

Four Topics: A New Way of Thinking Through Chinese Poetry

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The word “topic” likely calls to mind specific topics of discussion, but in the rhetorical tradition it has a more general sense. The topic, or “topos”, refers to the general strategies of argumentation one may resort to in the development of arguments about specific subjects. This sounds rather abstract, but it is actually very practical. Confronted with a specific subject, one mentally runs it through a set of argumentative strategies, looking for the ones that feel persuasive in this specific case. The topics are the “regions of experience from which the substance of an argument can be drawn”.

The quotation just given comes from a 1953 article by a group of writing instructors at the College of the University of Chicago, entitled “Looking for an Argument”. Classical and medieval rhetoric differentiated between a rather large number of topics. Aristotle identified twenty eight in the *Rhetoric* – not to mention the hundreds in the *Topics*. Cicero reorganized the subject into some eighteen categories, and Boethius gives some twenty. To be sure, there is value in applying fine distinctions to the evaluation of arguments, but there is also something to be said for simplifying one’s toolkit. A simple set of tools is easier put to use. Moreover, simpler tools are easily customized, to fit the needs of a given subject matter. The authors of “Looking for an Argument” proposed a much more manageable set of four topics, and it is these that I will present here, with one crucial modification.

The first topic is *definition*. An argument from definition refers to what a certain thing *is*, especially to the class (or “genus”) to which it belongs. In the pithy example used in “Looking for an Argument”, a student is in the process of being robbed at gunpoint. Turning to the topic of definition, he points out to the would-be robber that his action is a “crime”. His action defined in a bad way, the robber will stop. Or not. If the student worries that this argument from definition will not prove persuasive to a gun wielding assailant, he may move to the second topic: *consequence*, or “cause and effect”. In this case, the student would warn the robber that his actions will cause him to go to jail. And if this approach again fails, the third topic may prove useful: *analogy and contrast*. In the example in “Looking for an Argument”, the student asks the robber to imagine himself the victim of a robbery, but the topic of analogy and contrast should be understood much more broadly than that. *Definition* has to do with the essence of a matter, and *consequence* with facts that follow from that matter, or lead to its presence; with *analogy and contrast*, the argument steps away from the matter at hand and moves fully into the realm of

thought. Perhaps the robber could be told that in taking the student's wallet, he is acting like an early frost, ruining the wheat before the harvest.

Our fourth topic is *circumstance*, referring both to the context in which the subject of debate is found in the world and to the contexts in which it is placed in discourse. This is a substitution in the original formulation, which listed "authority" as a fourth topic. The authors themselves acknowledge that authority – 'because the Bible says so' is their example – is not a full-fledged topic. It merely bolsters the first three topics. Though similar criticism might be made of circumstance – that when an argument is made, the circumstances will be converted into one of the other topics – the identification of circumstance as a topic is useful, for two specific reasons. First, "Looking for an Argument" is a prescriptive account of the topics. Students are being told how to write. But a critical version of the topics will better draw on the descriptive side of rhetoric, and when we look at arguments, and especially arguments in literary works, we will find them furnished with a great deal of circumstance. Second, the substitution of circumstance for authority corrects a flaw in the original conception. The author of the article most prominently associated with this topical scheme was Richard M. Weaver (1929-1963), who would continue to use and develop it over the next decade. But Weaver was also an ardent segregationist, and there is a close connection between his promotion of *definition* as the ultimate topic and his resistance to the American civil rights movement, which aimed to reform the problematic social definitions of mid-twentieth century American society. Weaver was unable to accept that definitions mean different things depending on the circumstances in which one encounters them. Promoting the topic of circumstance – once described by Weaver as "a surrender of reason" – restores a balance to this set of topics.

Now, what could all this have to do with Chinese poetry? My proposition is this: poetry is not just lyrical expression. It is the articulation of a process of thought, and thought proceeds like an argument, with oneself or with an imagined reader. Or perhaps "a process of thought" is a good "definition" of what lyrical expression really is. The four topics can expose this process to analysis.

To illustrate what I mean by this, here are "topical translations" of two short poems by the eighth century poet Liu Zhangqing (劉長卿). The poems are part of a set of eight about a visit to the Buddhist temples at Longmen (Dragon Gate, in modern Henan province).

Autumn cliffs, red. The color is abundant,
 But it only accompanies. Then,
 Released as if from a drawn bow, a hidden spring's sound,
 Giving birth by the shoal to sublime waves. Then,
 The moonlight comes to the sandy banks, and there I see

People struggling to make themselves make the crossing.

