

12-2020

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The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

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Recommended Citation

Wei, Yong-Kang. 2021. "Ethos in Early Chinese Rhetoric: The Case of “Heaven”" *Humanities* 10, no. 1: 7.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/h10010007>

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Article

Ethos in Early Chinese Rhetoric: The Case of “Heaven”

Yong-Kang Wei

Department of Writing and Language Studies, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley,
Brownsville, TX 78520, USA; yongkang.wei@utrgv.edu

Abstract: Though applicable in many Western historical-cultural settings, the Aristotelian model of ethos is not universal. As early Chinese rhetoric shows in the example of *cheng-yan* or “ethos of sincerity,” inspiring trust does not necessarily involve a process of character-based self-projection. In the Aristotelian model, the rhetor stands as a signifier of ethos, with an ideology of individualism privileged, whereas Chinese rhetoric assumes a collectivist model in which ethos belongs, not to an individual or a text, but rather to culture and cultural tradition. This essay will be concentrating on the concept of Heaven, central to the cultural and institutional systems of early Chinese society, in an attempt to explore collective ethos as a function of cultural heritage. Heaven, it shall be argued, plays a key role in the creation of Chinese ethos. This essay will also contrast the logocentrism of Western rhetorical tradition with the ethnocentrism of Chinese tradition. The significance of Heaven in its role as a defining attribute of Chinese ethos is reflective of a unique cultural heritage shaped by a collective human desire in seeking a consciousness of unity with the universe. Just as there are historical, cultural, and philosophical reasons behind logocentrism in the West, so the ethnocentric turn of Chinese rhetoric should be appreciated in light of a cultural tradition that carries its own historical complexities and philosophical intricacies.

Keywords: ethos; Chinese ethos; rhetoric; early Chinese rhetoric; Heaven; cultural heritage



Citation: Wei, Yong-Kang. 2021. Ethos in Early Chinese Rhetoric: The Case of “Heaven”. *Humanities* 10: 7. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h10010007>

Received: 2 December 2020
Accepted: 27 December 2020
Published: 29 December 2020

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1. Introduction

Two species of ethos seem to predominate in this special issue of *Histories of Ethos*: one is rhetorical, aimed at swaying an audience; the other is sociological, aimed at attaining or asserting one’s “positionality” (Baumlin and Meyer 2018) in the human social world. In Burkean terms, this second species shifts the emphasis from persuasion to “identification,”¹ be it within “scientific ethos” (Merton 1973), “feminist ethos” (Palmer-Mehta 2016), or “cyborg ethos” (DeLashmutt 2011), to name a few. Indeed, most of the essays of this collection focus on the sociological ethos, as seen in “American working-class ethos” (Thelin 2019), “hip-hop ethos” (Harrison and Arthur 2019), “Islamic ethos” (Oweidat 2019), and “disability ethos” (Stones and Meyer 2020). For instance, Stones and Meyer are promoting positionality for people with disabilities when they argue for “a disability ethos of invention” that “creates spaces wherein people with disabilities can express individuality, promote understanding, and transform culture” (Stones and Meyer 2020, p. 2).

In this essay, I would like to strike a balance by focusing more on rhetorical ethos, through a discussion of “heavenly ethos” in classical Chinese rhetoric. But, before furthering my discussion, I wish to point out that the existence of two kinds of ethos marks a postmodern shift in contemporary scholarship and discourse practices: that is, from ethos as the individual, personal appeal of a rhetor to ethos as a collective consciousness embedded, evolved, and promoted within a society and its corresponding institutions, including its discourse systems. I would name the latter a “collective ethos,” in the sense that it is projected beyond the selfhood of a rhetor and into realms of the “communal”

¹ Halloran (1975) summarizes Burkean rhetoric well: “The key term for a modern rhetoric is not persuasion but identification” (p. 626).

(Harris 1993, p. 125). This “collective” and “communal” ethos diverges from the model as described by Aristotle in his *Rhetoric*.

Aristotle writes of ethos: “Persuasion is achieved by the speaker’s personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible. We believe good men more fully and more readily than others: this is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided” (Aristotle 1990, p. 153). In this way, Aristotle “emphasized the role a speaker’s character plays in persuasion” (Baumlin 1994, p. xii). Further, this ethotic persuasion is “achieved by what the speaker says, not by what people think of his character before he begins to speak” (Aristotle 1990, p. 153). That is to say, the rhetor must construct his material (his artistic proofs) to “make his own character look right” (Aristotle 1990, p. 160). To put it bluntly, an Aristotelian ethos can be “faked,” since the textually-produced image functions independently of a rhetor’s true character (assuming that “true character” exists).

Though Aristotle’s ethos can be taken as “quintessentially a linguistic phenomenon” (Baumlin 1994, p. xxiii) made up of artistic proofs, it never gives up on its own categories of self and selfhood: ethos must be equated with the character of a rhetor in the form of self-representation in order for its persuasive function to be materialized—even though representation as such amounts to an artistic fabrication. The Aristotelian notion of ethos, it would seem, has trapped Western theorists for good, for they can never, in the truest sense of the phrase, “think outside the box” of self—even when that self is reduced to a social “mask” or a linguistic “I” (Baumlin and Meyer 2018, p. 5). This situation is summed up well by Baumlin and Meyer: “it seems that any adequate ‘map’ or model of ethos will include a *version of self* and of its relation to culture and language” (Baumlin and Meyer 2018, p. 4). But the question is: Is it possible to theorize ethos without having self or selfhood attached to it? Or, does rhetorical ethos have to be character-based? Is a self-less and character-less rhetoric conceivable? We might get an answer from early Chinese rhetoric, which will be discussed a little later.

