Addressing the Autocrat: The Drama of Early Chinese Court Discourse

Paper Abstracts

1. Yuri Pines, Hebrew University, Israel

“From Teachers to Subjects: Ministers Speaking to the Rulers from Yan Ying 晏嬰 to Li Si 李斯”

In his seminal study on “Chinese Monarchism” (中國的王權主義), Liu Zehua (劉澤華) analyzed self-depreciating language employed by the leading Tang intellectuals, Han Yu (韓愈) and Liu Zongyuan (柳宗元) to demonstrate cultural and symbolical power of the emperor over his subjects – even over the most brilliant and audacious of them. In my study I would like to trace the roots of this phenomenon of ministerial humility versus the sovereign. To do so, I shall analyze ruler-minister intercourse through the three-odd centuries, from the late Chunqiu period (春秋, 771-453 BCE) to the Qin empire (秦, 221-207 BCE). By focusing on four eminent personalities—Yan Ying (晏嬰, c. 580-520 BCE), Mengzi (孟子, c. 380-300 BCE), Xunzi (荀子, c. 315-230 BCE), and Li Si (李斯, d. 208 BCE)—I shall demonstrate how the self-confident tone of a ruler’s instructor and guide, adopted by Yan Ying and to a certain degree by Mengzi, turned into a cautious tone of an advisor in the Xunzi and evolved into a subservient tone of a ruler’s subject in Li Si’s memorials. I hope to show that aside from reflecting difference in our source materials for each of the speakers, the changing mode of their putative conversation with the rulers may have reflected the widening gap between the ruler and the minister, anticipating the situation of “elevated monarch and humble subject” depicted by Liu Zehua.

2. Chang Su-ching, National Taiwan University

「先秦士大夫諫議修辭的三種類型」

先秦士大夫之諫議修辭，若以情、理、勢三者為判準，同時考察其歷史意識的變異，大致可分為教育導正、分庭抗禮與揚君抑臣三種主要的類型。春秋以前為貴族世襲社會，君、臣之分既定，君主有所不足，臣子只得費心建言或諫阻，言天命，申先王之德，藉以導正其失，而大抵辭氣委曲，情懇意切。戰國時代，民間士人學有所長，遊說諸侯時，乃推尊道以與君主權勢相抗。其中，秦採用法家治術，法家主張重勢尊君，其諫議往往重君抑臣，獨尊君勢而禁議抑學。
3. Mark Metcalf, independent scholar

“One Source, yet Different Courses 同源異流: Comparing the Rhetorical Styles of Su Qin 蘇秦 and Zhang Yi 張儀”

Various scholars have argued that the Zhanguo ce 戰國策 should be praised for its rhetorical merits and not criticized for its annalistic shortcomings. Consistent with this perspective, I investigate the Zhanguo ce persuasions of Su Qin 蘇秦, Zhang Yi 張儀, and other noteworthy you shui 游說 to determine if it is possible to attribute particular presentation/rhetorical styles to individual persuaders (e.g., the Zhang Yi style of persuasion). As Su Qin and Zhang Yi are reputed to have studied under Guiguzi 鬼谷子, I also evaluate the rhetorical approaches of these persuaders in the context of the guidance provided in the controversial Guiguzi text.

4. Michael Loewe, Cambridge University

“Dong Zhongshu and ‘Confucianism’”

Dong Zhongshu is frequently described as a ‘Great Confucian,’ often in the context of a so-called victory of Confucianism over other schools in Han times. However, questions remain concerning the influence that he exercised in his own life-time and later and the contribution that he made to intellectual development in Western Han times. Such questions concern the relation of his ideas to dynastic and political circumstances; the place that he took in public life; his part in introducing methods for training and selecting officials; and his readiness to cite the sayings of Kongzi. His influence may be partly judged by the willingness of scholars and officials to call on his views for support, from Eastern Han to Qing, and the extent to which his ideas may properly be regarded as being part of a Confucian heritage and tradition that took shape in Tang times and later.

