

World Rhetoric in the 21st Century: Conversation Between Sir Brian Vickers and Chen Rudong

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Abstract: The “Rhetoric in the Twenty-First Century: An Interactive Symposium” (3~7 July 2012) hosted a group of international scholars of rhetoric at the University of Oxford. The exchange between Sir Brian Vickers, a leading scholar of rhetoric in the west, and Professor Rudong Chen of Peking University, President of the Global Rhetoric Society of the World, and the leading rhetoric scholar in China, on the trends of international rhetoric studies and purpose and function of rhetoric was a highlight of the Symposium. The dialogue reflects the contrasting and conflicts on cultural perspectives between the West and the East. It attracts the attention of scholars in the field of rhetoric studies. In this article, the author considers the Vickers–Chen exchange and how it contributes to better understanding of Chinese, Western, and cosmopolitan expressions of rhetoric. Toward this goal, the issues raised by the top dialogue of Vickers–Chen illustrate the importance of international academic exchanges on the topic of rhetoric. These exchanges have encouraged Western scholars of rhetoric to abandon the view that there was no rhetorical tradition in China or the East. As Chen revealed in his response to Vickers, Chinese rhetoric can offer a paradigm for education, collaboration, and appreciation of cultural difference. While Chinese and Western rhetorics do differ on important key points, the Vickers–Chen exchange demonstrates that Chinese and Western rhetorics can be brought into harmony through a cosmopolitan comprehension and appreciation of the strengths they both bring to the development of a truly global rhetoric in the 21st century.

Keywords: University of Oxford, Peking University, Brian Vickers, Chen Rudong, global rhetoric

Founded in 1121 CE, the University of Oxford is the oldest English-speaking institution and hosts some of the most prestigious colleges in the world. Founded in 1898, Peking University is considered the most respected institution of higher education in China and is among the elite institutions of higher education in the world. The “Rhetoric in the 21st Century: An Interactive Symposium” (3~7 July 2012), organized by James J. Murphy, Professor Emeritus of English at the University of California-Davis, and Nicholas J. Crowe, of the Centre for Medieval & Renaissance Studies, Oxford, brought scholars from the West and the East, and from Oxford and Peking University to a seminar devoted to debate, dialogue, and discussion on the topic of rhetoric.

The leaders of the seminar selected four keynote speakers to make a provocative argument on the theme of rhetoric in the twenty-first century, including Sir Brian Vickers, Peter Mack, James J. Murphy, and Jennifer Richards. Nineteen delegates were selected from a number of applications. Participants from eight countries attended the seminar. The Interactive Symposium achieved its goals. With scholars representing different rhetorical traditions, assumptions and commonplaces were expressed, challenged, rejected and accepted on the basis of their argumentative power. All the participants and delegates were moved to an agreement that rhetoric could provide a method and mode of thinking for this century. Reflecting a Western bias, Cicero, the Roman, was the most cited rhetorician, with his *De Oratore* the most mentioned rhetorical text.

The high point of the symposium was the exchange between Sir Brian Vickers, a leading scholar of rhetoric in the west, and Professor Rudong Chen of Peking University, President of the Chinese Rhetoric Society of the World, and the leading rhetoric scholar in China, on the purpose and function of rhetoric. My goal in this essay is to describe the exchange between professors Vickers and Chen as it reveals both the present and the future of the study of rhetoric.

Vickers' book *In Defence of Rhetoric* is among the most important English contributions of rhetoric in the twentieth century.¹ In his keynote address, Vickers argued twenty-first-century rhetorical studies would not differ markedly from the rhetoric of preceding centuries. He identified three major areas of research in rhetoric for the twenty-first century: First, Vickers urged scholars to conduct textual analysis of rhetorical commentaries. This analysis would include increasing the number of translations that place texts in their contexts. Vickers offered as examples Virginia Cox and John Oastler Ward's *The Rhetoric of Cicero in Its Medieval and Early-Renaissance Commentary Tradition*, James J. Murphy and Jerry Green's *Renaissance Rhetoric Short-Title Catalogue 1460-1700*, and Gert Ueding, Gregor Kalivoda, and Franz-Hubert Robling's comprehensive seven-volume German survey of rhetoric, *Historisches*

1 Brian Vickers, *In Defence of Rhetoric* (Oxford Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 1988).

*Wörterbuch der Rhetorik.*²

Second, Vickers called for the study of rhetoric as an expression of a social phenomenon. Rhetoric scholars, Vickers continued, should consider how rhetorical theories are handed down by one generation to the next. The study of how rhetoric is taught, he emphasized, should be a focus of sustained study.

