

Essence, Absence, Uselessness: Engaging Non-Euro-American Rhetorics Interologically

LuMing Mao
Miami University

ABSTRACT *Using the carpenter story from the Zhuangzi as a representative anecdote, the article argues that the art of re-contextualization is interological in orientation and transformative in practice. Drawing on the rhetoric of Dao, it further sketches out the discursive affinities between the art of re-contextualization with its focus on “facts of usage” and “facts of non-usage,” on the one hand, and the interological sensibility marked by the presence of interbeing and becoming, on the other. The article ends by calling on transcending binary logic and developing new terms of engagement for non-Euro-American rhetorics.*

KEYWORDS *Facts of usage; Facts of non-usage; Interology; Re-contextualization*

RÉSUMÉ *Cet article se rapporte à la parabole du charpentier selon Zhuangzi comme anecdote pertinente pour soutenir que l'art de la recontextualisation est interologique en orientation et transformatif en pratique. L'article d'autre part a recours à la rhétorique du Dao afin de décrire les affinités discursives entre, d'une part, un art de la recontextualisation mettant l'accent sur les « faits d'utilisation » et les « faits de non-utilisation » et, d'autre part, une sensibilité interologique marquée par la présence de l'interêtre et du devenir. L'article se termine par l'affirmation qu'il faut transcender une logique binaire et trouver une nouvelle manière d'aborder les rhétoriques qui ne sont pas euro-américaines.*

MOTS CLÉS *Faits d'utilisation; Faits de non-utilisation; Interologie; Recontextualisation*

He is to be known as the eternal sannyasi [renouncer]
Who neither hates nor desires,
Who is indifferent to the pairs of opposites, O Arjuna.
He is easily liberated from bondage.

— *The Bhagavad Gita* (2009, p. 245)

Thus, it might be something (有) that provides the value,
But it is nothing (無) that provides the utility.

— *Daodejing* (2003, p. 91)

LuMing Mao is Chair of the English Department and Professor of English and Asian/Asian American Studies at Miami University, 356 Bachelor Hall, Oxford Campus, Oxford, OH 45056. Email: maolr@miamioh.edu.

Introduction

This article begins with a story from the *Zhuangzi*, my representative anecdote, to borrow a term from Kenneth Burke (1969). The story is taken from Chapter 4, “In the World of Men,” of the *Zhuangzi*, one of the classical texts that emerged during the Warring States era (403–221 BCE) in ancient China. Zhuangzi (369–286 BCE), a Daoist philosopher and rhetorician, was part of the emerging literati in one of the most tumultuous and formative periods in Chinese history. Although the text bears the author’s name, it most likely embodies the minds of more than one individual (Watson, 2013).¹

A carpenter named Shi, together with his apprentice, went to visit a shrine at a local village where stood a huge oak tree. The tree was broad enough to shelter several thousand oxen and measured a hundred spans around. The lowest branches were 80 feet from the ground, and a dozen or so of the branches could easily have been made into boats. There were many spectators milling around, admiring the tree’s beauty and grandeur. But the carpenter did not pay any attention to it at all and went on his way. His lack of interest or indifference surprised and even unsettled his apprentice, who ran after his master and said,

“Since I first took up my ax and followed you, I have never seen timber as beautiful as this. But you don’t even bother to look, and go right on without stopping. Why is this?”

“Forget it—say no more!” said Carpenter Shi. It’s a worthless tree! Make boats out of it and they’d sink; make coffins and they’d rot in no time; make vessels and they’d break at once. Use it for posts and the worms would eat them up. It’s not a timber tree—there’s nothing it can be used for. That’s how it got to be that old!”

After Carpenter Shi returned home, the oak tree appeared to him in a dream and said,

“What are you comparing me with? Are you comparing me with those useful trees? The cherry apple, the pear, the orange, the citron, the rest of those fructiferous trees and shrubs—as soon as their fruit is ripe, they are torn apart and subjected to abuse. Their big limbs are broken off, their little limbs are yanked around. Their utility makes life miserable for them, and so they don’t get to finish out the years Heaven gave them, but are cut off in mid-journey. They bring it on themselves—the pulling and tearing of the common mob. And it’s the same way with all other things.”

The oak tree continued,

“As for me, I’ve been trying a long time to be of no use, and though I almost died, I’ve finally got it. This is of great use to me. If I had been of some use, would I ever have grown this large? Moreover, you and I are both of us things. What’s the point of this—things condemn things? You, a worthless man about to die—how do you know I’m a worthless tree?” (Watson, 2013, pp. 30–31)

So, what does a story like this tell us? What kind of rhetoric, if any, is being conveyed here? Does this story represent a deliberative rhetoric or an epideictic rhetoric

(the rhetoric of “praise” or “blame”) or both?² How can we, here and now, represent such rhetoric without either romanticizing it beyond its otherness or flattening its difference in such a way that we end up denying its otherness? Where should we in general look for non-Euro-American rhetorics—through facts and their underlying essence or through experiences, absences, and even instances of “uselessness”? What kind of methodology can be developed to represent non-Euro-American rhetorics in ways that are generative, self-reflexive, and attentive to historicities, specificities, and incongruities?

