Commentary on: Jianfeng Wang's "Deep disagreement, deep rhetoric, and cultural diversity"

Jean Goodwin
North Carolina State University

Commentary on Jianfeng Wang's "Deep Disagreement, Deep Rhetoric, and Cultural Diversity: The Argumentative Style in a Cross-Cultural 'Rhetorical Borderland'"

JEAN GOODWIN

Department of Communication
North Carolina State University
Raleigh, NC 27695
USA
jegoodwi@ncsu.edu

Abstract: In this cogent paper, Wang urges argumentation theorists to pay attention to the myriad things that are happening whenever someone makes an argument. To do this he updates and extends the classical rhetorical cannon of style. He documents the importance of argumentative style through a case study of deep disagreement, showing how one arguer's choices served to reconstruct an otherwise abusive situation. I urge him to continue the project by providing an equally cogent account of explaining why an arguer's stylistic choices lead to the desired audience's response.

Whenever a person makes an argument, they inevitably make a lot of other, ancillary changes in the world. In the course of getting a reason out there where it can be seen, the arguer will also (for example) be putting forward some words in some syntactic structures. And those words will have to be in a specific font, of a specific size and color, appearing on a page that itself has a specific layout—i.e., the arguer will be making choices among all the options afforded by their word-processing application. Or arguer will speak words aloud, requiring a myriad of choices of frequency and amplitude. Or the arguer will make argument in a visual mode… And so on. However an argument gets made, the making has an indefinitely large number of features which *could* have been otherwise—but *aren't* (Jacobs, 2000). At least some of these features, we can presume, affect how the argument itself is received by the audience. Therefore, all this "argument-plus" material (Goodwin, 2000) deserves attention from theorists of argumentation.

In this wide-ranging and well-grounded paper, Jianfeng Wang provides such attention. He selects "style" as the umbrella term to capture the full range of the "argument-plus." This choice is a plausible one. While classical and classicizing rhetorical traditions have used "style" narrowly to refer to linguistic features, more recently scholars of rhetoric have deployed it to capture the diffuse yet coherent sets of features that constitute (as Wang says) a *way* of carrying out some discursive activity (e.g., Black, 1978; Hariman, 1995; Young, 2014).

As Wang points out, the argument's style does vital work in creating a favorable context for the argument's reception. Theories of argumentation sometimes consider context to be at least partially established before arguments get made, as when Perelman (to use Wang's example) declares that "contact of minds" or mutual attention is a necessary precondition for making arguments. Along similar lines, other theories posit that arguments can get made only after arguers come to agreements about procedures and shared understandings of starting points. With so many aspects of context established in advance, these theories may discount the importance of argumentative style—they feel no pressure to examine how the way of making an argument can help earn attention, enforce procedures, or evoke starting points. I've argued elsewhere (Goodwin, 2000, 2007) that such theories are wrong-headed: that argumentation

theorists should be giving accounts of how arguers create contexts, and not merely build contexts into the theory as something always already pre-given.

Whatever one thinks of that position, it is at least clear that in *some* cases argumentation theory does need to provide an account of how contact of minds and so on gets created. These are the cases in which arguments get made although contact of minds (etc.) is conspicuously lacking. Wang draws here from thinking about deep disagreement in argumentation theory and from investigations of discursive borderlands in rhetorical studies. Arguers sometimes possess different worldviews with no shared assumptions; they sometimes inhabit the liminal zones where diverse cultures meet. Nevertheless, even in these spaces arguers sometimes manage to make arguments. How can that happen? Since the preconditions for argument are not there to begin with, it must be the arguers themselves, the way that they are making arguments, their argumentative style, that are getting things done.

Wang demonstrates the plausibility of this view with a case study of an interaction between Trish Regan and Liu Xin. The interaction is well selected; we expect that a Fox network talk show host (now *former* host!) and a journalist from a People's Republic of China national network will have radically divergent worldviews. Moreover, the presence of deep disagreement is evident in the exchange itself. While the event was widely framed as a "debate" and Regan opened by extending a smarmy "welcome" to "different perspectives," in fact Regan uses her power as host to set up the interaction as a "tough," aggressive interview, granting herself the right to load questions and editorialize, to interrupt and talk over, and to characterize her interlocutor in a negative light without taking responsibility herself.

In sum, Wang's paper has named and documented a range of argumentative phenomena that theorists ought to be attending to. In closing, I would urge him to continue this line of investigation, and in particular continue to develop explanations of how argumentative style does its vital work. The range of potential stylistic features is indefinitely large—a skilled arguer like Liu can potentially marshal anything she is doing in order to improve the reception of her arguments, creating conditions for the audience's "mutual, voluntary, free, comprehensive, open, fair, impartial, considered, reasoned, informed, reflective, and involved engagement" with the arguments (Jacobs, 2000, p. 274). This imposes a heavy burden on the argumentation theorist to account for why *doing just the things she did* can reasonably be expected to have *just the effects she is aiming for*.

Given the range of phenomena that are embraced under Wang's umbrella of "style," I suspect that there are many explanatory modes to be explored. For example, the normative pragmatic approach, which I and others pursue, would notice that Liu opens the interaction by announcing that "I'm only speaking for myself, a journalist." The work of Fred Kauffeld (e.g., 2009) has demonstrated how this kind of open taking of responsibility can itself serve as a justification for an audience response. The audience can presume that the speaker would not commit herself to personal sincerity and journalistic integrity unless she was willing to do the work to fulfill those responsibilities; this gives them a reason to think that her arguments, however foreign they may seem, deserve their consideration.

Kauffeld's explanatory account focuses on the speaker and her undertaking of a particular argumentative style; Wang also briefly suggests—insightfully, I believe—that argumentative style can serve as "the arguer's projection of the *audience's* state of mind" (emphasis added). I expanded on a similar idea in my paper at the last OSSA conference (Goodwin, 2016), focusing on an interaction just as contentious as the Regan/Liu "debate." There I argued that a GMO scientist conspicuously treated the GMO-skeptics in his audience—people who were cross-

examining him, challenging him, and even insulting him—*as if* they were people interested only in the truth, asking questions in good faith. The scientist's willingness to "project" a candid audience, even against the evidence, gave onlookers reason to believe that he was candid himself.

There are undoubtedly other ways to explain how an argument's style provides a reason for, or a cause of, an audience's response. Once we (argumentation theorists) (a) acknowledge that when an argument gets made, a lot of other things are getting made as well; and (b) see that in practice those other things matter for how the argument is received (especially perhaps in cases of deep disagreement); then, as argumentation theorists, we are I believe obligated to start explaining *why*. Jianfeng Wang has gotten us off to a good start.

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