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Rhetorical Silence in Digital Media: An Ancient Tool for Modern Use

Rhetoric elicits firm association with words and persuasion. Few outside its academic field of study might consider silence as a rhetorical move. Primarily, this is fueled by the influence of Western thought despite the fact that silence is not excluded in Aristotle's famous definition of the art which, in every case, is "to see the available means of persuasion" (Kennedy 36). Eastern means of persuasion, however, tell a different story. In fact, the rhetorical situations of China heavily relied on tactical listening, observation, and other related acts of rhetoric. This is reflected in China's first rhetorical treatise, *Guiguzi*. Meanwhile, there is discussion of silence as a rhetorical move within racial and feminist literary analysis as it's been recognized that history silences voices as much as it records them, if not more. Max Picard writes, in *The World of Silence*, "there are eventless periods of human history. This is history when humans seem to be silenced," (82). And so silence in writing has been studied as omission of speaking rather than simply being limited to spoken language. This becomes an important concept when considering an influential cornerstone of historical writings on rhetoric such as Plato's *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus* because they are persuasive in nature and dialectical. What Plato chose to write as spoken between characters could be equally as important as when his characters chose to listen, remain silent, or what they chose not to say. How can this be applied to modern rhetorical situations? Is intentional silence as a rhetorical move reflected in digital forms of communication? Looking at

the historical moment for silence as a rhetorical move, and using common terms associated, similar concepts can be applied to social media communication in WeChat, which dominates digital media in China. Intentionally delayed text or voice messages provide commonly used opportunity for rhetorical moves of silence.

THE MOMENT

To consider the intentions and effects of how acts of persuasion are employed, the context of the moment in history when they were written deserve attention. The two historical moments that will be considered are that of Plato's *Gorgias* and that of *Guiguzi*. Plato's *Gorgias* was written around 380 BCE in ancient Greece. Both historical moments are of ancient times, and between the two, their contexts differ greatly. The context of the historical moment when *Gorgias* was written fits into a time of democracy in Greece. Oratory tradition was important to society for such purposes as storytelling and the justice system, in particular. Written persuasion often presented itself in the form of dialectic, where characters were presented as having conversations with one another and the reader is taken down a path of reasoning to the author's end. *Gorgias* is an example of a dialectic written by Plato. Forms of public speaking took place at important times in an Agora which is where the courts were held (Hanson 99). Greek citizens were able to speak in the Agora to willing crowds and to potentially sway them to a purpose. Actions resulting from oration relied upon crowds of people being convinced and moved by a speaker, and it is in this atmosphere that Plato's *Gorgias* is situated along with Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. In this framework, it's easy to understand the emphasis of rhetoric and the focus and attention that is put on methods and concepts of persuasion. It is also not surprising, in these circumstances, why silence as a rhetorical move is not given more address. In fact, it's more of a surprise that

Aristotle's famous definition of rhetoric does not inadvertently exclude such a move. In China, in a similar moment in time but a very different rhetorical situation, *Guiguzi* was written.

The time when *Guiguzi* was written was the time of pre-Qin Dynasty era known as the Warring States period, 475-221 BCE, (Wu 1). The region was divided into smaller areas controlled by rulers and those areas were referred to as 'states'. However, the power structure of those states was very much hierarchical in the tradition of having one ruler surrounded by advisors. The power structure was very centric with multiple layers, as indicated in *Guiguzi*, and the ruler was distanced from the layperson. The ruler would make the decisions in contrast to the crowd in Greek city-states. Therefore, these situations called for differing considerations. A Chinese proverb states that being close to an emperor is like being close to a tiger (Wu 13). The notion is that an advisor must take great care with their words. They walk the line. Displeasing the emperor with their words, whether it's bad advice or just good advice spoken poorly or received unfavorably will spell ruin for the advisor where ruin is poverty or death. In this, it may become clear why silence plays a key role in this rhetorical situation.