Third, rhetoric should be studied as an expression of political activity. Vickers expressed concern about the role played by rhetoric in the political arena: good people and good rhetoric do not always achieve positive results in democracies. Vickers suggested the following questions might guide rhetorical scholars in this century: How does persuasion work? How does persuasion happen? He made a point of lamenting the state of political rhetoric in the United States and Britain to illustrate the obvious need for a better political discourse.

In response to Vickers' keynote address, Professor Chen, one of the two Asian scholars attending the seminar, invited his western audience to consider Chinese rhetoric in both its ancient and modern expressions, considerations that had not appeared in Vickers' keynote address. Persuasion, argumentation, and the discovery of truth in western rhetoric are all important, Chen agreed. However, as Chen observed, Chinese rhetoric embraces "a way of life" "a social system" "a culture" and "a civilization". In ancient China, Chen noted, rhetoric was concerned with morality, ethics, and most importantly, accepted the Confucian emphasis on love. Rhetoric, Chen concluded, serves as an alternative to war and violence, offering civilizations a means to negotiate significant problems through moral communication rather than violence.

Sir Vickers' review of the Western rhetorical tradition was thorough, accurate, but needed professor Chen's insights given the 21st century will not belong to England or the West. Western scholars of rhetoric have yet to fully appreciate the rhetoric offered by the traditions and scholars of Asian rhetorics. Professor Chen, in his response to one of the most influential scholar of rhetoric in the West, modeled how cross-cultural dialogue on rhetoric ought to and can take place. He honored Sir Vickers' by treating him with deference, accurately interpreted what Sir Vickers said, and provided a complement to Vickers' history: the rhetorical traditions and scholarship of China.

Unfortunately, professor Vickers' keynote address did not reflect an understanding nor an appreciation of Asian rhetorical traditions. This tradition is outlined in

2 Virginia Cox and John O. Ward, *The Rhetoric of Cicero in Its Medieval and Early Renaissance Commentary Tradition* (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2006); Lawrence D. Green and James Jerome Murphy, *Renaissance Rhetoric Short-Title Catalogue 1460-1700*, 2nd ed. (Aldershot, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006); Gert Ueding, Gregor Kalivoda, and Franz-Hubert Robling, *Historisches Wörterbuch Der Rhetorik* (Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 1992).

professor Chen's "Rhetoric in East Asia: China and Japan," published in *The International Encyclopaedia of Communication*.³ Here, professor Chen describes the family characteristics of Asian and Chinese rhetoric. Chinese rhetorical thought, he notes, can be traced back to the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE) of Chinese history, preceding birth of Greek rhetorical thought.

In this article, professor Chen highlights four functions served by rhetoric in ancient China: The cultivation of morality, fulfillment of the good life, interpersonal diplomacy through dialogue, and management of society. Rhetorical competence and persuasive behavior were at the center of ancient Chinese society. To be rhetorically competent, professor Chen writes, the speaker in ancient China followed the principles of ritual, humanity, loyalty, and truthfulness. "They also outlined rhetorical the principle of bringing rhetoric into harmony with rhetorical situations through the techniques of 'Wén' (refinement) 'Zhì' (simplicity), 'Dǎ' (clarity) and 'Qǎo' (literary grace)." ⁴

When professor Chen outlines the functions and principles of ancient Chinese rhetoric, it is clear that they remain relevant to the modern Chinese rhetorical practices. They will, of course, need to account for the rhetorical problems faced by contemporary China. Before ancient Chinese rhetorical principles can inform modern Chinese rhetorical theory, professor Chen is wise to call for a thorough study of modern Chinese national rhetoric. He is currently leading a major project designed to achieve this goal.