This article develops a response to these questions, starting with a critical review of three major methodological approaches that have emerged in our ongoing efforts to engage non-Euro-American rhetorics. The review aims to articulate the challenges confronting rhetoric and communication scholars who are engaged in comparative rhetorical work. Following that, is deployed the art of re-contextualization to respond to these challenges, using Daoism or its rhetoric as a concrete example for illustration. In the process, the article draws on interology, the study of interality or betweenness (Zhang, 2014, 2015a, 2015b), to help shine a bright light on the importance of mobilizing an interpretive stance that privileges interdependence over essence and process over permanence. The article concludes by returning to the beginning, to the *Zhuangzi*, to complete the story. The implications are teased out and an argument is raised for nurturing a third space where difference or cultural hybridity can be entertained “without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (Bhabha, 2004, p. 5) and without having to invoke or appeal to an underlying binary logic that continues to dominate our ways of speaking, doing, and even being.

From generalization to piecemeal: In search of a silver bullet

Several major methodological approaches have emerged over the recent past to respond to the need to represent those rhetorics that have been marginalized, underrepresented, and altogether neglected or silenced. Here I review three such approaches.

One may call the first approach the “generalization approach.” It is an approach that aims to reach some large-scale conclusions by relying on not so large-scale evidence or, worse still, by appealing to what Robert Solomon calls the “transcendental pretense,” a pernicious form of Western ethnocentrism that treats its own provincial principles or precepts as constituting universal norms or standards and the rest as in want of “normalization” or “standardization” (quoted in Hall & Ames, 1995, p. xiv). A number of well-intentioned efforts have surfaced to develop a general theory of rhetoric that will apply to all speech communities and to all cultures. However, these efforts face daunting challenges. Specifically, any general theory of rhetoric must begin by addressing diversities within a given rhetorical tradition, a formidable undertaking in the first place. Further, while certain concepts or practices in one tradition *may* appear to be similar to those in another, any perceived similarities or even equivalences will invariably turn out to be more complex than meets the eye. Absent any concrete efforts to address these complexities, claims and pronouncements in support of any general theory of rhetoric could very well become either vacuous generalizations or extensions of the dominant rhetorical tradition.

For example, to develop such a theory, George Kennedy uses the Greco-Roman rhetorical principles and paradigms as both his starting and end points. Throughout his study *Comparative Rhetoric: An Historical and Cross-Cultural Introduction*, Kennedy (1998) applies these principles and paradigms to non-Euro-American rhetorics in the world. He aims to test their universal applicability so as to achieve a better understanding of rhetoric as a more general phenomenon of human life. Surprisingly, he rules out, without hesitation, any consideration of adopting and developing the other's concepts and frameworks for describing and interpreting the other's rhetorical practices. He reasons that such concepts and frameworks would be "unfamiliar" to most Western readers and thus can be "confusing" (p. 5). But is it not the author's job, one may ask, to make what is "unfamiliar" familiar and what is "confusing" clear or, better still, to take each element in a comparison out of its own larger cultural matrix so that "it opens itself to other influences and frameworks in a hybridizing comparative process in which each transforms the other reciprocally" (Friedman 2011, p. 759)?

In an earlier work, Kennedy (1984) also states that "Aristotle's objective in writing *Rhetoric* was not to describe Greek rhetoric, but to describe this universal facet of human communication" (p. 10). He further claims that it is "perfectly possible to utilize the categories of Aristotelian rhetoric to study speech in China, India, Africa, and elsewhere in the world" (p. 10). Once again, he expended no effort to adopt or develop local terms and to join the unfamiliar with the familiar. As a result, what we come to know about these other traditions amounts to no more than a testament to, or lack thereof, the adaptability and applicability of Western or Aristotelian rhetorical models and concepts, thus further silencing or making invisible non-Euro-American rhetorics in the process.

Although Kennedy (1998) probably would probably tell us that his use of Greco-Roman rhetorical principles and paradigms for "testing purposes" (p. 5) is not the same as thoughtless imposition, the kind of "testing" being applied in his study has at best led to some superficial characterizations regarding similarities and differences between the Greco-Roman rhetorical tradition and those non-Euro-American rhetorical traditions (Garrett, 1998). More importantly, what Kennedy ends up doing is treating those Greco-Roman rhetorical principles and categories as though they were universal norms or standards for us to imitate or aspire to, even though they were actually borne out of both a specific spatial-temporal environment and a peculiar historical development. Not to recognize their parochial, historically constructed nature is only to reify them and, worse still, to commit the "transcendental pretense."

The second, and almost the opposite of the first approach is what the comparative scholar of ancient Greek and Chinese science and medicine G.E.R. Lloyd (1996) calls the "piecemeal approach" (p. 5). This approach sets out "to make direct comparisons between individual theories and concepts *across* culture *as if* they were addressed to the *same* issue" (p. 3, emphasis in original) and as if these individual theories and concepts were free of their own internal disputes or of what Edward Schiappa (2003) calls "definitional ruptures" (p. 7).

Take "rhetoric" as an example. The art of rhetoric was developed and grew into a distinctive discipline in ancient Greece. It is not uncommon then to look for its equiv-

alent, say, in ancient China or India and then to rationalize its absence should no such equivalent be found, or to propose an outright affinity or commonality should the opposite be the case. Major problems arise out of this piecemeal approach. For starters, since there were competing versions of rhetoric in ancient Greece, the diversity and divergence in the forms “rhetoric” took and in the functions it performed were such that any generalization within ancient Greece can be a complex proposition, let alone finding its equivalent in ancient China. One has to wonder: Which version of rhetoric in ancient Greece is being appealed to in search of its equivalent in ancient China or India? And how does one account for the fact that “rhetoric” was not separated as a distinctive discipline from philosophy or religion over that part of the world?