A rhetor’s character, writes Aristotle, “may almost be called the most effective *means* of persuasion he possesses” (Aristotle 1990, p. 154; emphasis added). Three qualities, he adds, “inspire confidence in the orator’s own character”: namely, “good sense, good moral character, and good will” (Aristotle 1990, p. 161). But bear in mind that, no matter what, character is just a means to an end in his scheme of ethos. The end is to “inspire *trust* in his audience” (Aristotle 1990, p. 161; emphasis added), to render the audience better disposed to what the rhetor wants it to hear or react to. But another question may be raised: do rhetors have to rely on textually-constructed character in order to build up trust? Or, are there any alternative paths? Early Chinese rhetoric may have an answer in its emphasis on sincerity (*xin, cheng*) and sincere speech (*cheng-yan*).

Kennedy suggests that the “moral rightness of the message” in Confucian and Daoist texts could constitute Chinese ethos (Kennedy 1998, p. 151), a point seemingly echoed in Lu’s statement on Mencius’ *cheng-yan* (i.e., sincere speech) (Lu 1998, p. 175).² Lu strikes a Mencian tone when asserting that *cheng-yan* also refers to “an innate moral quality out of which sincere and honest speech naturally and powerfully arise in our efforts to influence one another” (Lu 1998, p. 175). Her further claim that *cheng-yan* is “similar to Aristotle’s notion of ethos” (Lu 1998, p. 175) seems a stretch, however, since *cheng-yan* is expressive of one’s “innate moral quality,” whereas Aristotelian ethos is a mode of persuasion out of artistic proof (and subject, thus, to manipulation). Nevertheless, “*cheng-yan* could be the closest shot in bridging the gap between Chinese and Western ethos,” in that it has the effect of inspiring “trust” in Confucian rhetoric (Wei 2017, p. 25). And its rhetorical power is best illustrated by Mencius himself: “It never happens that genuine sincerity cannot move others; on the other hand, nobody would be moved if sincerity was not in place.”³

² Mencius (390–305 B.C.) has been widely considered the second most important figure in the founding of Confucianism.

³ My translation, based on the original Chinese version in *The Complete Four Books and Five Classics with Annotations*, edited by Han (1995). See “Li Lou (a),” Mencius (p. 261).

Mencius' *cheng-yan* reinforces a Confucian doctrine on rhetoric: that is, *xiu ci li qi cheng*, which can be roughly translated as "to cultivate words for the purpose of building trust" or, simply, as "rhetoric oriented towards sincerity."⁴ Trust, or sincerity, or truthfulness, is a moral principle in Confucianism: "the aim of the noble man is to be *cheng*" (Goldin 1999, p. 104). Thus, *cheng-yan* can be viewed as "both the means to an end and the end itself of communication" (Lu 1998, p. 175). It differs from Aristotle's ethos in this respect, the latter being treated as a means only. Concomitantly, *cheng-yan* is reminiscent of Burkean "identification," which is seen as a strategy as well as the goal of rhetoric (Burke 1950).

In Confucian rhetoric, *cheng-yan* "focuses more on the appeal of language (i.e., *yan*) than on the very person who speaks or writes it, contrasting the emphasis placed on the appeal of the writer or speaker as a person in Western rhetoric" (Wei 2017, p. 26). This accords with a cultural tradition that downplays the role of an individual for the purpose of preserving social harmony; more significantly, it tells of a philosophical awareness of the structuring power of language in shaping human behavior (Hansen 1983; Graham 1989): hence Confucius' promotion of "rectification of names."⁵ It may not seem too much to say that Confucius, as well as his followers such as Mencius, brought "poststructuralist" insights into ancient China, given their recognition that "language, as a social practice, mediates one's conduct" (Wei 2017, p. 26). This might explain, in a fundamental way, why "sincere speech," rather than "sincere personality," is emphasized in the Confucian ethos of *cheng-yan*.

Needless to say, human agency plays a lesser role (if any) in the Confucian model of ethos; in this respect, it contrasts with the Western model, the latter predicated on the premise of "the moral and, ultimately, theological inseparability of the speaker-agent from the speech-act" (Baumlin 1994, p. xiii). If a discourse is agent-less, then where do we locate a rhetor's own ethos? Admittedly, early Confucianism does speak of moral agency, but it is not so much of selfhood in an individual as of "human nature" in general terms (Van Norden 2000). According to Seok, an "active form of moral agency" can still be observed in Confucian discourse, but it is not based on "self-enclosed independency" but rather on "relational and interactive interdependency of communal agency" (Seok 2017). In short, human agency, in the form of asserting an autonomous individual self, is out of the picture in the Confucian tradition, which values and puts to use the performative function of language while at the same time advocating self-cultivation, self-restraint, and self-effacement as virtues that a *jun-zi* (i.e., a nobleman or gentleman in the spiritual sense) must possess.

