book too heavy to carry around. So, what happened then is that the

²⁵ According to A. C. Graham, the *Zhuangzi* is "a collection of writings of the fourth, third, and second centuries B.C., in which only the Inner chapters can be confidently attributed to Chuang-tzu himself" (*Studies in Chinese Philosophy* 283).

²⁶ I suspect *The Bible* was also created that way in the West.

²⁷ I'm referring to those written during or before the Spring-Autumn and Warring States times (770–464; 463–222 B.C.).

writer had to remove (i.e., delete) some of the strips (i.e., some text) from the original book in order to carry around or to add his own writings to it. (It was very likely that he would sometimes do so deliberately to “cleanse” the text.) Because of this, the book was constantly changing in terms of content creation.

Likewise, the reader would have to remove some portion of a bamboo book (rolled into huge bundles) in order to read with ease. Consequently, there would be three options for the reader to do with that portion afterwards: 1) to “delete” it by dumping it into the trash can for various reasons; 2) to put it back into the book; or 3) to put it back, but not in the original order. Obviously, the last option points to the disruption of textual sequence, which further suggests the integrity of the book, if any, did not depend on sequence. Indeed, because the bamboo book was made of scores of separated bundles, the sequence of reading, which is prearranged by the author in a modern book, now fell completely in the hands of the reader, who could pick up whichever bundle (i.e., section) he (or, occasionally, she) wanted and start the joy of book reading. This may sound primitive to a reader who is used to modern print, but I would call that kind of ancient book “reader oriented” or “user friendly,” as the reader was able to take a more active role in interacting with the text. It was not only the writer who could decide what to keep or how to read; the reader had a say, too. (Does this remind us of a hypertext reader?) We can imagine that the writer did not have to worry about textual sequence, either: He could simply throw his own bundle into the bamboo pile. (Physically, the book looks like a bamboo pile.) Thus, technically speaking, a classical Chinese work had no definitive beginning or ending.

At this point, I probably can say that a bamboo book was a hypertext in itself, because it was indeed a “networked” text with many fragmentary sub-texts (on bamboo strips) bound together through cords (but not through logic). Because of the way the book was bound, a writer/reader could at his disposal remove, add, or rearrange the texts (Lewis 55), or simply connect them to another book, a phenomenon we see only in today’s hypertext. This kind of interaction with the texts would have two implications. First, it means, as mentioned, that the bamboo book was non-linear and non-sequential, just like an electronic hypertext: No matter how you read it, it makes sense (or does not make sense to the logocentric-minded). Second, it means that the bamboo book was fluid and open-ended, with numerous possibilities (it is “endless” in theory) of creating new ideas, new meanings, new interpretations, etc. Paul de Man says, “Rhetoric suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration” (10). I think he has a good example, from the ancient bamboo book in China, to support that view.

It is not hard to see why in ancient China a classic work commonly credited to a particular historic figure could result in numerous “adulterated” versions, because it was literally a social construction featuring an evolving process of textual transformation carried out by many writers/readers over the years. The variances of a text are the imprints of such a transformation, which further suggests that classical Chinese rhetoric was constantly shifting and therefore unstable due to the absence of individual authorship (or control). Like what we have seen in hypertext, rhetoric in ancient China was defined by motion rather than by “momentary location” (Moulthrop 303). Stanley Fish once argued, following Paul de Man, that rhetoric is based on what it aims to dissolve.²⁸ I tend to say classical Chinese rhetoric had done just that, but only two thousand years ago: In its virtually endless motion, it deconstructed itself, making unattainable any new totality in rhetoric.²⁹

²⁸ See his book *Doing What Comes Naturally*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1990 (p. 493).

²⁹ As a matter of fact, the motion stopped sometime during the Han Dynasty (202 B.C.–9 A.D.), when paper was invented. The rulers of the state also realized the need to uncover “orthodox” classics to control ordinary people’s thought.

Rhetorical Tradition

Apparently, the bamboo text fits well into a rhetorical tradition that operates on a different philosophical basis: namely, a tradition that values an anti-logical mode of thinking, typified in the model of *Yin-Yang* duality. In the Western mode of logocentric thinking, A is A and B is B. To the contrary, in Chinese thinking, A exists because of B, and *Yin* exists because of *Yang*, or vice versa; so A can be B, and B can be A. We can see this clearly from an excerpt from the *Zhuangzi*:

... the other arises out of the self, just as the self arises out of the other. This is the theory that self and other give rise to each other. Besides, where there is life, there is death; and where there is death, there is life. Where there is impossibility, there is possibility; where there is possibility, there is impossibility. It is because there is wrong, there is right. . . . Thereupon the self is also the other; the other is also the self.³⁰

