
David R. Knechtges and Eugene Vance (editors):

Rhetoric and the Discourses of Power in Court Culture. China, Europe, and Japan

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With *Rhetoric and the Discourses of Power in Court Culture* the sinologist David R. Knechtges and the professor of Italian and French Eugene Vance have edited an impressive volume that investigates the role of the court in the cultures of pre-modern China, Europe, and Japan. The volume is the result of an international research project that started in 1994 and included scholars from a variety of disciplines. The project's aim was to "identify productive strategies for studying both the court as a locus of power and its relationship to and influence on the norms of a larger culture" (p. ix).

The book opens with an Introduction (pp. ix-xiv) by Knechtges, highlighting the contents of the volume. Twelve original articles follow, presented under five different headings: "Rhetoric of Persuasion" (Part I, pp. 3-72), "Rhetoric of Taste" (Part II, pp. 73-148), "Rhetoric of Communication" (Part III, pp. 149-238), "Rhetoric of Gender" (Part IV, pp. 239-284), and "Rhetoric of Natural Nobility" (Part V, pp. 285-341).

Part I begins with Knechtges' article on "The Rhetoric of Imperial Abdication and Accession in a Third-Century Chinese Court: The Case of Cao Pi's Accession as Emperor of the Wei Dynasty" (pp. 3-35). Cao Pi (187-226), the Prince of Wei, is known to have forced the last Han emperor to abdicate the imperial throne in his favor. In his essay, Knechtges unveils the argumentative tactics employed by Cao Pi and his associates to manipulate public opinion and justify his accession to the throne. Through a textual analysis of the memorials (*biao*) that were exchanged between Cao Pi and court officials, Knechtges identifies a rhetorical strategy in the Prince's subversive plan that aimed at legitimizing his rise to power. Knechtges calls this communicative strategy a "rhetoric of refusal" (p. 6), an established political ritual in which Cao Pi rejected requests from officials and the Emperor himself to become the new ruler. Rebutting objections and drawing from examples of other individuals in history who had declined offers of the throne, Cao Pi motivated his refusal to replace the current Emperor by way of arguments that actually emphasized his integrity and purity of character. He was thus able to make a case for his legitimate ascension to power. The ultimate goal of Cao Pi, Knechtges demonstrates, was to argue that he would not take the imperial throne by force, even though he had by then actually already seized political control.

While a communicative strategy enabled Cao Pi to remove the Han Emperor in a peaceful fashion, this was not the case as regards the dethroning of Edward II of England (1284-1327). As discussed by Scott L. Waugh in the other contribution to this part of the book ("The Court, Politics, and Rhetoric in England, 1310-1330", pp. 36-72), Edward II was deposed after turbulent developments and violent atrocities. Waugh analyzes the way in which observers and commentators described the political and social unrest they witnessed. What emerges from a close study of their narrative, Waugh shows, is "the existence of a complex rhetoric of vice, emotion, and due process that writers used to explain and judge events for themselves and their readers" (p. 38).

Part II, “Rhetoric of Taste”, contains three articles. In the first of these, “Poems for the Emperor: Imperial Tastes in the Early Ninth Century” (pp. 73-93), Pauline Yu investigates the reasons for the proliferation of poetry collections in early ninth-century China, one being perhaps the inclusion of a test of literary ability in the prestigious *jinshi* examination, the gateway to the highest rank in the Chinese civil service.