My point is that the Aristotelian model of ethos, projected through the "identification of a speaker with/in his or her speech" (Baumlin 1994, p. xi), is not universal in application. For, if ethos is to function rhetorically for the purpose of gaining trust (as more broadly defined), then there is a way of formulating ethos without such identification: this is seen in the example of *cheng-yan* or "ethos of sincerity" in early Chinese rhetoric, where a rhetor's personal character matters little in delivering the rhetorical power of trust to move his audience. I have no intention to declare that a Chinese ethos is better. It is just different. The famous "agonistic Greeks vs. irenic Chinese" contrast put forth by Lloyd (1996) may sound a little dramatic, but it captures the difference in sociological footpaths that the ancient Greeks and Chinese had set for themselves: the former privileged personal gain or advancement, whereas the latter valued social harmony, thereby discouraging such gain or advancement. When translated into rhetorical practices, these differing worldviews underlie two vastly different traditions. The Athenian-based rhetoric takes an aggressive, "argue-to-win" approach, bringing into play a personalized speech whose owner (ultimately winner) must be identified: hence, its ethos is character driven, based on self-projection. To the contrary, the Daoist or Confucian rhetoric upholds the

⁴ My translation, based on the original Chinese version in *The Complete Four Books and Five Classics with Annotations*, edited by Han (1995). See "Wen-Yan Zhuan," Zhou Yi (p. 439).

⁵ Briefly put, this promotion reflects a realization that correctness in language could lead to correctness in human behavior.

virtue of conformity to the Way (or Dao), the ultimate source of harmony of all beings, a virtue that often leads to a rhetorical practice that “eschews persuasion and argumentation” (Lyon 2009, p. 178). In line with the doctrine of harmony, rhetoric is also depersonalized, a Chinese feature that renders baseless the identification of a rhetor with his text, hence the kind of ethos projected as self-less and character-less—all the more so if a “poststructuralist” view of language, shared among early Chinese thinkers, is taken into account for its conditioning power over humans.

That ethos, in the sense of inspiring trust, can be projected differently, from the perspective of early Chinese rhetoric, calls for a need “to see the history of rhetoric as culturally situated and embedded” (Lipson and Binkley 2004, p. 3; emphasis original). The purpose of this essay is indeed to highlight that need. In what follows, I will be further discussing the notion of ethos in early Chinese rhetoric by looking closely at a deeply revered concept in Chinese culture, *tian* (Heaven), which carries an ethotic function similar to the *skeptron*, as presented by Baumlin and Meyer following Bourdieu (Baumlin and Meyer 2018, pp. 7–8). Like the *skeptron*, *tian* can be used to “claim the cultural authority, expertise, trust, and means to speak and to be heard” (Baumlin 2020, p. 1). Through *tian* or Heaven, Chinese ethos is, in essence, an invocation of one’s cultural heritage, with which rhetors identify themselves and, in doing so, create their ethotic appeals or appeals of their speeches/texts. I would call ethos as such a “collective ethos,” in the sense that it has little to do with the individual qualities of a rhetor but much to do with a collective consciousness that defines, and is also defined by, Chinese culture in ancient times, as exemplified by Heaven.

2. Collective Ethos

It would be hard to imagine an ancient Chinese rhetor (*shui-ke*) standing above a crowd delivering an epideictic speech or engaging in a public debate, not because democracy failed to prevail in society, but because such a rhetorical behavior was completely out of character with a cultural tradition that discourages individuality but holds high instead the spirit of humility, collectivism, and adherence to social rituals (*li*). And there is one more reason, perhaps more important: that is, rhetoric in early China was hardly seen as an individual enterprise. Rather, it was practiced, socially, in the form of “collective workmanship” (Wei 2017), as typically seen in the production of the Chinese classics, such as Laozi’s *Dao De Jing* (*Tao-Te Ching*) and Confucius’ *Analects*.⁶ These were created as collections of short essays, paragraphs, and axiomatic sentences written and rewritten by generations of disciples of Laozi and Confucius over a span of decades or even centuries. While the texts bear the name of Laozi or Confucius as a token of respect from disciples (Lewis 1999, p. 53), the historical master may have never contributed a single written word to the collection. What is significant about these textual collections is that their authorship appears to break away from all of the “self-structure” (Alcorn 1994, p. 3) associated with a Western ethos: character, personality, person(a), voice, image, and, above all, the self. None of these traits matters in the production of old Chinese texts.

“A theory of ethos,” states Alcorn, “needs to be grounded in a relatively clear, but also relatively complex, understanding of the self” (Alcorn 1994, p. 4), but does this theory also apply to those Chinese classics, and, more broadly, to Chinese rhetoric in general? The question is self-explanatory, given the collective workmanship just mentioned. I would not say there is no such thing as ethos in the Chinese classics. To the contrary, the name of historical Laozi or Confucius carries ethotic weight and can be used effectively for the purpose of holding the *skeptron*; but that moniker does not necessarily denote the “inseparability of the speaker-agent from the speech-act” (Baumlin 1994, p. xiii), as commonly practiced in the Western tradition, let alone an ethos built upon and out of an individual rhetor’s personal character.

⁶ Laozi (570?–480? B.C.) is an early Chinese thinker and the founder of Daoism.