The same difficulties apply, if we start from the other side. The article uses Chinese yin (陰) and yang (陽) for illustration. Two of six qi (energy, 氣)—the other four qi are wind, rain, dark, and light—yin and yang became rhetorically important in ancient China by the fourth century BCE. They began to assume the role of the quintessential polarity in China in the third and second century BCE in explanation of social, political, and cosmological processes (Raphals, 1998). Can we now turn to ancient Greece and look for similar concepts there? Should we fail in this piecemeal approach, can we then conclude that ancient Greece *lacked* such correlative concepts? Or if we happen to come across the Pythagorean Table of Opposites, the *sustoichia*, reported by Aristotle in the *Metaphysics*,³ can we then declare some immediate compatibility between the *sustoichia* (table of opposites) and the yin-yang concept? Either move would miss the point. Namely, to impose a deficiency label, as has often been done the other way around, upon ancient Greece because of this apparent absence, is to assume that the yin-yang concept or some such had attained the same level of rhetorical importance in ancient Greece. In so doing, we perpetuate this perceived divide between Chinese correlative thinking and Greek causal thinking.⁴

This said, to claim some outright affinity, without careful investigation, between the *sustoichia* and the yin-yang concept will inevitably lead to giving up on many obvious and not so obvious differences. For one thing, the reciprocal, interdependent characteristic constitutive of the yin-yang concept was never in doubt or in dispute in ancient China. By contrast, there were widespread divergences among Greek theorists of opposites, and these disagreements or confrontations left little room for a consensus view (Lloyd, 1996). For another, the use of the yin-yang concept in ancient China was consistently moral and political (Sivin, 1995). It emphasized the importance of harmony and reciprocity on the strength of cosmological unity because it “see[s] heaven and earth, ruler and minister, father and son, old and young, male and female, as all, ideally, embodying the same reciprocal relationship” (Lloyd, 1996, p. 127). By contrast, there was no such emphasis in the Greek use of opposites, and the use of opposites was never set out to lend legitimacy to a particular regime (Lloyd, 1996). Moreover, the yin-yang concept exemplifies a quintessential Chinese sensibility or what Peter Zhang (2015b) aptly dubs “an interological mode of being” (p. 93), a point returned to in the next section.

The third approach is called “discursive hypercorrection.” Ills and sins have been committed in the past in representing non-Euro-American rhetorics. Either because

of orientalist logic, an interpretive procedure that not only essentializes the other but also projects and constructs the West as the idealized standard and the other as its very unchanging antithesis (Said, 1978), or because of our own terministic screens (Burke, 1966), past representations of non-Euro-American rhetorics have run the gamut from blind adulation to misrepresentation or under-representation, to silencing, to total rejection. To redress these ills and sins, scholars become so anxious to see the other in its otherness that they often end up representing the other beyond its otherness or flattening its otherness so that the other becomes no more than a mirror image of themselves.

For example, Confucian rhetoric has recently been suggested as possessing the “potential for democratic deliberations” (Lyon, 2004, p. 142) or construed in general as a legitimate alternative to dominant Aristotelian rhetoric. Similarly, Daoism has also been branded as another alternative to Western conceptions of rhetorical theory and criticism (Combs, 2006). The concern here has to do with the likelihood and its consequence of taking Confucian or Daoist rhetoric out of or beyond its own political and social context without being cognizant of them. To put it more bluntly, these kinds of characterizations may very well blur the distinction *between* the level of importance we want to attribute to these ancient rhetorics because of our own rhetorical exigency *and* the level of importance that accrued to them because of their own context and their own peculiar historical development. The challenge lies in how best we can recognize and, better still, harness these distinctions or boundaries in the service of developing a different kind of methodology that is mindful of its own epistemic space and location and attentive to gaps, excesses, and absences.

The missing link: The art of re-contextualization as a *tertium quid*

In view of the problems these three approaches have revealed, the article turns to the art of re-contextualization (Mao, 2011, 2013a, 2013b, 2014). A discursive third, the art of recontextualization draws on a number of disciplines, including comparative philosophy, comparative literature, cultural anthropology, feminist rhetorical studies, and postcolonial studies, to respond to a methodological paradox. That is, when speaking for and with non-Euro-American rhetorics, rhetoric and communication scholars must start somewhere. More often than not, they most likely start with their own familiar concepts and points of reference, thus risking either imposing them on these other rhetorics or silencing the latter’s own concepts or points of reference. As a response, the art of re-contextualization aims to negotiate the dynamics and complexities regarding the subject matter under study and the subject position taken for that study. Therefore, it directly engages, for example, the local and the global, the present and the past, the importantly present and the merely present and/or available,⁵ and the imperative to speak with, as well as for, the other⁶ and an awareness of its fraught process and consequences. Meanings or orders that emerge out of this kind of engagement are driven not so much by any underlying causal logic as by a dialectic such engagement mobilizes and by a creative, open-ended process it fosters and embodies—hence it is an art or a *tekhne*, not a strategy.

In a recent essay commenting on the methods in comparative literature, scholar Haun Saussy (2003) describes a “third-language” rule where scholars use three, rather

than two, languages to carry out literary analysis. According to Saussy, the use of a third language provides an additional perspective that a two-language pattern leaves out and it generates examples that challenge universal literature. This third language thus becomes a *tertium quid*⁷ that “mediates less than it interferes and in the process it produces something new” (2003, p. 340).