In the second article in this part, “Claiming the Past for the Present: Ichijō Kaneyoshi and *Tales of Ise*” (pp. 94-116), Steven Carter examines the case of the influential Japanese medieval scholar and courtier Ichijō Kaneyoshi (1402-1487) and his attempt to identify the court as the preserver of knowledge and traditions at a time when the rise of the warrior class was putting the court’s very survival at peril. Kaneyoshi distinguished himself as a patron of poetry in all courtly forms, but he was also a scholar devoted to the exegesis of historical and literary classics. Carter argues (p. 101) that although Kaneyoshi’s contributions to the preservation of court traditions are also apparent from other works, his commentary on the anonymous tenth-century collection of *Tales of Ise* (*Ise monogatari gūkenshō*, *My Foolish Views on Tales of Ise*) is perhaps the work that best epitomized his hidden ideological agenda. On the surface, Kaneyoshi’s exegesis of these canonical poetic and prose texts on the life of the poet Ariwara no Narihira simply aimed at providing explanations for unclear terms and phrases. Carter demonstrates, however, that a deeper analysis of the commentary reveals the clear purpose to conserve the *Tales of Ise* within the boundaries of courtly culture. Kaneyoshi dismissed, for example, previous readings of sections of the text as possible Buddhist allegories and argued that it should be read exclusively in a courtly context. As Carter cogently points out, Kaneyoshi’s ultimate intent was to situate the *Tales of Ise* in the history of the court and, concurrently, in the history of the Japanese nation. Thus, Carter sees Kaneyoshi as contributing “to an ongoing process that through philology assisted in defining the history of the Japanese nation as the history of the Japanese court” (p. 114).

Finally, in “The Emperor and the Ink Plum: Tracing a Lost Connection between Literati and Huizong’s Court” (pp. 117-148), Ronald Egan addresses the process by which the Imperial court in China, particularly that of Emperor Huizong (ruled 1101-1126), appropriated aesthetic values that had been first developed by *wenren* or literati painters.

In his article “Personal Crisis and Communication in the Life of Cao Zhi” (pp. 149-168), which opens Part III on “Rhetoric of Communication”, Robert Joe Cutter examines yet another use of the *biao* – the epistolary memorial used by Cao Pi to legitimize his accession to the throne – focusing this time on the case of Cao Pi’s brother, Cao Zhi.

Paul Edward Dutton, on the other hand, in “Keeping Secrets in a Dark Age” (pp. 169-198), explores the intricate means of communication at the ninth-century Carolingian court and reveals the existence of a ‘rhetoric of secrecy’ in the court culture of medieval Europe.

In the last essay of this part, “The Politics of Classical Chinese in the Early Japanese Court” (pp. 199-238), Robert Borgen discusses the role played by literature written in Chinese in the eighth and ninth century in the organization of the Japanese state of that period. Borgen maintains that “as the ancestors of the present imperial family were attempting to consolidate political power, they found a useful ally in Confucian theories that saw political value in literary composition” (p. 202). Chinese literature in early Japan contributed to the identification of the early Japanese medieval court as the repository of culture and knowledge.

In Part IV, “Rhetoric of Gender”, Stephen Owen’s engaging article, “One Sight: The *Han shu* Biography of Lady Lin” (pp. 239-259), unveils the Chinese historian Ban Gu’s (32-92) attempt to manipulate the historical legacy of the life of Lady Li, the favorite consort of Emperor Wu of the Former Han (ruled 141-87 B.C.E.). In his *History of the Former Han*, Gu described a deathbed scene in which Lady Li rejects the Emperor’s request that she allow him to see her. No

longer able to rely on the legendary beauty that had made the Emperor fond of her in previous years, Lady Li decides that the only way to retain imperial favor for her son and brothers is to conceal the ruin of her looks. Owen demonstrates, however, that Ban Gu's reconstruction of these events was at best based on gossip and anecdotes: the historian was intent on presenting a subjective interpretation of Lady Li's life that emphasized her subversive plan to maneuver and influence imperial power.

Part IV also contains another engaging piece entitled "Poetry of Palace Complaint of the Tang: Its Potential and Limitations" (pp. 260-284). In this article, Kuo-Ying Wang explores an important genre in the Chinese classical poetic tradition, the "poetry of palace complaint" (p. 260). Poems of this type expressed the frustration, melancholy, and despair of many of the palace ladies who as formal consorts and concubines competed for the emperor's favor but were later often constrained to a life of deprivation and solitude. Wang examines two early examples of the genre: "Tall Gate Palace Rhapsody" and "Rhapsody of Self-Commiseration". The former poem is associated with Empress Chen, who, once the imperial favorite, was later deposed by the Emperor and sent to live in Tall Gate Palace. The latter is known as an autobiographical work written by Lady Ban, who experienced the same fate under Emperor Cheng. Wang emphasizes the inherently allegorical power of the genre of "poetry of palace complaint" (p. 263): since the poems addressed such universal themes as solitude and isolation, instead of featuring historical characters they could easily be changed to feature anonymous figures at the court. With their new focus on fictional characters, the poems could then be read as a metaphor "for the common experiences of officialdom" (p. 277).

