

## The Origins of Literary Form

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As an exercise in a sub-literary form, I've been told not to exceed ten minutes. This puts a premium on compression *and* clarity. I intend to spend five minutes on sweeping generalizations, three minutes on a specific example, and two minutes being provocative, or perhaps merely provoking.

### Part 1. The Broad Brush, or Watch Out, Here It Comes

A. There are at least three reasons to accept the Brooksian analysis:<sup>1</sup>

The *microjustifications* for doing so are the repeated shocks of discovery it offers – impenetrable walls of mystery against which you have banged your head dissolve at its touch. Even though some of those discoveries will ultimately require correction, their solvent action is as beneficent for our thinking as the squirts from his oil can are for the Tin Woodman in *The Wizard of Oz*.

The *macrojustification* lies in the scope and penetration of its challenge to the received wisdom. Even if Bruce and Taeko were utterly wrong, the effect of such a systematic and encompassing reconceptualization would do more for the field than a hundred flaccid ditherings within the accepted paradigm. As things stand now, even the most brilliant contributions add only glittering chips to a mosaic which no one can see in its entirety. This analysis opens up the whole panorama.

Lastly, there is the *depressing alternative* – to be stuck with the existing description of early Chinese literature, an incoherent garble preserved only by authority and disciplinary tradition.

B. What is the orthodox view of the origins of literary form?

The archaeologists can show us traditions of pottery marking that presumably coalesce over time into a more unified system of written characters, but are commendably modest about drawing any conclusions about early literature.<sup>2</sup>

The Shāng used a recognizably Chinese written language to communicate with the gods (that is, the royal ancestors), but as David Hawkes proclaims, “The dynasty of Shāng kings . . . left behind no literature. Chinese literature begins with the Jōu.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Brooks **Re-Dating**.

<sup>2</sup>Cheung **Recent** 383.

<sup>3</sup>Hawkes **Songs** 16.

“The Jōu were a wordy people . . .,” to quote Hawkes again, driven by their guilty conscience as usurpers to fill footlockers with tedious self-justifications, while spies transcribed for monarchs the effusions of sex-starved peasants singing in the fields, and fortune tellers mumbled obscurities in the marketplace.

Orthodoxy asks us to accept whichever chunks of Shū Jīng, Shī Jīng, and Yì Jīng are not temporarily under a cloud as the Forgery of the Week, and then to understand the Duke of Jōu as having issued, from his death bed, a gag order on literary expression which lasted until Confucius stumbled into print.

C. We might better rephrase Hawkes as: “The dynasty of Jōu kings, as well as the Spring and Autumn period, left behind no literature. Chinese literature begins with the core of the Analects in the 05th century, and achieves a rich polycentric vitality only in the 04th century.” Then we are in a position to see that the Warring States period *is* the birthplace of Chinese literature.

It is in the evolution out of the early 05th-century beginnings of the Analects that we observe crucial literary transitions: from the lapidary Analects saying to the complex essay found in the early 03rd-century heart of the Sywǎndž, and from the didactic Analects anecdote to the extended historical romance, exemplified in the very late 04th-century Dzwǒ Jwàn. Throughout this period, textual kernels, once established by some editorial impetus based in a political faction, accrete (layer by layer) into the multivocal, diachronic textual traditions that we call by single labels such as Gwǎndž or Mwòdž, forgetting that it is only at the end of the Warring States that we can conceive of a work of solitary inspiration. Postmodernism has dispersed the concept of authorship into the intertextual web – in the Warring States period, everything we try to call a text *is* an intertextual web. The concept of an author has hardly begun to condense out of it.

## Part 2. A Specific Case, or Drawing Feet on the Brooksonian Snake

A. When people sit down to read Warring States literature, they are generally in agreement as to what they find, stylistically. There is what Burton Watson calls “a fondness for direct speech . . . a tendency to use balanced, parallel phrases.”<sup>4</sup>

Egan endorses this view of a style “consistently laconic and paratactic.”<sup>5</sup> Watson, in a weary mood, paraphrasing Yoshikawa Kōjirō, says “In this style one must usually grasp the meaning of the first phrase before he can move on to the second. But in other cases he must move on to the second phrase before he can understand the first. And when, as sometimes happens, these two phenomena coincide, it is difficult to see where the pleasurable sensation comes in.”<sup>6</sup> This lament seems to qualify the enthusiasm expressed elsewhere for paratactic style.

<sup>4</sup>Watson **Early** 23, 25.

<sup>5</sup>Egan **Narratives** 339.