This article suggests that the art of re-contextualization be the *tertium quid* for engaging non-Euro-American rhetorics or any other comparative undertaking for that matter. Moreover, as a discursive third, the art of re-contextualization bears an unmistakable family resemblance to interology—the study of interality or betweenness that “sees the interzone or zone of proximity as the space of possibilities and transformations and the locus of ethics” (Zhang, 2015b, p. 93).⁸ As a matter of fact, the art of re-contextualization is interological through and through as it yields a third or an interological space. Here is why.

First, the art of re-contextualization critically engages both self and other, explicitly interrogating who we are and where we have been (read as self) and unpacking how political, economic, and sociocultural exigencies as well as historicities help determine local contexts and performances (read as other). This kind of dialogic engagement also necessarily takes into account the contingencies of the present in the global contact zones, drawing on the other’s social, political, and linguistic affiliations and affordances to reflect on and further trouble our own modes of doing and being.

In “Prologue to Interology: In Lieu of a Preface,” Peter Zhang (2015a) further characterizes interology as the study of interbeing and becoming, as more interested in “transformations and transfigurations in between, in affinities, affectivities, alliances, and valences than [in] so-called essences and filiations” (pp. 59–60). The art of re-contextualization, by its very focus on relationality or interdependence, exemplifies an interological undertaking. It aims to break away from or transcend our “natural” attachment to causal thinking that values being over becoming and rest over change and motion. And by embracing the fact that our engagement with the other demands a critical assessment of the self, it calls into existence a third space or an interality where multiplicity, fluidity, and ambiguity become at once our *modus operandi* and our *raison d’être*.

Second, and very much related, as an interological undertaking, the art of re-contextualization is marked by a distinctive processual or recursive characteristic. Namely, by interrogating our own modes of doing and being and by privileging relations of interdependence and interconnectivity, the art of re-contextualization champions a process that is “dialogic, dialectical, reflective, reflexive, embodied, and anchored in an ethos of care, respect, and humility” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 67). What this process entails, then, is a strong ethical imperative, which resonates with Zhang’s call to “recuperate a social interality defined by our presence to each other, or an embodied social ecology (2015a, p. 62).

Third, the art of re-contextualization joins with Bo Wang’s “transrhetorical approach” in that both constitute what she calls “a trope of epistemological crossing” and “promise the possibility of new meanings, new conceptual categories, and new ways of knowing and thinking” (2015, p. 248; also Wang, 2013). Echoing Wang’s call

for developing “plural local forms of engagement and hybrid analytical frameworks” (2015, p. 249), the art of re-contextualization moves away from formulating structures of sameness or difference based on “facts of essence” to developing narratives based on both “facts of usage” (Schiappa, 2003, pp. 6–7) and what I call “facts of nonusage” (Mao, 2014, p. 452). As a matter of fact, the turn toward “facts of nonusage” not only calls to mind the concept of “wu” (無) or “absence” or “nothingness” in the *Daodejing*⁹ or the concept of “xu” (虛) in the *Zhuangzi*¹⁰ but also exemplifies interality or the productive absence or emptiness that the art of re-contextualization seeks to value and celebrate (also You & Zhang, 2015; Zhang, 2015b). An explanation follows.

By facts of essence, Schiappa means the definitional facts sought through the question “What is X?”—facts that describe the essence or the true nature of things. By “facts of usage,” he refers to the definitional facts sought through the question “How is X used?”—facts that describe how things are actually being used or practiced in their local environments (2003, pp. 6–7). And by “facts of nonusage” is meant facts sought through such questions as: What are users not doing, and why? Is their silence caused by extreme emotion or passion, by immediate contexts of situation, or by the larger sociocultural matrix?¹¹ Could what they are doing be examples of the merely present rather than the importantly present? Could what they are *not* doing be due to the blind spots we have developed or to what Jacqueline Jones Royster calls the “passionate attachments” (2000, p. 280) we have accumulated? What are the questions with which users are concerned and to which the answers are thought by them to be the right answers (Lloyd, 1996)?

This pivot for “facts of usage” and, more importantly, for “facts of nonusage” unequivocally reflects an interological sensibility. Our proclivity for “facts of essence” betrays what Zhang calls “an entity- or object-orientation” (2015b, p. 94), an orientation that privileges substance or objectification over eventing or relationality and is predicated on causal thinking as opposed to analogical or correlative thinking. By contrast, the focus on “facts of usage” and on “facts of nonusage” moves away from substance or essence and calls our attention to discursive gaps, excesses, and absences or emptiness. After all, meaning can never be fully exhausted, and there will always be a surplus or an excess of meaning in any given proposition or communicative act. Further, such a focus challenges and in fact helps collapse the underlying binary that pits “facts of nonusage” against “facts of usage” and shuns them as undesirable or unacceptable. It yields to a relation of interdependence or the yin-and-yang of rhetorical reality. Not by accident, this relation of interdependence between “facts of usage” and “facts of nonusage” finds a “kindred spirit” in the link between “what is” and “what is not” or between presence and absence, the stuff that interality is made of.