As a result of collective workmanship, early Chinese rhetoricians produced a body of classical texts unmatched by other cultures or civilizations of ancient times (Kennedy 1998). However, many of these texts are just repeated products (though with some variations), something I “discovered” years ago when doing research in a Beijing library. I would refrain from using the term “plagiarism” to describe the phenomenon; rather, it would be more appropriate to see it as a practice of “patterned rhetoric” (Schaberg 2001), where rhetors would strive to speak/write like one another so as to conform to the “order” and “terms” of “received language” (Schaberg 2001, p. 30). One cannot help noticing, from the patterned rhetoric, that “originality was discounted” (Oliver 1995, p. 361) and, further, that “eloquence was viewed as conforming oneself to discourse rituals that had been collectively valued and culturally sanctioned” (Wei 2017, p. 18). This would contrast sharply with the Western tradition, where “rhetoric is seen as an individual endeavor, identified with self-presentation, or even self-sell” (Wei 2017, p. 18). The Western sense of rhetoric, “as an avenue for the individual to achieve control,” warrants “originality and individuality,” notes Matalene (1985, p. 795).

This “patterned” rhetorical practice reflects, to a large extent, a cultural practice at large of relying on “received wisdom” to find solutions to the problems or issues of the current age. There was a deep-rooted belief among the early Chinese that the past was better than the present and that the “golden age” of the remote past—when the state was run as “a perfect embodiment of *dao*” (Liu and You 2009, p. 156) by sage-kings such as Yao and Shun⁷—ought to be emulated by all rulers through the restoration of *li* (ritualized systems).⁸ This prominent feature of Chinese thinking is referred to as “the use of the historical appeal” (Cua 2000, p. 39) or, probably more exact, the appeal of “building on the wisdom of ancestors” (Kline 2000, p. 164). Kline explains: “Before the emergence of the ancient sages the world was in chaos,” but “fortunately for Chinese civilization there arose sages who were able to create ritual forms and build lasting institutions that provided the framework for an ordered society and individual cultivation” (Kline 2000, p. 155). Hence the appeal to antiquity. A famous example would be Confucius himself, who “adopted history,” as Liu and You have observed, “as an archetypical *topos*” in his rhetoric, which can be re-presented like this: “The past informs and guides the present” (Liu and You 2009, p. 158).

The historical appeal was practiced ubiquitously in early Chinese rhetoric. The reason is simple: it paves the path to the *skeptron*. Whoever speaks in the name of the ancestors can wave the *skeptron* of ethos, but this would—again—throw into question the Aristotelian notion of ethos as an individual appeal on the part of a rhetor, just as the abovementioned collective workmanship and patterned rhetoric would throw into question the agonistic notion of Athenian rhetoric as an individual enterprise. The reason is also simple: a Chinese ethos, in the form of historical appeal, has little to do with the personal character of a rhetor, upon which an Aristotelian ethos is sustained; rather, it is a cultural construct woven out of the collective consciousness of early Chinese society, a consciousness that holds fast to an inveterate belief in history and in the “wisdom” of legendary sage-kings, who are said to have possessed direct inspiration from the “divine” (Schwartz 1989, p. 26). I am using the term “cultural construct” to refer to a simple fact: such a belief cannot be attributed to any single figure or any particular period in Chinese history, but it has been passed on through generations as part of a cultural heritage. A rhetor’s job, so to speak, is to build a connection with that heritage in order to appropriate the ethotic power that comes with it.

So, we might say that a Chinese ethos comes from without, as it is constructed out of a cultural heritage, as opposed to a Western ethos, which comes from within, being grounded in a rhetor’s self or selfhood. This without/within contrast may explain, in a nutshell, how Chinese ethos “works” as a collective ethos versus its Western counterpart, which “works” as an individualistic ethos. Again, I would not say that a collective ethos is superior to an

⁷ Legendary figures in Chinese history.

⁸ In Confucianism, *li*, a ritualized system of institutions, plays a key part in keeping harmony in place.

individualistic ethos. It is just different. It reflects the uniqueness of Chinese rhetoric in its own development, and, more broadly, it reflects the cultural values and social institutions surrounding such development in ancient China—a point that will be discussed through the remainder of the essay, in the case of Heaven.

3. Heaven and the Dao

Any Westerner who has an extended exposure to classical Chinese texts would be struck by the “Chinese obsession” with Heaven (*tian*) and Heaven-related notions, such as the Mandate of Heaven (*tian-ming*), the Will of Heaven, the Way or Dao of Heaven, etc. In many ways, Heaven was to the Chinese what God was to Christians in the West (Goldin 1999).⁹ However, despite its “omnipresence,” the concept of Heaven did not appear as clearly articulated in those texts as the Judeo-Christian God was in the *Bible*. This is because a broad range of associations were carried with “Heaven”: Lord-on-High, a cosmic moral order in the sense of the Dao, the “mediator” between humans and the Dao (Liu and You 2009), a physical object in the sense of the sky opposite to the earth, a metaphysical entity representing *Yang* (and complementary to Earth as *Yin*), nature, human nature, and fate or destiny, just to name a few. Ironically, the conceptual vagueness of Heaven turned out to be a rhetorical “advantage” to some rhetors (*shui-ke*), who would (mis)use Heaven to argue the unarguable and explain the unexplainable.