Professor Chen also points to modern Chinese texts on rhetoric, which include Wang Dechun and Chen Chen's *Modern Rhetoric*, Zheng Yuanhan's *Speech Stylistics*, Li Yunhan's *Stylistics of Chinese Language*, Wang Xijie's *General Rhetoric*, Liu Huanhui's *Compendium of Rhetoric*, Zhang Lianqiang's studies on the *Theoretical Basis of Rhetoric*, and Rudong Chen's *Introduction to Socio-psychological Rhetoric*, *Chinese Rhetoric for Foreigners*, *Cognitive Rhetoric*, *The Contemporary Rhetoric of Chinese*, and etc. Professor Chen has written more than eight books, published by Peking University Press and other press in China, on the topic of rhetoric and communication.

In these books, he surveys the roles played by language, image, media, visualizations, persuasion, and a host of other topics in the construction of meaning. His books offer Chinese readers a comprehensive overview of rhetoric in its broadest expression. Because he has studied in England and the United States, he can identify where Chinese and Western rhetorics overlap and where they differ. There is no more important problem modern China faces than the problem of rhetoric, Chen argues. These books and articles

3 Chen Rudong, "Rhetoric in East Asia: China and Japan", *The International Encyclopedia of Communication*, edited by Wolfgang Donsbach, Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2008, pp.4228-4231.

4 Ibid.

need to be brought into dialogue with those highlighted by professor Vickers.

Toward the end of bridging Western and Eastern rhetorics, one group of rhetorical scholars at the Oxford conference took the position during the final parliamentary debate that translation ought to be the foundation for the study of rhetoric in the twenty-first century. In arguing their case, the group suggested that translation (*translatio studii*) and the discipline of translation studies could foster the study of rhetoric in a global context. Translation assumes meaning can be communicated across and between cultures. The goal of translating rhetorical texts would be to promote a global rhetorical culture.

A truly global rhetoric would include a broadened understanding of “reason”; a focus on ethics, on audience, and an emphasis on cosmopolitanism, which could serve as touchstones for this approach. Metaphors, the party contended, are in this regard critical in conveying experience and ideas. Translation by definition requires flexibility, ethical recognition of others, and creative responses to texts that may yield multiple meanings. The process of persuasion (rhetoric) itself, the party argued, was rooted in translation, arising first from the soul and mind and proceeding then to its transmission in the verbal, visual or written expressions. If there argument has worth, then rhetorical scholars need to engage in a more robust effort to translate rhetorical texts in Asian languages into English and English rhetorical texts into Asian languages.

Similar to professor Chen’s position that rhetoric is the major problem facing China, a second group of scholars argued that rhetoric in the twenty-first century should be described as a cure and not the illin cases where misunderstanding and misinterpretation arise. An ethical rhetoric, they suggest, presumes a responsive posture, and the centrality of audiences to constitute an ethical community. Global audiences and their rhetorics are diverse: an understanding of the history of rhetoric must remain open to reinterpretation, and rooted in the recognition that there are multiple rhetorics.

The Vickers–Chen exchange highlights the need to complement the study of Western rhetorics with those of the east. As such, the exchange teaches us that we should engage in a thorough accounting of local and global rhetorics, seeking out where there are differences and similarities, and following professor Chen’s vision of cultivating international exchanges based on rhetoric rather than war. The Oxford conference, and the Vickers–Chen exchange, suggests it is possible and desirable for rhetorical scholars, from different traditions, to engage in the dialogues, disagreements, and discovery necessary to foster a global society founded on the best principles drawn from Cicero and Confucius.

Professor Chen, in a recent paper titled “On Globalizing Trends of Rhetoric Studies”, delivered to the Chinese Rhetoric Society of the World, describes how

eastern and western rhetorics could fit into a larger global constellation of rhetorics.⁵ National rhetorics (those of China and the United States for example) are characterized by the myths and logics that nations use to form their identities and their view of other nations. Chen argues that national rhetorics should be a focus of study. Such study should complement efforts to place national rhetorics in the larger galaxy of global rhetorics. Scholars of rhetoric, Chen suggests, can contribute to an understanding of their own national rhetorics and to a more universal understanding of rhetoric through comparative analysis and comparisons. These comparisons, Chen continues, will lead to collisions and some incompatibilities that can be worked through with rhetoric. Chen's vision is exciting and can help foster the development of a global rhetorical culture.