In the fifth and last part of the book, Eugene Vance and Arjo Vanderjagt discuss the issue of a "Rhetoric of Natural Nobility". Thus, in "Dante in God's Court: The Paradise at the End of the Road" (pp. 285-320), Vance revisits the meaning of nobility during the Middle Ages through an examination of Dante's literary production – from the *Vita Nuova* to the last cantos of the *Paradiso* – with special focus on Dante's attempt to redefine the criteria of nobility. For Dante, true nobility was a manifestation of spiritual and intellectual virtues and not something that could be acquired through ancestral lineage. Moreover, Vance discusses the courtly setting in cantos 31-33 of the *Paradiso* as it "relates to the iconography of the sixth-century Byzantine mosaics of Ravenna", suggesting that "Dante found in the sacred art of Ravenna a grandiose visual idiom and an ideological message that powerfully reinforced the fulfillment of his highly personal poetics of mystical (and noble) love" (p. 285).

In the concluding article, "Practicing Nobility in Fifteenth-Century Burgundian Courtly Culture: Ideology and Politics" (pp. 321-341), Arjo Vanderjagt discusses how, after succeeding his father Philip the Good, Charles the Bold (1433-1477) was able to maintain control of the Burgundian state through the appropriation of such terms as 'chose publique', 'justice', and 'magnanimité'. As Vanderjagt demonstrates, Charles thereby sought "to reconstruct Philip the Good's Promised Land, which had been based upon the commonweal, as a centralist state led by a strong prince" (p. 323).

Rhetoric and the Discourses of Power in Court Culture is a stimulating volume that contributes significantly to our understanding of the manipulation of culture and power in the courts of early China, Europe, and Japan. It is particularly remarkable in so far as it creates a bridge between separate cultural traditions, providing helpful insights on argumentative strategies that span across cultures and time.

My only reservations regard the way in which the word 'rhetoric' is employed in the title of the book. The title suggests that the book addresses the question of how the field of rhetoric, or better, how different rhetorical traditions, with their own canon, taxonomy, and derived practices, may have affected the development of court culture in different historical contexts. I

expected to read a work that, through the unifying theme of court culture, would offer a long-awaited presentation of the rich and varied landscape of rhetorical systems other than the Western, Greco-Roman. However, it is clearly not the main purpose of the book to draw scholarly attention to the rhetorical traditions of China and Japan. As co-editor David R. Knechtges states in his introductory essay, “this book explores the subject of *the* rhetoric and discourses of power in a variety of courts” (p. ix). Thus, ‘rhetoric’ is here used – as a synonym of ‘discourse’ – to denote the persuasive practices and linguistic strategies that established the court as a locus of power, knowledge, and culture.

Despite this criticism, *Rhetoric and the Discourses of Power in Court Culture* represents a significant achievement. All the essays contained in the volume are lucid and generally jargon-free. Students and scholars of rhetoric and related fields will find it engaging, thought-provoking, and rewarding.

Massimiliano Tomasi
Dept. of Modern and Classical Languages
Western Washington University
516 High Street, Bellingham
WA 98225-9057
USA
Massimiliano.Tomasi@wwu.edu

Massimiliano Tomasi is Associate Professor of Japanese at Western Washington University. He is the author of *Rhetoric in Modern Japan: Western Influences on the Development of Oratorical and Narrative Style* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004) and has just completed a book manuscript on the Japanese literary critic Shimamura Hôgetsu (1871-1918).