山葉傍崖赤，千峰秋色多。夜泉發清響，寒渚生微波。稍見沙月上，歸人爭渡河。
（龍門八詠之二：水東渡）

A topical analysis of this poem's three couplets reveals: (Couplet 1) a definition that shifts into circumstance, contrasted with (Couplet 2) a strong definition that issues strong consequences, which in turn is contrasted with (Couplet 3) a scene of weakened consequence. The red autumn leaves would seem to define the scene the poet faces, but, in this Buddhist allegory, the colors are revealed to be the illusory phenomenal world (*se*, "color" or *rūpa*). The red is actually circumstance, "accompanying" the Buddhist peaks but not truly part of them. This false definition contrasts with the real one that appears, in a veiled way, in the second couplet. There we hear and see the signs of the Buddhist truth, the gurgling spring and the soft waves being the effects of that sublime cause. That the definition is hidden and known by its signs takes us into the topic of consequence. Then, the last line of the poem shows the pilgrims struggling to cause themselves to "cross the river", that is, to reach the *nirvāṇa* of true definition. This difficult course of consequence stands in contrast with the easy and natural one of the spring and its waves.

Is the poet one of those striving in vain, or has he joined into the sublime source of definition, his poem a wave-like effect of it? This is the central question in another poem in the same series:

The river a bright, rippling mirror, as if

The scales of the fish – or the dragon! – were no longer separated from me.

Ancient and white, altars and the paths and birds and sand –

A single white bird on the sand.

Ancient and white.

Clouds, from their mountain, would make me stay, from my town.

They would. As if.

伊水搖鏡光，纖鱗如不隔。千龕道傍古，一鳥沙上白。何事還山雲，能留向城客。
（龍門八詠之七：水西渡）

This poem features a strong definition in the middle, couched between illusory analogies in the first and last couplets. At the beginning, the river is like a mirror, and in its dazzling light the numinous fish – or the dragon lord of Dragon Gate – is now visible to the poet. At the end, nature has taken on a human aspect, the mountains and clouds beckoning him to linger on. This is all poetic conceit. The dragon scales are an illusion produced by the sun's glint on the river, and of course the clouds have taken no notice of him. As the translation indicates, it is a world of "as if". Nested in that world of illusion, however, we find the topic of definition. "Ancient" and "white" would appear to be mere adjectives, attached to the temples and the birds respectively, but they are

actually transcendent qualities: “ancient” is to say “eternal”, and “white” is “colorless”, or beyond the phenomenal world. These qualities signal a hidden defining power. And the poet, having witnessed this, has joined, however briefly, with that source of definition. Though he must return to the world of illusion, that world now serves as a frame, setting this experience of the eternal and colorless off in contrast.

In these two examples, definition stands out as the most prominent topic, followed by the contrasts which enhance the poet’s experience of definition, even as they carry him away from it. By thinking through poems in this way, we can arrive at fresh understandings of individual poems, types of poetry, poets, and periods of literature. And this simple set of tools is by no means limited to poetry, but can be applied fruitfully to “arguments” in any subject matter.

The Four Topics

1. *Definition*

What something is. Especially, what class of things it belongs to.

2. *Consequence*

What effects something causes, or what cause it is the effect of.

3. *Analogy and contrast*

What other thing something resembles, or differs from.

4. *Circumstance*

The context in which something is found, or placed.

Further reading

Bilsky, Manuel, McCrea Hazlett, Robert E. Streeter, and Richard M. Weaver. “Looking for an Argument”. *College English* 14.4 (Jan. 1953): 210-16.

Cogan, Marc. “Rodolphus Agricola and the Semantic Revolutions of the History of Invention”. *Rhetorica* 2.2 (Summer 1984): 163-94. (A provocative discussion of the relation of rhetoric and dialectic, with reference to the topics.)

Crowley, Sharon. “When Ideology Motivates Theory: The Case of the Man from Weaverville”. *Rhetoric Review* 20.1-2 (Spring 2001): 66-93. (An important critique of Weaver.)

- Fleming, David. "Becoming Rhetorical: An Education in the Topics." In Deepika Bahri & Joseph Petraglia, ed., *The Realms of Rhetoric: Inquiries into the Prospects for Rhetoric Education* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), pp.93-116. (Proposes a new, "malleable" set of five topics.)
- Leff, Michael C. "The Topics of Argumentative Invention in Latin Rhetorical Theory from Cicero to Boethius". *Rhetorica* 1.1 (Spring 1983): 23-44. (Shows the complexities of the subject.)
- Skinner, Quintin. *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. (Pp. 111-19, for a succinct overview of shifts in the meaning of "topic".)
- Weaver, Richard M. *In Defense of Tradition: Collected Shorter Writings of Richard M. Weaver, 1929-1963*. Edited and introduced by Ted J. Smith III. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2000. (Includes "Looking for an Argument" and the widely anthologized "Language is Sermonic", along with other writings that illustrate Weaver's worldview.)