The multivalent meanings of Heaven may indicate a conceptual evolution that it had undergone in early Chinese thought. For example, according to Shun (1997, p. 15), in the early Zhou period (1066–771 B.C.), Heaven “was thought to be responsible for various natural phenomena, to have control over human affairs, and to have emotions and the capacity to act.”¹⁰ In addition, it represented “a source of political authority” for the Zhou kings, hence the Mandate of Heaven (Shun 1997, p. 15). But in the later Zhou, Heaven came to be known as a force for “rewarding the good and punishing the evil” and for “the preservation and destruction of states,” a change that implies that the king was not the sole beneficiary of Heavenly authority (Shun 1997, p.16). During this period, Heaven was also seen as “the source of norms of conduct,” so that a moral basis could be established for “the observance of *li* [rituals; rites]” (Shun 1997, p. 16).

Whatever differences in view of Heaven, the general consensus among scholars seems to be: for Confucius, the term referred to “a supreme, personal deity,” but after him it was more and more associated with “a superior moral force or nature” (Ching 1997, p. 80). In the latter sense, Heaven came close to the concept of the Dao, the ultimate principle of governance in the universe for all beings and non-beings. In many classical texts, Heaven and the Dao were used interchangeably to represent the order of the divine and/or the natural, believed to be above or beyond that of the human. But very often Heaven would serve as an attendant notion of the Dao to suggest that the visible or the nameable (Heaven) is contingent upon the invisible or the nameless (Dao). For example, in his essay “On Heaven”, Xunzi argued that “Heaven is governed by a constant Way (*tian you chang dao*).”¹¹ In *Dao De Jing*, Laozi claimed that “the nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth” (Laozi 1972, chp. 1), implying that “Heaven and earth are not the ultimate” (Schwartz 1989, p. 196).

In early Chinese thought, the term Dao was also used to refer to a variety of subjects, covering a range of references greater than Heaven. Philosophically, especially in the school of Daoism, it was meant as a metaphysical concept to represent the ultimate, which by definition remains “completely beyond human perception” (Kohn 1992, p. 46). This

⁹ According to Ivanhoe and Norden (2001, p. 360), Heaven in pre-Qin China was “not primarily thought of as a place,” and was “not connected with any explicit views about an afterlife,” which may serve as a point of distinction from the Western concept of Heaven.

¹⁰ Zhou refers to the Zhou Dynasty in Chinese history, roughly from 1066 to 221 B.C. The later Zhou included the “Spring-Autumn” (722–481 B.C.) and Warring-States (403–221 B.C.) periods, which historians often liken to the Axial period in the West.

¹¹ My translation, based on the original Chinese version in *Selected Readings from Famous Chinese Philosophers*. Vol. 1, edited by Shi (1988, p. 208). Xunzi was an ancient Chinese thinker (about 313–238 B.C.), arguably the third most important figure in the founding of Confucianism.

may add to the explanation why Heaven could be ambiguous, especially when used in association with the nameless.

4. The Dao, Truth, and Western Logocentrism

In this section and the next, I will explore the positions of truth and logic in ancient Chinese philosophy (and related epistemological issues), in hopes of “setting the stage” for further discussion of Heaven and its centrality to ethos in classical Chinese texts. In this passage from *Dao De Jing*, Laozi describes the Dao:

Look, it cannot be seen—it is beyond form.
 Listen, it cannot be heard—it is beyond sound.
 Grasp, it cannot be held—it is intangible.
 These three are indefinable;
 Therefore they are joined in one.
 From above it is not bright;
 From below it is not dark:
 An unbroken thread beyond description.
 It returns to nothingness.
 The form of the formless,
 The image of the imageless,
 It is called indefinable and beyond imagination.
 Stand before it and there is no beginning.
 Follow it and there is no end. (Laozi 1972, chp. 14)

This passage could be easily dismissed as “elusive” by someone with a “positivist” attitude, but it addresses several philosophical issues widely discussed in Western post-modernism. It also registers an extraordinary similarity to the Vacuum Genesis theory of modern physics, which declares that the whole universe started from “absolute nothingness.”¹² There is probably no need to elaborate on the “eternal emptiness” of the world from the point of view of Daoism, but we can sense a relevance in Laozi’s passage to the questions of truth and language.

First, the Dao, or the ultimate reality, is considered beyond reach in early Chinese thought as it cannot be “seen,” “heard,” “held” or even “imagined.” If we compare it with the transcendental truth framed in Platonic tradition, we may see an immediate difference. In *Gorgias*, Plato’s Socrates asserts that truth, like “the great power of geometrical equality among both gods and men” (Plato 1990, p. 100), is accessible to humans if a rigorous reasoning, modeled after his dialectic, is conducted. Since Plato, Western philosophy has been driven by what Derrida (Derrida 1976, p. 11) calls “logocentrism,” phrased after the Greek term *logos*. But what has been celebrated in the logocentric tradition is indeed Plato’s idealistic notion that absolute truth can somehow be ascertained by humans.