There is probably no need for me to interpret Zhuang Zi's "meaning" here, but readers can clearly sense the anti-logical reasoning between the lines. The statement that "the self is also the other; the other is also the self" reflects the *Yin-Yang* principle that could be formalized as "A is B and B is A," as opposed to the logocentric thinking of "A is A and B is B," which is prevailing in Western culture. The *Zhuangzi*, and *Dao De Jing* as well, is one of those classics that have been impacting Chinese culture for over two millennia, so there is no reason to believe that a rhetoric that does not rely on methodical or logical argumentation cannot appeal to an audience.³¹ Little doubt the anti-logical feature of Chinese rhetoric will pose questions about the traditional perceptions, and strategies, of rhetoric in the West, prodding people to explore new areas to expand their conceptions on rhetoric as well as on culture and other issues. I would not say that the Chinese tradition is the right way to understand rhetoric, but at least it shows us an alternative to approaching this particular language art.³²

For instance, reason and logic are very much privileged in the Western tradition of rhetoric, under the assumption that they provide epistemological certainty to the writer/speaker as well as to the reader/listener. Texts as such often appear "ordered, controlled, teleological, referential, and autonomously meaningful" (Alvin Kernan 144). Also, because of the obsession with logos (i.e., logical appeal), the Western tradition tends to treat rhetorical practice as a unilateral action, in which the rhetor argues "single-handedly," from the beginning to end, just to prove he or she is right without yielding space for audience participation (Carolyn Matalene 803). In contrast, classical Chinese rhetoric operates rather paradoxically, with emphasis on understanding through distinction (i.e., between A and B, *Yin* and *Yang*, right and wrong, etc.) instead of logical representation aimed at describing the world as it is. And, because of the collective authorship, the texts of classical Chinese rhetoric are largely dialogic, involving an open-ended process of making and remaking, which in turn allows for more interaction between writers and readers, as seen through the production and transformation of bamboo texts.

Western readers may be struck by the ambiguity of classical Chinese texts. For example, Lee Jacobus has the following to say about *Dao De Jing* (which is generally believed to be a collection of aphorisms contributed by generations of Daoists):

³⁰ The translation is from *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (68–69), compiled by Theodore de Bary et al. New York: Columbia University Press. 1960.

³¹ Unlike the West, which separates rhetoric from philosophy, in ancient China rhetoric and philosophy are one, inseparable. The Chinese classics are philosophical masterpieces. They are also rhetorical masterpieces.

³² Rhetoric is widely defined as the "art of persuasion" in the West.

Sometimes the text seems to be purposely ambiguous—a rhetorical device that promotes examination and careful speculation on the part of the reader. This ambiguity may annoy a reader who is used to having ideas clearly spelled out and explained. [But] Lao-Tzu seems to treat ideas like seeds to be planted in the mind of a listener, to take root and grow as the soil will permit. (18)

The ambiguity of *Dao De Jing* and numerous other classical texts may indicate the lack of control by one particular author in text production, but it may also suggest that logic does not have much say in classical Chinese rhetoric. A. C. Graham has revealed the “curiously familiar-sounding syllogism” in a text by Wang Chong (A.D. 27–C. 100) (*Disputers of the Tao* 168), and many other scholars, both Chinese and Western, have made similar discoveries, so there is no reason to assume that the ancient Chinese did not understand logic or could not think logically. However, it seems safe to say that in ancient China logic, or logical thinking, had never been elevated to such an important epistemological status as it had enjoyed in the West. This is because, points out Graham, Chinese thinking engages in “correlative thinking” (*Unreason Within Reason* 97-119) as opposed to analytical thinking: that is, “in terms of process rather than of static entities” (77).

Rhetoric based on the “process” mode of thinking would appear “mobile” or “fluid,” in the sense of connecting everything with everything else in a constant move (i.e., correlatively),³³ therefore different from rhetoric based on the analytical mode, which would rather perceive the world as separate or divided, in terms of “static entities.” Rhetorical fluidity is an important feature of classical Chinese texts, as exemplified in *Dao De Jing* and *Yi Jing* (Book of Changes). (Graham 97-119).

Apparently, such rhetorical fluidity is made possible by the physical fluidity of textual production and transformation, as discussed in the previous sections, in the sense that those bamboo strips would not restrain or impose physical limits on the motion of rhetorical texts. On the other hand, those bamboo books can thrive in a “hypertextual” manner also because of the open-ended, anti-logical nature of classical Chinese rhetoric, which, without suffering damages to textual “integrity,” would permit—and sustain—features we normally associate with the modern-day hypertext, such as fragmentation, continual transformation of text, reader/writer interaction, disruption of textual sequence, etc.

Conclusion

I wish that I had made a “good case” about my claim that hypertext was first started in China. At least I think the Chinese hypertext fits well with the definition by Bolter: “the interactive interconnection of a set of symbolic elements.” No doubt, not everything matches: The Chinese hypertext was manually linked, off-line, whereas the modern hypertext is electronically connected, on-line. But I feel this is a minor difference. A classical Chinese text is “hypertextual” not just because it is “networked” in the form of a bamboo book. More importantly, it exhibits a “spirit” normally identified with the modern-day hypertext: i.e., multiaccental, fragmentary, non-linear, open-ended, fluid, unstable, and, finally, interactive.

But if someone insists that stuff like “electronic” or “on-line” must be included in the definition, then I can at least say that there existed a “bamboo hypertext” in ancient China.

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³³ The *Yin-Yang* ideology sees the world as an ontological duality that is constantly changing, evolving, and reversing.

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