In a word, the art of re-contextualization aims not so much to create agents of harmony for cultural encounters and for representing non-Euro-American rhetorics as to effectively enable “loci of enunciation” for developing narratives that are neither revisionist nor aimed to tell a different truth, but “narratives geared toward the search for a different logic” (Mignolo, 2000, p. 22). It is a logic that is interological in orientation and transformative in practice. More succinctly stated, the art of re-contextualization is invention, intervention, and transformation all rolled into one dialectic.

The rhetoric of Dao: A case in point

Daoist rhetoric has been attracting growing attention from rhetoric and communication scholars in the United States (e.g., Combs, 2006; Lu, 1998; Lyon, 2008; Mao, 2013b; Swearingen, 2013). It emerged as a challenge to Confucianism and Legalism, and Daoist sensibilities have permeated Chinese culture and its thought patterns (Lu, 1998), even demonstrating unexpected affinities with postmodern views regarding, for example, language, truth, and rationality (Graham, 1989). Quoting Lu, “Understood in its totality, Daoism presents a worldview with metaphysical, dialectical, and rhetorical significance that, in fact, does not condemn speech and argumentation but simply points out their limitations” (1998, p. 225).

This article characterizes the particular way and process evidenced in Daoism of challenging, intervening in, and creatively transforming our conventional institutions and practices as the rhetoric of *Dao*, an example of non-Euro-American rhetorics. The rhetoric of *Dao* is manifested through a discursive field consisting of, for example, *de* (德, being able to embody and induce character, efficacy, and potential for one’s individual experience); *wuwei* (無為, engaging the world non-coersively); *wuzhi* (無知, rejecting the kind of knowing that is predicated upon transcendental presence); and *wuyu* (無欲, exercising the kind of desire that celebrates, rather than possesses, things). Because of a symbiotic relationship between *de* and *dao*, the rhetoric of *Dao* promotes the dialectic of interdependent binaries in nature and in the human world, nurturing a perpetual tension between cultivating a creative and processual dimension at the individual level and elevating one of many competing *Daos* to the status of one and the only *Dao* at the communal, state, and cosmic level (Mao, 2013b).

How then does one go about engaging such a rhetoric when it is a couple of thousand years removed from us, when it continues to garner attention, if not adulation, in the present, and when “it ceases to be *Dao* if it is to be put into words” (*Daodejing*, 2003, p. 77)?¹² More specifically, how can the art of re-contextualization serve as a *tertium quid* or as an interological undertaking for such a rhetoric?

By practising the art of re-contextualization, we first move away from “What is the rhetoric of *Dao*?” toward “How does it guide human conduct?” The pivot from “what” to “how” is a pivot from “facts of essence” to “facts of usage” and “facts of nonusage.” It enables us to reject any overarching rhetorical principle or context to determine the context of *Dao* and to open up a third space where we begin to ask such questions as: How does the rhetoric of *Dao* arise? In what manifestations and through which agency? How does this rhetoric inhabit and shape the world? Further, what were the questions with which the actors then and there were concerned and to which the answers were thought by them to be the right answers? Our responses to these questions will help establish new “loci of enunciation” and develop narratives marked by an interbeing or becoming, by a dialogic and dialectical tacking between “facts of usage” and “facts of nonusage” in such a way as to bring them both into critical and simultaneous view.

Second, the art of re-contextualization, because of its relentless dialogism and dialecticism, develops “thick description” *with an attitude*. As is now well known, the term “thick description” was originally coined by the Oxford ordinary language

philosopher Gilbert Ryle and later popularized by the late cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973). For Geertz, achieving thick description for a culture or a community is to ask, for example, “what it is, ridicule or challenge, irony or anger, snobbery or pride, that, in their occurrence and through their agency, is getting said” (p. 10), and, we might add, not getting said or silenced. It is to provide “the sort of sensible actuality that makes it possible to think not only realistically and concretely *about* them [mega-concepts], but, what is more important, creatively and imaginatively *with* them” (p. 23, emphasis in original).

Pursuing thick description for the rhetoric of *Dao* then means focusing not on its ontological status or its facts of essence but on what is actually getting said and what is *not* getting said, on what is importantly present and what is merely present and/or available, and why. It means looking for how *Dao* helps individuals negotiate and harness the perpetual tension between cultivating *Dao*'s creative and processual dimension at the individual level, on the one hand, and elevating one of many competing *Daos* to the status of the one and only *Dao* at the communal, national, and cosmic level, on the other.

Meanwhile, it must be entered that pursuing thick description does not happen in an ideological vacuum, nor does it absolve us rhetoric and communication scholars of carrying out the ethical imperative or exercising an ethic of care. We have to ask, for example, in whose terms and under what authority is thick description for the rhetoric of *Dao* being developed and disseminated? From which epistemic space and location is thick description originated? And where does it travel to, and what impact will it bear on the community or culture of which it is an integral part? In other words, pursuing thick description with an attitude for the rhetoric of *Dao* calls on us to be both reflective and reflexive, to be both attentive to the link between what is and what is not and ready to interrogate our own methodological orientations and analytical frameworks. It also means addressing how we can represent the rhetoric of *Dao* in ways that in turn inform the conditions of the present. In the process, we can begin to avoid reifying the rhetoric of *Dao* or treating it as though it were “a self-contained ‘super-organic’ reality with forces and purposes of its own” (Geertz, 1973, p. 11) or with its own internal or immanent law or order. We can also begin to avoid reducing it by moving beyond the temptation to claim its utility or applicability for every symbolic practice imaginable. Reification or reduction once again betrays an entity- or object-bias or orientation (Zhang, 2015b), and either move makes us further removed from relationality and productive ambiguity.