To say that the absolute truth is beyond reach is one thing, but to say such truth does not exist in early Chinese thought is another. Indeed, the Dao is just another word for the absolute. However, unlike their Greek counterparts so possessed with rational demonstration in their quest for the absolute (supposedly independent of human intervention), ancient Chinese thinkers—at least the vast majority of them—appeared to take a “let-it-go” attitude towards it, so that they could redirect their attention to the worldly, promoting their moral or political agendas by utilizing what had already been accepted as true, such as the Dao. A. C. Graham, a noted Western Sinologist, sums it up this way: for Confucius and Laozi, “problem-solving without useful purpose is a pointless frivolity” (Graham 1989, p. 7). Graham’s statement seems to reaffirm an earlier observation by Johnston, who

¹² See, for example, “The Creation of the Universe,” PBS, 28 October 2003.

notes that the approach to truth in early Chinese philosophy is based on “a pragmatic, [...] not a logical or empirical justification” (Johnston 1976, p. 4). This assessment by Western scholars is also echoed by some Chinese. For instance, Liu and You hold that Confucius was “concerned chiefly with human affairs in his teaching, distancing himself from natural and metaphysical matters” (Liu and You 2009, p. 159). Logically, we may draw two implications from the aforementioned “let-it-go” attitude: first, that the pragmatic approach to truth would yield more space for rhetorical maneuvers (*shui* in Chinese); and second, that such an approach would blend rhetoric (in the realm of the acceptable or conventional) and philosophy (in the realm of the absolute or truthful) into one instead of separating them. This is seen in the example of *Dao De Jing*, which can be read as “a work of rhetoric” and also as a treatise on philosophy (Kowal 1995, p. 364).¹³

Second, Laozi’s message can also be interpreted as a recognition that the ultimate truth, if any, cannot be conveyed through language, because it is “indefinable” and “beyond description.” Again, we can feel the difference between Laozi and Plato. The latter believes that “the truth behind appearances can be delineated” by a language that is “more analytical, objective, and dialectical” (Bizzell and Herzberg 1990, p. 56). Put simply, for Laozi, the truth is ineffable, but for Plato it can be effable if the right language is in place. A careful reader can see that Laozi poses a paradox by speaking the unspeakable in *Dao De Jing*. On the other hand, Plato also poses a paradox, though in a different way. For, the infinite truth would stop being infinite the moment it turned into a linguistic entity in the hands of mundane humans. In other words, are humans really capable of using the finite (language) to describe the infinite?

5. Logic and Its Position in Chinese Rhetoric

Plato is known for his hostility towards rhetoric, but he never abandons rhetoric; rather, he advocates “good rhetoric,” cleansed of emotive and irrational elements that he fears can induce “flattery” (Plato 1990, p. 96). Clearly, Plato sees logic, or *logos* (as Derrida would call it), as the defining element of “good rhetoric.” We know that Aristotle has made a vigorous defense of rhetoric, declaring it “the counterpart of Dialectic” (Aristotle 1990, p. 151), but, like his teacher, he too privileges logic, as seen in his statement about enthymemes, which he claims “are the substance of rhetorical persuasion.” In many ways, Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* can be read as “a popular logic” (Cooper 1960, p. xx). That Plato and Aristotle and, by extension, the logocentricism of Western philosophy (and rhetoric) privilege logic seems self-explanatory, as logic operates, conveniently, on the premise of truth: whoever knows how to apply logic grasps, in Derrida’s words, the “signifier” and “signification of truth” (Derrida 1976, p. 10; emphasis original).

Logic, as a special language formulation, was not completely alien to early Chinese philosophers and rhetoricians; rather, it just did not enjoy the status it had with Plato, Aristotle, and other Greeks. As Schaberg demonstrates in his analysis of passages in the *Zuo Zhuan*, “the syllogism was among the techniques of proof available to early Chinese speakers and writers” (Schaberg 2001, p. 41).¹⁴ He uses the following as an example: “one who is the object of awe, concern, modeling, and imitation has *weiyi* [dignity and deportment]; King Wen¹⁵ was the object of awe, concern, modeling, and imitation; therefore King Wen had *weiyi*” (Schaberg 2001, p. 41).

What appears to distinguish the ancient Chinese from the ancient Greeks is that the former generally did not share the same degree of “rigor” with the latter, for two reasons. One reason is that Chinese writers or speakers were pragmatic: if everything is

¹³ Western rhetoric seeks the probable (that is, things approximating truth) for its rational appeal; Chinese pragmatism, however, would look for what is acceptable (*ke*), morally and socially, with truth out of the picture. The former is epistemological in approach; the latter is largely cultural (and therefore conventional).

¹⁴ *Zuo Zhuan* is one of the classics in the Confucian canon.

¹⁵ Founder of the Zhou Dynasty (1171–1122 B.C), widely regarded as a sage-king in Chinese history.

already made clear, then the conclusion can be “left implicit.”¹⁶ The other reason is that the Chinese preferred to have “logical demonstration” (*apodeixis*) and “showy display” (*epideixis*) “intertwined” in texts (Schaberg 2001, p. 41), a point that appears to confirm what was suggested earlier: the pragmatic approach to truth would blend the rhetorical and the philosophical into one. Overall, however, ancient Chinese writers/speakers would pay much more attention to the former, as rhetorical “elegance [was] paramount, in classical texts such as the *Zou Zhuan* and *Guo Yu*¹⁷ (Schaberg 2001, p. 30).