TERMS OF ART

As usage of language changes over time and context, the way language has been used to signify something is specific a context or moment. It becomes relevant to investigate and compare the ways this is done when exploring ideas over time and context. Timmerman and Schiappa define terms of art as "any words or phrases that take on reasonably specialized denotative functions within a particular language community." (Timmerman 1). And the terms of art with primary concern are those commonly associated with silence such as *listen, hear, observe, quiet, or*

silence. The way they are used and their intended meaning can shed light on how silence is reflected as a rhetorical move.

Guiguzi describes the concept of speaking as being in motion, and the concept of not speaking as being motionless (Wu 13). The state of being motionless is somewhat abstract and could be understood as listening or being silent. The binary relationship between these two states reflects the philosophy of the Dao in which opposites are linked and complimentary to provide balance. Rhetors are instructed to be intricately aware of this relationship in order to respond. When the other is speaking, be motionless and hear what is said (27). This seems to describe listening and silently observing. “Try and remain calm and silent in order to hear what the other person says and examine his activities,” (47). This act of silence is a rhetorical move. It carries the intent of the persuader to identify the best means of persuasion to come, agreeing with Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric. “Those who do not see what is happening nearby are not listening to surrounding words; those who know what will happen reflect on the past to examine the future,” (53). Some acts of listening and silence are ‘reflection’ on the past. However, this reflection seems to neglect an aspect of modern discussion regarding the absence of history – the silent aspect of it. Later, *Guiguzi* describes listening with “Heaven’s ears”, (87). This is explained as listening acutely. However, “unexamined thoughts result in insensitive listening that gains nothing,” (96). So here, the silence of listening must involve thought or contemplation of what is being listened to. In contrast, it is mentioned that listening to words without thought is not hearing those words. However, this is also a form of silence, and to some degree, this can also be intentional. If the persuader deems that the other person is not of concern, or there may be some other reason such as being uninformed, then the persuader can be silent while not hearing. I would say that this can also be a rhetorical move, although perhaps not one that targets

the other speaker. Reasons are described as ‘formless’ and “unuttered words are unrevealing.” This formlessness is meant to convey something without shape, and in this case, that would be an argument or words. Let the words take form before being spoken. So this idea of formlessness is akin to ‘motionless’ or quiet or silent (44). “Know when to speak or when to be silent,” (140). This form of silence is accompanied by the instruction to ‘know’. This indicates intention, and this intention is also reflected in Plato’s *Gorgias*. What does not seem to be indicated by ‘silent’ in *Guiguzi* is the notion of ‘absence’. However, this could specifically be attributed to the spoken nature of the teachings. It is not intended to be understood as persuasion in writing. There could be teaching about physically being absent as a rhetorical move of intended silence, but I do not see such an example. In that case, there wouldn’t be the presence of thought, which is intricately tied to the teachings on silence and listening in *Guiguzi*.

In Plato’s *Gorgias*, Socrates is speaking to Callicles, who then states, “I have been listening and making admissions to you, Socrates,” (Jowett 365). In this use of “listening”, Callicles has been focused on understanding what Socrates has been saying, and has responded ‘yes’ to several questions. This indicates a silence coupled with thought, which agrees with the usage in *Guiguzi*. After continued dialogue between Socrates and Callicles, Socrates tells Callicles to listen and to interrupt if he feels Socrates’ words are in error (372). This aspect of silence is also in agreement with *Guiguzi*. Although it is more direct, with instructions by the speaker about the expectation of interruption, it seems to be related to the idea that, in a dialogue situation where individuals are exchanging ideas, one should be alert in silence to respond. However, in this circumstance, there is a difference in hierarchy. In *Guiguzi*, the warning is of being near a tiger. There is more risk. In *Gorgias*, there is no risk except one person gaining argumentative advantage. On being silent, there is indication of a difference. There is a point in