Third, practising the art of re-contextualization to represent the rhetoric of *Dao* aims to cultivate a dialectic between developing a local narrative informed by the dynamics of *Daos* and the *Dao* (historicity), on the one hand, and searching for that narrative's new and broader significance in the present both in and outside its discursive milieu (specificity and incongruity), on the other. By that is meant any meaningful engagement with the rhetoric of *Dao* will have to deal with the tension between the *Daos* practiced at the individual level and the one and only *Dao* claimed and promoted by the powers that be, as well as the tension between the heterogeneous *Daos* at the individual level and their inevitable pressure on the one and only *Dao* for dialogue and change. Similarly, our engagement, in its search for the significance of the rhetoric

of *Dao*, will have to be mindful of how the rhetoric of *Dao* is being shaped by the forces both within and outside of its discursive context. These parallel efforts in turn bring about meaning and affordance for such a dialectic.

Not only is such a dialectic an example of interality in and of itself, but it also opens up new space to experience interality, to extend and augment it. Consequently, we can begin to make visible and further privilege interdependence or betweenness or “facts of nonusage” *both* between the local and the global *and* within and beyond the local and the global. As a result, we can begin to apply the art of re-contextualization to all areas of rhetoric and to all instances of interality without the essentializing division between self and other and between Euro-American rhetorics (read as the dominant) and non-Euro-American rhetorics, for example.

Finally, the art of re-contextualization is about discovering and articulating eventfulness—how “things stand in relation to something else at particular times” (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 23) and how gaps, excesses, and absences can be brought to light and made useful. It is about discovering and articulating rhetorics in places where they have hitherto been ruled non-existent or not readily available. Because of its insistence on eventfulness or relationality, the art of re-contextualization guards us against falling prey to a concomitant temptation to anoint such rhetorics as unique, as incommensurable with all other rhetorics. It enables us to move a step closer to meeting our ethical responsibility to speak *with*, rather than *for*, non-Euro-American rhetorics and to engage in a co-constitutive practice that embraces both “facts of usage” and “facts of nonusage,” as well as what feminist rhetoricians Jacqueline Royster and Gesa Kirsch call “a multidimensional sense of diversity” (2012, p. 112).

From binary logic to a rhetoric of becoming: A matter of interdependence-in-difference

Coming back full circle, we now return to Zhuangzi’s story with which we began this article. More specifically, I want to use this concluding section to complete the story, teasing out its implications and charting out a way forward so that we can both part company with binary logic once and for all and embrace and put to practice an interological sensibility through the art of re-contextualization.

This much is clear: Zhuangzi’s story, through the lens of an oak tree, is not about litigious, polemic rhetoric we regularly associate with ancient Greece, a rhetoric, truth be told, which is often driven not so much by the search for truth as by fierce competition for ideological supremacy and personal popularity and ambition. Rather, Zhuangzi’s story reflects and indeed enacts a different kind of rhetoric that calls for a different way of engagement. Neither deliberative nor epideictic, this rhetoric takes the form of an analogy and challenges us to think beyond our own passionate attachments or to remove what John Dewey calls “the useless lumber that blocks our highways of thought” (quoted in Hall & Ames, 1995, p. xx). We can call this rhetoric a rhetoric of becoming.

By calling this rhetoric of Zhuangzi’s a rhetoric of becoming, this article seeks to underscore the fact that such a rhetoric perpetually participates in a meaning-making, knowledge-creating process and disrupts and further transforms existing boundaries, conditions, and conventions. Privileging becoming and process over rest and permanence and valuing experience and multiplicity over abstract knowledge and single

points of origin, the rhetoric of becoming thus embodies a productive tension *between* its heterogeneous agency and fluidity *and* a sense of history and continuity. To achieve authority and authenticity, it both asserts or affirms its situated history and defers its meaning to a context that is being continuously reconstructed and recalibrated. In a word, through the rhetoric of becoming, Zhuangzi is jolting us to reject our conventional boundaries, binaries, and biases and to cultivate and celebrate a sensibility for interdependence, betweenness, and heterogeneous resonance.

So, fruit trees or timber trees that can be made into vessels or houses are “useful” but “their utility makes life miserable for them, and so they don’t get to finish out the years Heaven gave them” because “they are torn apart and subjected to abuse.” Their utility to humans thus is not useful to them. By contrast, “useless” trees get to grow to their ripe old age and avoid the fate of being cut down or “cut off in mid-journey” (Watson, 2013, pp. 30–31). Their uselessness (to humans) is most worthy to them.

Like the tree’s usefulness and uselessness, rhetoric in ancient Greece and the rhetoric of *Dao* in ancient China are value propositions closely tied to, and in fact constituted by, both a particular socio-political, if not divine, matrix and a situated interpretive framework. Otherwise stated, they are discursively motivated and materially enabled. What is useful or desirable for one community or culture may not be so for another. Instead of romanticizing the other or engineering a forced fit amidst a complex web of power asymmetry, we should focus on that which is actually getting experienced and enacted or not, and why. We should further perform this dialectic *both* between the local and the global *and* within and beyond the local and the global. Instead of resorting to conventional terms of engagement such as useful versus useless, persuasive versus irenic, logic versus analogic, or Greek rhetoric versus Chinese rhetoric, we should direct our attention to the historicities, specificities, and incongruities each culture reveals, values, and practises and to the ways in which each rhetoric connects to and possibly interanimates every other rhetoric.