Apart from sporadic pieces of “logical” writing collected in the aforementioned Confucian classics, pre-Qin China also saw a brief episode of “rationalism,” as represented by Mozi (480–420 B.C.) and his school of thought, Mohism. While Mozi and his followers did not formalize logic in the Aristotelian fashion, their “logical sophistication” (Graham 1989, p. 137) has been widely recognized by both Chinese and Western theorists. The early Mohists were primarily concerned over “problems of morals and government,” but the Neo-Mohists extended their inquiry into such areas as “logical puzzles, geometry, optics, mechanics, economics” (Graham 1989, p. 137). Mohism has, however, been traditionally viewed as an anti-Confucian, anti-establishment movement. Despite a brief period of thriving in pre-Qin China, its status in the development of Chinese philosophy has remained at best “secondary” (Graham 1989, p. 7), if not marginal.

Due to a renewed interest in Mohism and other schools of rationalism (e.g., School of Naming) in recent decades, many contemporary Chinese scholars feel the “urge” to challenge the “bias” of Western scholars who hold that “Chinese rhetoric is not interested in logic” (Lu 1998, p. 31). For example, Zhi-Tie Dong draws a comparison between Aristotle’s logic and Chinese “naming” and “arguing” (largely based on Mohism) and concludes that the latter, despite its lesser degree of formalism, represents “the study of logic in ancient China” (Dong 1998, pp. 4, 190). Xing Lu, for another example, argues that Western theorists have been wrong in using their own rhetorical terminology to judge Chinese rhetoric, for they ‘are “unfamiliar” with terms in Chinese “associated with the classical Greek meaning of *logos*” (Lu 1998, p. 37).

The arguments of these Chinese scholars may have merit, but elevating Chinese rhetoric to the “logical” status may suggest, on their part, a misunderstanding of the cultural and intellectual circumstances in which that rhetoric has been practiced. The quest for truth has been part and parcel of the logocentrism of Western philosophy, but this has never been the case within the Chinese tradition. Because the mainstream philosophers in ancient China, who were also rhetoricians, were “pragmatic” about truth, they were generally not particularly interested in using logic—both as the “signifier” and “signification of truth” by Western standards—to demonstrate the absolute. Yes, logic or *logos* did have its presence in classical Chinese texts, but it was rarely considered the substance of rhetoric due to Chinese rhetors’ “faith” in the “incontrovertibility” of “received definitions and texts” (Schaberg 2001, p. 42). In other words, for those rhetors, received wisdom was more important, and perhaps more useful, than something that had to be rigorously proven or demonstrated. Based on my readings of classical texts, even a rationalist such as Mozi would frequently have to resort to “Heaven” to hammer out his argument. So, I would say that the assessment by some of the Western theorists, such as Oliver, that “Chinese rhetoric is not interested in logic” is basically “*ke*” (acceptable), even though it may sound a bit belittling to those who are attempting to “rationalize” classical Chinese rhetoric.¹⁸ Once more, this does not mean that “the Chinese do not speak or write in ways that presume the

¹⁶ For a Chinese, something such as “all swans are white, and this is a swan” is enough; the conclusion, “therefore this swan is white,” is self-evident and can be left unsaid. As an added note, Aristotle prefers to leave the premises implicit because of the concern that “a tight logical argument is not effective in rhetoric” (Kennedy 1980, p. 71), seemingly contrasting the Chinese preference for an implicit conclusion.

¹⁷ Also one of the classics in Confucian canon.

¹⁸ The word “*ke*” (acceptable) was characteristically used in classical Chinese texts when a judgment was called for, in contrast to the frequent use of “true” or “valid” in similar situations in Western texts. This may also serve as an example of how ancient Chinese in general were not particularly interested in strict logical demonstrations. For practical reasons, what is “acceptable” would have a wider range of applications than what is “true” or “valid” based on logical demonstration.

facticity of assertions. It is only that there is little interest in raising the issue of facticity or literalness to the level of speculation and theory" (Hall and Ames 1998, p. 135).

6. Ethos as a Cultural Construct

The seemingly unshakable "faith" in "received definitions and texts" (Schaberg 2001, p. 42) may have constituted a rhetorical strategy in itself. Because it was "never open to question," such a faith, Schaberg contends, "encouraged a looseness of form in proofs" (Schaberg 2001, p. 42). For pragmatic reasons, an argument using Heaven to "bluff" others would be easier to make than one relying on a rigid process of rational demonstration, which could well turn out to be a linguistic "drab," given the cultural penchant for rhetorical elegance. I might add that faith in the past, in the form of the historical appeal (as discussed earlier), is still widely observed in today's China. The practice of "repeating set phrases and maxims, following patterns, and imitating texts" (Matalene 1985, p. 804) is especially true in documents produced by the government offices and speeches made by government officials.

Aside from being pragmatic, the emphasis on received wisdom can also be seen as a conscious effort on the part of rhetors to utilize what had already been culturally accepted or established in the past to construct appeals to their own contemporary audiences—a point that I made earlier when speaking of the collective nature of Chinese ethos as a cultural heritage. The variables of such wisdom, such as the Dao, *Yin-Yang*, Heaven, and Confucianism, are all cultural formulations belonging to an early Chinese tradition. This would further explain why Chinese ethos is essentially a cultural, and therefore a collective, construct. As Kennedy observes, the "tradition of the ancestors who continue to watch the living" (Kennedy 1998, p. 151) plays an important role in creating Chinese ethos. This confirms the significance of the cultural in shaping how the Chinese present their ethos (through the ancestral lineage, for example). The remainder of this section will look at the early Chinese rhetorical tradition and its ethotic uses of Heaven as the ultimate source of authority.