Scholars who study Chinese national rhetoric would focus on the myths the Chinese people believe are important. Toward this end, identification of Chinese myths, with those that are central to Chinese identity, would be emphasized. The study of Chinese national rhetoric, Chen maintains, will highlight benevolence and a focus on persuasion, rather than violence, as the means of promoting social change. As the oldest civilization in the world, Chen rightly notes that China, like Greece, had a tradition of argumentation, debate, and persuasion; the Chinese do not need to import rhetoric from the West.

The study of Chinese national rhetoric will allow scholars to appreciate how Chinese mythic rhetoric animates Chinese social and international policy. For example, Chinese and American diplomats need to appreciate Chinese myths and how they are communicated. I believe President Obama's selection of John Huntsman as his first ambassador to China reflected a commitment to grounding American foreign policy in an understanding of Chinese culture; Huntsman speaks fluent Mandarin and has a strong command of Chinese history. Although the China and the US have faced conflict during Obama's first term, the Obama administration, operating under the influence of Huntsman, pursued a policy of engagement. Similarly, contemporary Chinese foreign policy seeks to bring China's image into alignment with its role as one of the two leading global powers. Toward this end, Chinese academics are promoting the study of public diplomacy, seeking to develop the "soft power" of persuasion to improve China's image.

Professor Chen has led the effort in China to invigorate the study of rhetoric, seeing that it can promote an understanding of national images. Chen seeks to promote and understanding of "national image building, competence and strategies of national rhetoric, especially the national rhetorical competence of national leader, officials,

5 Chen Rudong, *On Globalizing Trends of Rhetoric Studies*, Paper presented to the Third Biennial Bienienl Conference of the Chinese Rhetoric Society of the World, Incheon University, Korea, October, 2012.

reporter and the public.” Chinese leaders, Chen writes, must demonstrate “rhetorical competence” in a global context. Toward this end, Chen and other Chinese scholars of rhetoric define “rhetorical competence” very broadly to include knowledge of both China’s myths and those of China’s global neighbors. To accomplish this goal, professor Chen and an international group of scholars have created opportunities for Chinese and Western scholars of rhetoric to meet and discuss topics of common interest.

These discussions began in the year 2000 with an American rhetorical scholar visiting China to cultivate relationships with Chinese scholars of rhetoric. Since the year 2000, the study of rhetoric has emerged as an important field in China, with the formation of the Chinese Rhetoric Society of the World in 2007 marking the arrival of Chinese rhetoric on the global academic stage. The society, under the leadership of professor Chen and a host of other Asian scholars, has attracted scholars of rhetoric from around the world to China. Scholars from the United States and the United Kingdom, and Canada, and France, and Germany, and Italy, and Russia, and Denmark Sweden, and Mexico, and Egypt, and Malaysia, as well as Japan, and Korea have attended conferences organized by the Chinese Rhetoric Society of the World.

As an American member of the Chinese Rhetoric Society of the World, I can testify that the Society has helped me better understand Chinese culture and myths as they are expressed through rhetoric. And, I have returned from Society conferences impressed with my Chinese colleagues who study and teach rhetoric. Far too many Americans and scholars of rhetoric are unaware of the Chinese rhetorical tradition. Jerome Murphy, who now know better, wrote in 1972 that there was no evidence of a rhetorical conscience outside the West.⁶ This misperception was due to a lack of contact between Chinese and Western scholars of rhetoric and to the entrenched Western belief that Asia is devoid of argumentative reason, that emotion, intuition and mysticism are the most important cultural values in the East. The studies offered by the scholars who are members of the Chinese Rhetoric Society of the World have challenged and replaced these misperceptions with essays demonstrating the presence of argumentative reason in Chinese ancient and modern culture.

The Vickers–Chen exchange is an illustration of progress made in the study of rhetoric, for it invited a juxtaposition of different rhetorical traditions. Such juxtapositions will be the method for global studies of rhetoric, which is the next step professor Chen and other internationally focused scholars of rhetoric would like to take.

