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Commentary on: Yun Xie, Shuying Shi, Sarah Evans, and Dale Hample's "Exploring the Meaning of Argument in China"

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I want to begin by thanking the authors for standing up to the immense challenges of the task they have taken on and for delivering this research to us, which sheds light on so many important issues. I will not be able to address them all here. Instead, I will restrict my commentary to some methodological concerns that have been explored in comparative rhetoric and which may also be important here. And I will end with some questions.

I begin by simply noting some of the challenges to comparative work explained by LuMing Mao (2003). One of the temptations in comparative work is to default to a "deficiency model" of comparison, in which one tradition is found to lack something another tradition has. This is in part an inevitable result of having to start with familiar terms and concepts and then search for something similar to them in an unfamiliar place. This inevitable starting point is not as fit for discovering the unfamiliar as it is for discovering either that the familiar cannot be found or that what appears to be similar is in some ways discordant with the familiar terms and concepts. That is, against the fullness of the familiar, the unfamiliar presents itself as relatively empty, as being deficient, missing important things. One common cure for this is as dangerous as the problem: to impose familiar concepts as best one can, to find the universals one seeks, and then to ignore what is discordant, or else to highlight the dissonance and the resistance to clear comprehension that the unfamiliar presents.

A good example of the deficiency model at work can easily be seen in this paper's introductory account of the literature on argumentation in China. According to this literature, Chinese society is said to prefer a "non-argumentative, non-confrontational, conflict-avoidance approach," and this is opposed to a preference for "direct argumentation." Here Chinese argumentative discourse is identified by negation, by what it lacks. The goal of the paper before us, however, is to step back and ask whether the word "argument" and the concepts associated with the word can be taken for granted when they depart English-speaking lands for China. And in a wonderful reflective move, the authors turn around and wonder first whether the word can even be taken for granted in its own territories.

After a quick breeze through the millennia, the answer seems to be that attempts to define "argument" yield a variety of conflicting results and often break down into efforts at taxonomy. It appears that kinds of argument are easier to identify than what they are kinds of. While this may at first seem like a setback, it

may well not be. LuMing Mao points out that one way to escape the deficiency model is to aim for “reflective engagement,” a process in which engagement with the unfamiliar, and making an effort to understand the unfamiliar in its own terms, can lead further down the line to a process of reflection on and rethinking of familiar words and terms. Ultimately, he says, this can become a mutual process between traditions.

I believe that this process is probably supported by a certain looseness in our concepts that allows us a rubric under which to explore similarities and differences in words, concepts, practices, institutions, and their inter-relations—all of which inflect one another and make comparative work difficult. We will never find “argument” to be useful in China or Chinese if we keep it tightly linked to its original contexts—or if we insist on understanding argument in China only in its own terms. A word that means many different things may support a more successful search.

In their account of related concepts in China, the authors note that in China the concept of argument has overlapped with the notion of conflict and that there are strong Confucian, Taoist, Buddhist, and Folk-historical reasons to think of conflict as something best avoided. Thus, it is not simply that Chinese society values the non-controversial and so generates little positive regard for argument and intellectual controversy—that would be the deficiency model—but rather that there are powerful intellectual traditions that promote social bonds and discourage self-centeredness. And our authors go even further to resist the temptation of the deficiency model by showing that argument is valued differently in China depending on the practical context in which it is embedded. In interpersonal matters, argument and conflict are discouraged. In matters of public debate, they are highly regarded. The English search term “argument” is here being used loosely to discover something about argument in China—that it is valued differently in different practical and perhaps also different institutional contexts.

When it comes to the question of how best to translate the English word “argument” into Chinese, the waters are muddier. The authors conclude that there is no word in Chinese that translates the English “argument;” rather, China has a great number of argument-related terms, any one of which might be appropriate in a particular context. In fact, the authors report that a survey of Chinese students asked to translate the English word yielded 27 different Chinese words—interestingly enough, the words could be spread out on a continuum from least aggressive to most aggressive.

The discussion the authors offer near the end of the paper is rich with findings about the different practice-grounded meanings of argument-related Chinese words, but in one case, it seems to fall back on a deficiency judgment. Ordinary Chinese does not, they say, have a specific word for argument as product, for argument as a special kind of relation between a claim and the reasons in support of it. Chinese itself *does* have a word to refer to this, but it is not a word in ancient Chinese, and it is used only in formal contexts, by people with technical training in logic and philosophy, and not in ordinary conversation. In the spirit of reflective engagement, I would like to note that this may not be very different from the English language use of “argument.” Very few people would ever have the occasion to say to anyone in ordinary life: “Exactly what is your argument?” And it

can take many students, even with instruction, more than a short time even to grasp the concept. Argument as a process is much more familiar in everyday English. So is argument as a quarrel.

I would like to end with two final comments, the first in the spirit of reflective engagement. The rich discussion of argument-related words in Chinese does highlight the somewhat troubling capaciousness of the English word “argument,” a capaciousness against which every English-speaking theorist of argument must struggle. The more specific vocabulary of Chinese could be of help in this struggle. So could the language’s more pragmatic way of sorting out meanings. But then again, there is also some usefulness and power in the capaciousness of the English word. It does, after all, promote the reflections in which we are now engaged.

Second, I would like to wonder aloud what it would be like to bring this discussion of argument in China into contact with two claims that have been made recently about contemporary argument in China. The first is made by Andy Kirkpatrick and Zhichang Xu in their book *Chinese Rhetoric and Writing*. They say that the cultural revolution introduced a rhetoric of aggression and confrontation and denunciation that is still common in China, and reigns in much public discourse from the denunciations of dissidents to the demands of Charter 08. The second is a remark made by blogger, scholar, author, and Chinese classicist Ran Yunfei in a New York Review of Books interview. In the context of criticizing both the provocations of Ai WeiWei and the falseness of Chinese education, he is asked how one can possibly combat all the falseness. He answers: “You have to learn how to argue. Too few public intellectuals in China have learned to argue logically. They don’t know how and end up cursing each other all the time.” Here we seem to have complaints that in fact China has turned too far toward aggressive discourse in public life, but that the cure for aggression is in fact a kind of argument, a less aggressive kind of argument—not simply to think or to claim but to argue, as Ran Yunfei says, “logically.” So, then, are social practices and institutional changes in China—say blogging and academic freedom in higher education—are these putting new stresses on and inflections in the words for argument? Are the words being used in new ways for new purposes? And are the 350,000,000 people in China who have learned or are engaged in learning English—some of them at advanced levels—joining the words and concepts for argument together in new and unforeseen ways? Where is the English word “argument” going now that more Chinese than North Americans are speaking English?

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