the dialogue when Socrates is discussing with Pollus, and states, “Why are you silent, Polus? Am I not right?” (339). So in this circumstance, the silence of Pollus indicates to Socrates another message which is perhaps not an intentional rhetorical move. This silence might carry the indication of weakness according to the way it is written by Plato. That signals that silence is not necessarily regarded as a great virtue or a cunning rhetorical move as it is in *Guiguzi*. This is confirmed later on. Socrates mentions being silent in a situation to mean not speaking on an issue, or being silenced to mean having ideas put to an end. The indication is indicated as a negative rather than a positive, and this connotation carries on until today. The silencing of voices is the discussion of modern feminist and racial studies. However, in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, Socrates is conversing with Phaedrus and there is mention of writing. Socrates describes writing as being like a painting and explains that words give life in speech. In this exchange, Socrates mentions a word that is “graven in the soul of the learner” and knows when to speak and when to be silent. The indication here is that words can stick with a listener as though written on their mind. And that some words carry an intelligence which help the learner understand when to speak and when to be silent (Jowett 1111). The connotation of “silent” in this context is a positive one. It indicates an intelligent and intentional silence which reflects *Guiguzi*.

SILENCE AS A RHETORICAL MOVE

Silence can be construed in a variety of ways, either positive or negative. The word itself indicates the absence of sound, not just the absence of speaking. It elicits synonyms such as quiet, tranquil, calm, and peaceful. Meditation and deep thought can be silent. Prayer can be silent. But in a rhetorical situation that involves persuasive intent, which aspects of silence are in play?

In analyzing Plato's writing, the modern method of observing absence is used by Trent Eades in his essay, *Plato, Rhetoric, and Silence*. This is the other kind of silence that carries importance as related to writing. While this sort of analysis seems lacking in *Guiguzi*, and could be a subject of future analysis, it is applied to Plato's dialectic as a way of observing how characters such as Socrates are sometime silenced in a dialogue and what meaning that silencing may carry. "One fascinating rhetorical practice of Plato's that may function as a cipher for reading at least some of the dialogues is his silencing of Socrates in several of the later dialogues," (Eades 245). Eades notes that Socrates is often a central figure in Plato's dialogues. But on occasion, Socrates is sidelined and silenced while other characters do the talking. What might this silence mean, if anything? Eades suggests that the silencing of Socrates is a rhetorical move on Plato's part, within his writing. As a written rhetorical move, the silencing of Socrates may be intentionally done by Plato in order for the reader to internalize Socrates' and the Stranger's *techne* (250). Without delving further into the development of this idea, the suggestion is that the writer, Plato, is practicing persuasive writing by silencing Socrates, making his voice absent, as a technique to develop a comparison in the mind of the reader between the two. To put it another way, absence as a form of persuasion through the development of thoughts.

This absence, which is a form of silence, is the subject of modern feminist discussions. "Chinese protocols regarding silence, understatement, and deference, for example, resemble Western feminine practices that in the West are often encoded as weak or negative," (Lunsford 7). What Lunsford means, here, is that there is a difference of interpretation, but maybe not a difference in practice. The techniques of silence that are skillfully used by women are also the techniques that are taught in Chinese rhetorical moves. For example, *Guiguzi* teaches that the "the most important tactic in persuasion" is listening, and that it "is critical to understanding the

audience's intentions in order to form a relationship" before the persuader can be successful (Wu 26). It also teaches to seek and find people who would agree with you and to listen to the will of others before you would move to persuade others of a cause. Aristotle does not say much on the topic so Western rhetoric has also not focused much on it until feminist and racial studies began analyzing ways to listen (Ratcliffe 20).

One intriguing aspect of Ede's analysis of Plato employing silence as a rhetorical move is comparing it to feminist analysis of similar moves. For example, Lester C. Olson looks at Audre Lorde's speech about *Transforming Silence into Language and Action*. Lorde's speech "examines factors that may cause some people to remain silent, while enabling others to speak and act," (Olson 49). This idea sets the stage for Ede's analysis of Plato in that the silencing of Socrates is allowing other characters to speak in a dialogue and the reader may be persuaded by the dialogue through the thoughts of a silent Socrates. Cheryl Glenn "rewrites rhetorical delivery to include the delivery of silence," (Glenn 262). How can 'silence' be delivered? Using silence in a way that elicits and guides thought in an audience may have just that kind of effect. "Although some silences are unproductive or passive, not all are; but whether it is a forced position or a tactical choice, it carries meaning," (Glenn 263). Silence always carries meaning. The silence described by Plato in *Gorgias* or the damaging silence described by Lorde, when it is used for shame or ignorance, carries a negative meaning. However, other forms of silence carry a positive meaning. So when silence is employed intentionally and skillfully, it can deliver a powerful message with persuasive effects.