5. Michael Nylan, University of California at Berkeley

“The Classical Turn in Memorials from 30 BCE to 10 CE”

Fukui Shigemasa, Michael Loewe, and other scholars have been building a case that what we know as “classicism” was first promoted not at Wudi’s court (140-87 BCE) but during the reign of Chengdi (33-7 BCE). Certainly, most of the famous thinkers were living at court during that reign, including Liu Xiang, Liu Xin, Jing Fang, Huan Tan, and Yang Xiong. In addition, the imperial library at that time was being reorganized. This talk will examine the memorials and edicts about this turn toward the classical, explicating the subtext underlying many of the contemporary writings.
6. Garret Olberding, University of Oklahoma

“How Did Ministers Err?: The Use of Facts in Early Han Address”

Much of recent analysis on the contents of ministerial addresses to the autocrat centers around the minister’s attention to and use of canonical sources, whether as an indication of the use of ritualized norms (禮) or a logic of signs. This paper will take a different tack in the study of ministerial address by evaluating the types of evidence the addresses marshalled to shape public policy debates. Focusing on those addresses relating to military affairs, such as Zhao Chongguo’s address to Emperor Xuan, my analysis will speak specifically to the ways in which error or “fault” was discussed in the court setting and how such might point to the standards by which a minister’s presented evidence could be taken to be flawed or mistaken. The interest of this paper is not merely to describe the court environment but also to carefully evaluate the general standards of evidence used in the early Han.

7. Enno Giele, University of Arizona

“Rational and Irrational Argumentation in Ancient Chinese Memorials and Edicts”

Reading ancient Chinese court correspondence, we often come across arguments that from our own post-enlightenment perspective can readily be identified as irrational, as when, for instance, some natural phenomenon is explained as a portent signifying the government’s failure, a well-known pattern of argumentation in ancient China. The urge to just label this “mythical” or “ritual” thinking and gloss it over is strong and omnipresent in academic research. In spite of this perception, there are actually numerous examples of—even in the modern sense—very “rational” arguments. My essay will propose a preliminary explanation for this phenomenon.

8. John Major, independent scholar

“Performing Remonstrance: The Huainanzi’s “Fu on Profligate Indolence”

Huainanzi 淮南子 Chapter 8 (Ben jing 本經, “The Basic Warp”) includes a self-contained section in the form of a fu 賦 rhyme-prose composition on the subject of “Profligate Indolence” (liu dun 流遁), describing pleasure-palaces based on Wood, Water, Earth, Metal, and Fire. Exuberantly rhymed and rhythmic, extravagant in its language, the fu is well suited to oral performance. But instead of following the current fashion of lavishing praise on the intricately contrived structures that it depicts, the fu condemns them: “Of these five, even one is sufficient for a ruler to lose control of the world.” Thus the conventions of a popular genre of court poetry are turned to the stern business of remonstrance against the ruler’s extravagance.
9. Sarah Queen, Connecticut College

“The Disputant Speaks (難者曰): Towards a Typology of Literary Conventions and Rhetorical Forms of Argumentation in Early Han Sources”

Historical records indicate that there was a robust tradition of court debate in the Han dynasty. However, the form and conventions of political discussion have not received the attention they deserve, given the prominence of debate at the central court and in official circles of learning. Drawing primarily upon the Chunqiu fanlu (Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn) and the Huainanzi (The Master of Huainan), this paper seeks to identify the specific linguistic conventions and rhetorical forms associated with court debate as a distinctive genre of oral performance in Han China.

10. Waiyee Li, Harvard University

“Diplomatic Rhetoric in Zuozhuan”

The strategies whereby the powerful justifies aggression, the weak defends its rights, or the “barbaric” asserts its interests dramatize the balance or tension between moral suasion and expediency in the diplomatic rhetoric in Zuozhuan. This paper will examine these strategies in terms of their uses of the past and textual traditions, visions of present and future order, spatial conceptions of center and margins, and implicit assumptions about psychological manipulation.

11. David Schaberg, University of California at Los Angeles

“Functionary Speech: On the Work of shi 使 and shi 史”

The Zuozhuan recounts the missions of numerous “envoys” (shi 使), noble members of court sent by the court of a domain to represent its interests in negotiations with other domains. As references in the Lunyu and other early texts suggest, the envoy was expected to cultivate the verbal and intellectual skills necessary to improvise his speeches according to the circumstances, without departing from the basic aims of his mission. Meanwhile, another type of court official, the “scribe” (shi 史), had responsibility not only for certain kinds of historical recording, but also for a broader mastery of historical knowledge and the ability to speak authoritatively about it. In view of the likely etymological connections among the words shi 使 and shi 史 (and possibly li 理 and shi 土), and given the importance of oratorical ability and historical mastery in the speeches attributed to both types of officials, it is appropriate to consider the possibility of a common origin for the two and to examine the implications of this common origin for the early history of historical writing and the early history of oratory.