The first step, which both Vickers and Chen would endorse, is for scholars interested in global rhetoric to read the foundational global rhetorical texts. Vickers

6 James Jerome Murphy, *A Synoptic History of Classical Rhetoric*, 1st ed., Studies in Speech (New York: Random House, 1972).

would, of course, select the texts of Plato and Cicero; Chen would invite scholars to read the texts of Confucius and those offered by School of Ming. As Vickers observed in his Oxford keynote address, these texts would warrant translation from Greek and English into Chinese, with annotated commentaries designed for a Chinese or Asian audiences. Similarly, Chinese rhetorical texts need to be translated into English, with the assistance of scholars who have some understanding of the Western rhetorical traditions.⁷

Juxtaposition of different rhetorical traditions is not enough, for they only provide comparative descriptions of diverse perspectives on rhetoric. Chen calls for both a “collision” of rhetorical traditions and the possibility, at least on some topics, of a communion. One example of such comparison is my collaboration with WooSoo Park from Republic of Korea to study of the American rhetoric professor Robert Oliver’s service as a ghostwriter to Syngman Rhee, the first president of the Republic of Korea. The purpose of this research project is to tell the story of the 18-year collaboration (1942~1960) between Syngman Rhee (1875~1965), the first president of South Korea, and Robert T. Oliver (1909~2000), a professor at the Pennsylvania State University, USA. Park and I consider both the collisions of American and South Korean Cultures in their collaborations and where they agreed.

Chen is right: we cannot leave the study of rhetorical texts and traditions at level of description. We must, as Chen did at Oxford, identify where there are disagreements and incompatibility. The Vickers–Chen exchange at Oxford highlighted a major difference: Vickers’ view of rhetoric, derived from Plato, centered on truth and argumentation. Chen’s Chinese influenced outlook focused on benevolence and ethics. An extended dialogue between the two scholars, beyond the encounter at Oxford, would have revealed that Chinese rhetoric, as Chen briefly noted in his presentation, does concern truth and persuasion; Vickers would have acknowledged that Greek rhetoric did concern itself with ethics. Regardless, there are differences between the Greek and Chinese systems of rhetoric that need to be acknowledged.

Drawing on argumentative reason, scholars of rhetoric can then deal with these differences through reasoned discourse. In so doing, scholars of rhetoric would be engaging in a truly global rhetoric as citizens of nations concerned with their images, and as citizens of the world, who remain committed to values that transcend nations. Professor Chen in his paper presented to the Chinese Rhetoric Society of the World called for a global society based on rhetoric. This global society would use argument,

7 For examples, see Xing Lu and David A. Frank, “On the Study of Ancient Chinese Rhetoric/Bian,” *Western Journal of Communication* 57, no. 4 (1993): 445–63; Xing Lu, *Rhetoric in Ancient China, Fifth to Third Century, B.C.E. : A Comparison with Classical Greek Rhetoric*, Studies in Rhetoric/Communication (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998).

rather than war and violence, to deal with differences. There are rhetorical texts that may deserve to be foundations for this global society. I would advance Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca's *New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* as one such text.⁸ In the aftermath of World War II and the murder of millions, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca offered rhetoric as a method for humans to deal with difference through reasoned argumentation. They sought to bring reason (logic) into balance with the persuasion of audiences. Like Chen, they believe humans can reason together.

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca also advanced the idea of a "universal audience." This same idea is advanced, although not with these words, by professor Chen. A universal audience stands in relationship with local or national audiences. In calling for a global society founded on rhetoric, professor Chen, like Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, seeks to develop universal principles of justice and peace that can help adjudicated differences of opinion and policy. These principles themselves would be the result of considered persuasion. And, there maybe issues that are not to be open to persuasion, and there may be room for radically different perspectives to co-exist in the same rhetorical constellation.

Professor Chen is seeking to promote a truly rhetorical culture in China and is leading efforts to extend rhetorical thinking, drawing on both western and eastern traditions of rhetoric, through dialogue and contacts with non-Asian scholars. I join him in these efforts. He is right to say that the problem facing China and the world is rhetoric, and rhetoric, as he argues, is also the solution.

8 Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* (Notre Dame, [Ind.]: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969); David A. Frank, "A Traumatic Reading of Twentieth-Century Rhetorical Theory: The Belgian Holocaust, Malines, Perelman, and De Man." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 93(2007): 308-43. See my article that explains how Perelman offered rhetoric as a reasoned alternative to war and violence.