There is more. What this story has taught us is not to flip simply the said hierarchy, as one might be tempted to do, so that what was useless then becomes useful now or what was yin yesterday assumes the status of yang today. For such a reversal of fortunes, as it were, however well-intentioned or amply justified, still preserves the underlying binary or its underlying binary logic and thus fails to recognize their interdependence-in-difference or their interality or their betweenness. Instead, Zhuangzi’s story or its rhetoric of becoming is calling on us to enter a third space, an interbeing, where untimely connections¹³ and novel possibilities can be openly entertained and plural forms of inquiry hotly pursued. We stop asking: What are these untimely connections and novel possibilities? We begin to ask: How are they “good to think with” (Lévi-Strauss, 1964, p. 89) and how are they good to create “the condition of openness to new objects and new forms of inquiry” (Saussy, 2003, p. 23)?

After the carpenter woke up from his dream, he reported his dream to his apprentice, who then questioned the oak tree’s intent for being at the village shrine to be “useless.” The carpenter scolded him as follows:

“Shhh! Say no more! It’s only resting there. If we carp and criticize it, it will merely conclude that we don’t understand it. Even if it weren’t at the

shrine, do you suppose it would be cut down? It protects itself in a different way from ordinary people. If you try to judge it by conventional standards, you'll be way off!" (Watson, 2013, p. 31)

Therefore, unless we stop judging "by conventional standards" or by their underlying binary logic, we will never understand the oak tree's intent nor will we its usefulness. To put it more positively, we must develop new terms of engagement in ways that will enable us to challenge those conventional standards and their underlying binary logic and to better understand and represent the oak tree's intent as well as Zhuangzi's reasoning or his rhetoric of becoming behind it. Only then can we become "indifferent to the pairs of opposites" and fully appreciate that it is "nothing (無) that provides the utility," as is advised by the two epigraphs that begin this article. Or it is simply a matter of interdependence-in-difference.

Notes

1. Incidentally, Peter Zhang discusses the *Zhuangzi* as one of the important sources for studying interality or betweenness (2015b, pp. 98–99).
2. Traditional Western rhetoric recognizes only three species of discourse: deliberative (to exhort or dissuade), epideictic (to praise or blame), and judicial (to accuse or defend). For Aristotle, the audience determines the discourse's purpose though he readily admits that the boundary between deliberative and epideictic rhetoric is not clear-cut and the difference is often one of style (1991, pp. 47–51, 1358b). Such a taxonomy will also encounter serious challenges when and if it should get applied to other rhetorical traditions as I hope to demonstrate in this article. See also, for another example, Megan Schoen (2012).
3. According to Aristotle (1966), there are ten pairs of opposite terms in the Pythagorean Table of Opposites, which displays the analogy in the relationships between each pair. For example, on the side of limit, there are odd, one, right, male, resting, straight, light, good, and square; on the side of the unlimited, there are even, many, left, female, moving, curved, darkness, bad, and rectangular. Lloyd (1996) further suggests that Aristotle draws upon the basic idea conveyed through the *sustoichia*. Lloyd writes, "Thus the belief that right is to be associated with male, front, upper, hot, and conversely left is to be associated with female, back, lower, cold, is given explanatory work to do in a wide variety of contexts in his [Aristotle's] cosmology, in his embryology and elsewhere in his physics" (pp. 114–115).
4. Correlative thinking, in its indifference to logical analysis and in its emphasis on analogical associations, interdependence, or betweenness is interlogical (see the discussion in the following section). By contrast, causal thinking is linear and marked by an emphasis on formal or abstract definitions in search of essence or univocity.
5. That is, Hall and Ames' "Principle of Mere Presence" (1995) is being channeled here. By that they mean that the mere presence of an idea or doctrine in a particular culture does not entitle us to claim the idea or doctrine is importantly present—"that is, present in such a way that it significantly qualifies, defines, or otherwise shapes the culture" (p. xv).
6. What is being developed here is in direct conversation with Linda Alcoff's much cited "The Problem of Speaking for Others" (1991–1992) where she identifies, and further develops response (her four-step strategy) to, the major challenges scholars face and must address in speaking for others. However, this article advocates a co-constitutive process where the act of representation has to be completed by both self and other—hence the emphasis is on "with" over "for" or "about."
7. The *OED* defines a *tertium quid* as "something (indefinite or left undefined) related in some way to two (definite or known) things, but distinct from both."

8. According to Zhang, both “interology” and “interality” were coined by the Chinese-American philosopher Geling Shang (2015b, p. 93).
9. See Chapter 11 as well as chaps. 2, 4, and 5.
10. See Chapter 4 (Watson, 2013).
11. Greeks would refer to the first two instances—becoming silent because of being overcome by passion or because of recognizing and respecting the immediate communicative context—as *aposiopesis*.
12. This Daoist distrust in language or, more precisely, in linguistic objectification once again reflects this interological sensibility for productive absence or emptiness. It throws in stark relief the remarkable difference vividly worded in John 1:1: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Here stands, in no uncertain terms, secular or divine, a quintessential contrast between the language of ontological presence, on the one hand, and the language of deference (for the interological sensibility), on the other.
13. This draws on Michelle Ballif’s (2014) recent essay in which she invites us to “write histories that begin with this presumption of their always already untimely nature, and further to think about history as *not* a function of linear temporality” (p. 247, emphasis in original).