<sup>6</sup>Watson **Early** 55.

B. All appreciation for the sophistication of this style mysteriously vanishes when the orthodox observer turns to the *Analects*, which is described as haphazardly arranged,<sup>7</sup> rudimentary in organization,<sup>8</sup> disjointed,<sup>9</sup> and unsystematic.<sup>10</sup> D C Lau, among the standard translators, is a partial exception. He nervously buries in the third appendix to his version a realization that at least the older books of the *Analects* are all formed around a small number of subheadings, and even flags what I would call a paratactic dyad in Book 3, although he is thrown off the scent by a later interpolation there. In fact, the work has literary form to burn, and the next great step in understanding it has always been right under our noses.

Every time I have challenged my introductory survey of Chinese history to look for structure in the *Analects*, one of the brighter students has pointed to LY 7:7 and 7:8 (see Dawson's translation in the Appendix) as a demonstration that the text, at least some of the time, uses pairs of adjacent passages to comment on, and revise, each other. What a historicized *Analects*, à la Brooks, makes clear, by identifying the interleaved passages from later states of the textual tradition, is that the core text originally consisted *entirely* of such paratactic dyads, occasionally rising to triadic perorations. On the handout, you have the triad that concludes the second subheading of the oldest stratum of the text. If this sort of closely worked language is haphazard, rudimentary, disjointed, and unsystematic, then so is a Shakespearean sonnet.

### Part 3. Another Triadic Peroration, or Let's Go Over the Top!

A. Rather than representing a literary comeback by a tradition that had slipped into a coma after generating 305 songs, 64 riddles, and a few weird documents, the *Analects* stands at the dawn of Chinese literature. Rather than manifesting the authorial high spirits of Confucius or his epigones, it is the result of editorial care in the context of a gnomic tradition expressed in paratactic dyads and triads.

B. It so happens that there is another textual tradition of gnomic sayings, of at least similar antiquity, edited by scribes into paratactic dyads and triads. It's in the Bible, attributed to Solomon instead of Confucius, probably with even less warrant. In the handout is a cousin to LY 4:17 from Proverbs 26:4-5. Given that the Nag Hammadi library of so-called "Gnostic" texts includes one whose echoes of the *Bhagavad Gîtâ* have already been remarked upon,<sup>11</sup> it may not be too grotesque to imagine that some day a peasant in Upper Egypt, looking for nitrate-bearing rocks, may put his mattock through a jar containing a wisdom text ancestral to LY 4, and remind us that Eurasian history is all one narrative.

<sup>7</sup>Ebrey **Civilization** 17.

<sup>8</sup>Dawson **Analects** vii.

<sup>9</sup>Schwartz **World** 62.

<sup>10</sup>Chan **Source Book** 19 n11.

<sup>11</sup>Robinson **Nag** 295.

### Appendix: Handout

**Parataxis** (Gk “placing beside”): Coordinative ranging of phrases one after another, without other expression of syntactic relation. The resulting parallelism may be syntactic, semantic, rhythmic, phonetic, or morphologic. Compare **hypotaxis** (Gk “placing beneath”), in which phrases are related to each other as main and qualifying elements by syntactic subordination.

#### A Mutually Qualifying Paratactic Dyad

**Open Admissions** (LY 7:7):

The Master said:  
 “From the bringer of a bundle of dried meat upwards,  
 I have never once refused instruction to anyone”

**But Post-Matriculation Screening** (LY 7:8):

The Master said:  
 “To those who are not eager to learn I do not explain anything.  
 And to those who are not bursting to speak I do not reveal anything.  
 If I raise one angle  
 and they do not come back with the other three angles,  
 I will not repeat myself”

(NB: We have reached a point in the development of the school where tuition is charged!)

#### A Triadic Peroration

(The End of the Analects Core Chapter)

LY 4:14 The Master said:

“One is not worried about not holding position;  
 one is worried about how one may fit oneself for appointment.  
 One is not worried that nobody knows one;  
 one seeks to become fit to be known”

LY 4:16 The Master said:

“The gentleman is familiar with what is right,  
 just as the small man is familiar with profit”

LY 4:17 The Master said:

“When you come across a superior person,  
 think of being equal to him.  
 When you come across an inferior person,  
 turn inwards and examine yourself”

#### A Parallel Case of Parataxis

(cf LY 4:17, above)

Proverbs 26:4

Answer not a fool according to his folly,  
 lest you be like him yourself.

Proverbs 26:5

Answer a fool according to his folly,  
 lest he be wise in his own eyes.

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