In his book, *The World of Silence*, Picard discusses the concept that all spoken words have a 'silence'. They communicate some things and do not communicate others. They communicate a message in one way and omit communication of a message in another way. They

are two sides of the same coin, which *Guiguzi* would likely agree on, and it's a natural dynamic of "meaning-making", (Picard 24). Silence and listening can be considered a necessary component to rhetoric and the persuasive effects can be strong and long lasting.

Ratcliffe states that the "logos" which was inherited by Western rhetoric is "arrogant", and that the "logos" was always meant to be accompanied by the verb form, "Legein", which depicts listening and contemplation. Our Logos conflates "rational thought and forceful speech" (Ratcliffe 251). Too much emphasis is placed on the words or the spoken aspects.

"Like the zero in mathematics, silence is an absence with a function," (Glenn 263). Some of the positive effects that silence can have can help an audience understand. It can be expressive, stand for alertness, portray the speaker as sensitive, or signify attentiveness. It can be planned and executed, (Cartographies 17). A person has the ability to choose silence when it benefits them and then to identify occasions when it will work against them, refraining from silence in those occasions if possible, (Glenn 263). Although there are many forms of silence and, for each form, it can be positive or negative; the focus here is on the positive and on silence as a rhetorical move.

WECHAT MESSAGING AS A RHETORICAL ARTIFACT

Advancement and adoption of instant messaging apps has rapidly expanded over the past decade. Line is popular in Japan, Kakao is popular in Korea, WhatsApp is popular in various countries, and then there's Telegram, Discord, and Facebook Messenger among others. WeChat is the wildly popular mobile App in China. It's more than just a messaging App. WeChat is an all-around payments App. You can send and receive money, transfer to and from your bank account, or just pay at a store directly. When you walk down the streets in China and run across a

homeless person, he may have a QR code sitting out so that passersby can scan and donate. If you go to church, no need to pass a basket around. The church will just display a QR code and the congregation will scan it from their seats and give what they want. Beyond that, WeChat provides a social media function for users to share pictures, videos, and other aspects of life. WeChat allows mini-programs that can be downloaded and do any number of things. WeChat has a feature called microblog which is like a personal website so users can seek subscribers.

Given the numerous functions, we will limit analysis to the communications functions of WeChat. Users can communicate in numerous ways: audio call, video call, text message, voice message, and visuals such as emoji, stickers, and gifs. Users can create group chats for work, family, school, or any other reason, then post text or voice messages, pictures, or video to the group. The relationship this form of communication can have with both ancient Greek and Chinese rhetoric is both relevant and significant. The importance of WeChat in China today cannot be understated. It's used to connect millions of users and is a primary method of payment in society. The societal dominance of WeChat gives it a multi-billion dollar valuation and it is a rhetorical artifact that warrants further research as to the effects it produces in rhetoric and communication.

RHETORICAL SILENCE ON WECHAT MESSAGING

Using different functions of WeChat can simulate speaking to live crowds or in a private discussion, one-to-one. Therefore, aspects and rhetorical moves of Aristotle, Isocrates, Plato, Guiguzi, Zhuangzi, and Confucius can all be applied.

Specifically, we're analyzing rhetorical silence using the communicative functions of WeChat. So how does rhetorical silence apply to WeChat? We can look at 4 types of silence. The first is absence. This is when a person chooses not to respond, and there are different kinds of absence. One kind will end a conversation because there will be no more responses. Another kind will seek to strike a topic from the conversation. This is possible when texting and multiple questions or issues are raised and not all of them are addressed. The responder will filter the something out of the conversation simply by passing over it intentionally and addressing other issues. The skipped topic then becomes silent.