References

- Alcoff, Linda. (1991–1992). The problem of speaking for others. *Cultural Critique*, 20, 5–32.
- Ames, Roger T., & Rosemont, Henry, Jr. (1998). Introduction. *The analects of Confucius: A philosophical translation* (pp. 1–70). New York, NY: Ballantine Books.
- Aristotle. (1966). *Aristotle’s metaphysics* (Hippocrates G. Apostle, Trans.). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Aristotle. (1991). *On rhetoric: A theory of civic discourse* (George A. Kennedy, Trans.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Ballif, Michelle. (2014). Writing the event: The impossible possibility for historiography. *Rhetoric Review Quarterly*, 44, 243–255.
- Bhabha, Homi. (2004). *The location of culture* (2nd ed). London: Routledge.
- The Bhagavad Gita*. (2009). (Winthrop Sargeant, Trans.). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Burke, Kenneth. (1966). *Language as symbolic action: Essays on life, literature, and method*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Burke, Kenneth. (1969). *A grammar of motives*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Combs, Steven C. (2006). *The Dao of rhetoric*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Daodejing*: “Making this life significant.” (2003). (Roger T. Ames & David L. Hall, Trans.). New York, NY: Ballantine.
- Friedman, Susan Stanford. (2011). Why not compare? *PMLA [Publications of the Modern Language Association of America]*, 126, 753–762.
- Garrett, Mary. (1998). [Review of the book *Comparative rhetoric: An historical and cross-cultural introduction*]. *Rhetorica*, 16, 431–433.
- Geertz, Clifford. (1973). Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture. *The interpretations of cultures: Selected essays* (pp. 3–30). New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Graham, A. C. (1989). *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical argument in ancient China*. LaSalle, IL: Open Court.
- Hall, David L., & Ames, Roger T. (1995). *Anticipating China: Thinking through the narratives of Chinese and Western culture*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Kennedy, George A. (1984). *New Testament interpretation through rhetorical criticism*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Kennedy, George A. (1998). *Comparative rhetoric: An historical and cross-cultural introduction*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. (1964). *Totemism* (Rodney Needham, Trans.). London: Merlin.
- Lloyd, G.E.R. (1996). *Adversaries and authorities: Investigations into ancient Greek and Chinese science*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

- Lu, Xing. (1998). *Rhetoric in ancient China, fifth to third century B.C.E.: A comparison with classical Greek rhetoric*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press.
- Lyon, Arabella. (2004). Confucian silence and remonstrance: A basis for deliberation? In Carol S. Lipson & Roberta A. Binkley (Eds.), *Rhetoric before and beyond the Greeks* (pp. 131–145). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Lyon, Arabella. (2008). Rhetorical authority in Athenian democracy and the Chinese legalism of Han Fei. *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 41, 51–71.
- Mao, LuMing. (2011). The rhetoric of responsibility: Practicing the art of recontextualization. *Rhetoric Review*, 30, 119–20, 131–32.
- Mao, LuMing. (2013a). Beyond bias, binary, and border: Mapping out the future of comparative rhetoric. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 43, 209–225.
- Mao, LuMing. (2013b). Writing the other into histories of rhetoric: Theorizing the art of recontextualization. In Michelle Ballif (Ed.), *Theorizing histories of rhetoric* (pp. 41–57). Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Mao, LuMing. (2014). Thinking beyond Aristotle: The turn to how in comparative rhetoric. *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 129, 448–455.
- Mignolo, Walter D. (2000). *Local histories/global designs: Coloniality, subaltern knowledges, and border thinking*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Raphals, Lisa. (1998). *Sharing the light: Representations of women and virtue in early China*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Royster, Jacqueline Jones. (2000). *Traces of a stream: Literacy and social change among African American women*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Royster, Jacqueline Jones, & Kirsch, Gesa E. (2012). *Feminist rhetorical practices: New horizons for rhetoric, composition, and literacy studies*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Said, Edward. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York, NY: Vintage.
- Saussy, Haun. (2003). Comparative literature? *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 118, 336–341.
- Schiappa, Edward. (2003). *Defining reality: Definitions and the politics of meaning*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Schoen, Megan. (2012). Rhetoric of the Thirstland: An historical investigation of discourse in Botswana. *Rhetoric Review*, 31, 271–288.
- Sivin, Nathan. (1995). The myth of the naturalists. In *Medicine, philosophy and religion in ancient China: Researches and reflections* (pp. 1–33). Aldershot, UK: Variorum.
- Swearingen, C. Jan. (2013). Tao trek: One and other in comparative rhetoric: A response. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 43, 300–309.
- Wang, Bo. (2013). Comparative rhetoric, postcolonial studies, and transnational reminiscences: A geopolitical approach. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 43, 226–242.
- Wang, Bo. (2015). Transrhetorical practice. *Rhetoric Review*, 34, 246–249.
- Watson, Burton (Trans.). (2013). *The complete works of Zhuangzi*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- You, Xi-lin, & Zhang, Peter. (2015). Interality in Heidegger. *China Media Research*, 11, 104–108.
- Zhang, Peter. (2014). McLuhan and *I Ching*: An interological inquiry. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 39, 449–468.
- Zhang, Peter. (2015a). Prologue to interology: In lieu of a preface. *China Media Research*, 11, 57–67.
- Zhang, Peter. (2015b). The human seriousness of interality: An East Asian take. *China Media Research*, 11, 93–103.