Another form of silence is time delay. According to Aristotle, Kairos is the timing or appropriate circumstances for response. In this case, silence will be temporary. It can send a message, depending on the rhetorical situation. For example, in China, it can be a problem when colleagues consistently contact you outside of working hours and on the weekend. The more you respond to these occasions, the more you send the message that it is acceptable and appropriate to be contacting you during off hours. The opposite is also true. If you never respond outside of working hours except in the case of an emergency, this will be a form of delayed silence, and the message being sent is that business is taken care of strictly during work hours. Time delayed silence can be perceived as 'thinking'. I was offered a job, once. It was a terrible job offer. After 10 minutes of discussion with my wife, I knew I would reject this offer. However, I waited 4 hours to reject this job offer in order to preserve the relationship with this employer. My silence was a signal that I had given the offer some careful deliberation and had decided that this offer would not work for us. This happened over WeChat.

Literal silence would take place during an audio call, a video call, or a voice message. It would have to be the audible passing of time without vocalization of thought. Admittedly, this

would likely be awkward during a voice message, but it is possible. Literal silence during an audio or video call should signify thoughtful listening to the other person. The type of effect created by this silence will be revealed when the silent person chooses to break that silence.

The fourth type of silence is silence through emoji or gif. It may be arguable as to whether or not this qualifies as silence, but I maintain that, within the context described, it does. Gif or emoji silence takes place during text communication. One person is typing sentences and words to communicate. The other person responds with an emoji or a gif which displays an emotion or facial expression, but does not reveal a conclusive response about the conversation. For example, an emoji may depict deep thought, interest, or surprise. This form of silence still carries an affect because the first person has not heard from the second person. Thoughts still remain formless, and if it is a conversation, a response is still warranted. But the effects of using emoji can deliver. In this case, the emoji or gif is acting as a replacement for visual cues that may be shown during a face-to-face conversation. There is a drawback, however. In some formal situations, an emoji or gif may not be well received, and the other party could take offense depending on which one was used and whether or not the other person's position in society is well above the first.

Silence as a rhetorical move on WeChat can be described in more specific ways. Hua Zhu notes that, in *Guiguzi*, silence as a rhetorical move is not limited to listening but can include assessing, guessing, analyzing, and eliciting. All of these aspects of silence can be deployed on WeChat in conversation, particularly in a text exchange.

Some of the historical usage from the rhetoric of *Guiguzi* would not apply to the modern WeChat conversation. As mentioned previously, the rhetorical moves described in *Guiguzi* were meant to be practiced with great care and caution because of the consequences that await a

person who displeases the emperor or ruler. However, on WeChat, there are no such consequences. As a result, there will likely be less caution invested into the conversation. This would not be a detrimental factor in utilizing the principles taught, however. They still remain useful and important in this modern context.

CONCLUSION

Silence has been broken down into 4 aspects: absence, delay, literal, and emoji, for the purposes of analyzing communications in WeChat. Some of these uses stay specific to modern times due to their nature, but the notion of strategic and intentional silence finds its roots thousands of years ago in *Guiguzi* and possibly elsewhere. The main purpose of teaching the art of persuasion in *Guiguzi* is to connect with the audience, and this might seem counterintuitive to a rhetorician who focuses strongly on the persuasive aspect, (Wu 26). But when this fact is considered deeply, persuasion would not be the fortress it sometimes appears to be if a speaker can truly connect with an audience. Most of the work will have already been done. How much evidence is demanded of a friend than a stranger? How well do we listen to someone who makes us feel comfortable rather than distant or detached? In Plato's *Gorgias*, the dialogue takes place mostly among friends. The delivery of silence as a rhetorical move is thousands of years old. The practice has always been alive and well, whether or not it has been analyzed and discussed as much as it deserves. In this analysis, I refer to "silence" as a rhetorical move. I admit that this term is an oversimplification and that the strategic silence has as many or more forms as Aristotle's pathos has feelings. It can be broken down into any message that is being delivered by its use. This is just the tip of the iceberg. Silence as a rhetorical move is in great need of

deeper analysis across modern forms of digital communication as well as being in need of more analysis throughout historical moments in written texts and literature. WeChat alone can be broken into pieces further, analytically, and discussed. That's just one platform of many and one nation. It's time to break the silence.

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