For obvious reasons, whoever succeeded in appropriating the power of Heaven or placing himself under the "blessings" of Heaven would conveniently have the *skeptron* (ethos or source of ethos) in his hands to do what might otherwise be thought of as morally incomprehensible: for example, usurping the throne or conquering another kingdom. That is why every founder of a dynasty in Chinese history would invariably claim to inherit *tian-ming* (the Mandate of Heaven) for "the establishment of new regimes" (Lu 1998, p. 50), and kings or emperors would never hesitate to claim the title of *tian-zi* (the Son of Heaven) to ensure their authority as "the ultimate rulers of human affairs" (Lu 1998, p. 55). *Shi Jing* (*Book of Poetry*) contains numerous lines describing how King Wen, founder of the Zhou, had been granted a "command" (*ling*) from Heaven to overthrow the Shang and establish his own dynasty.¹⁹ This is seen, for example, in the stanza of Da Ming:

The Mandate came from Heaven
 Commanding this King Wen
 To rename the kingdom as Zhou and establish its capital in Haojing
 And to marry an heiress from the state of Shen.
 She later bore King Wu,
 The elder son [of King Wen] who continued the course [of the farther].
 Blessed by Heaven, he [King Wu] carried on the Mandate,
 Coordinating military attacks against the Great Shang.²⁰

¹⁹ The Shang Dynasty (around 1600–1066 B.C.). King Zhou, the last ruler of the Shang, is historically perceived as personally responsible for the demise of the dynasty because of his "wicked" rule. In *Shi Jing* and other early classics, he often serves to exemplify how a bad ruler is doomed by the Will of Heaven.

²⁰ My translation, based on the original Chinese version in *The Complete Four Books and Five Classics with Annotations*, edited by Han (1995). See "Da Ya," *Shi Jing* (p. 753).

Shang Shu (*Book of Documents*), among other classics, contains similar passages of how King Wu used the Mandate of Heaven to “spin” his political ethos—as seen, for example, in a “motivational speech” delivered to his generals and soldiers:

Heaven always shows its mercy to the people, and the ruler must obey the Will of Heaven. Jie of the Xia disobeyed Heaven above and therefore caused grave calamities all over on Earth.²¹ That is why Heaven granted its Mandate to Cheng Tang,²² to terminate the Dynasty of Xia. Today, the crimes of the king [Zhou] far exceed those committed by Jie. He persecutes the innocent and sends them into exile; he punishes and butchers his ministers who try to voice an honest opinion. He claims to have the Mandate of Heaven, yet dares to say that to revere Heaven is useless, that sacrificial ceremonies produce nothing good, and that his despotic practices won’t hurt society. He is thus not far away from his own demise, as shown by the example of Jie. That is why Heaven confers the turn on me to rule the country. Plus, the dream I dreamed accords with the signs revealed through divination: They both tell good fortunes ahead, predicting an inevitable victory over the Shang. It is true that he has followers in millions, but they are shallow and ignorant. It is true that I have only ten ministers, but they are highly capable, knowing fully well how to govern the country and having a strong determination of working together for me. Surrounding oneself with crowds of cronies is nothing compared with leading a few men defined by virtue.

My people have witnessed what Heaven has witnessed [i.e., the ills of the day]; my people have heard what Heaven has condemned. If the people are complaining [of the social ills], I cannot stand aside; I have the sole responsibility to react. Now, I will lead my troops to charge forward.²³

It is not necessary to perform a lengthy rhetorical analysis to point out the complexity of modes of appeals that King Wu applied and to show their relevance to the historical, cultural context in which the audience was addressed; it is important, nonetheless, to know that the passage quoted above from *Shang Shu* displays a high level of rhetorical technique long before the time of Confucius.²⁴ For instance, logic—especially in the Aristotelian category of “historical example” (Bizzell and Herzberg 1990, p. 147)—was applied to show that the Shang Dynasty would be doomed because of its despotic king, Zhou. The use of “example” could be summarized thus: King Jie disobeyed Heaven, hence the destruction of his dynasty. Now King Zhou is disobeying Heaven, his dynasty is approaching an end, too. There is little doubt that King Wu was using this “example” to legitimize his military attacks against the Shang as well as to advise his listeners that victory would be on his side.

However, we may also sense a subjugation of logos to ethos in the speech, given that the use of logic is dependent on the Will of Heaven—the basis of King Wu’s ethos or, in Schwartz’s words, “the ultimate source of the king’s authority” (Schwartz 1989, p. 29). In fact, the whole argument would collapse if his ethos could not be sustained by the invocation of Heaven. For example, if Heaven did not exist, or if Heaven did not punish Jie (but rather Jie caused his own failure), then it would be useless for King Wu to present his ethos as the inheritor of a heavenly mandate (as in “Heaven confers the turn on me to rule”); this would in turn render “invalid” the application of a “logical” example that links Jie’s fall to the prospect of Zhou’s fall. (At least, there is no way to tell that Heaven chooses King Wu to execute its mandate.) But what appears ludicrous to a modern mind made perfect sense to King Wu and his audience, because the king’s claim “to a special

²¹ Jie, the last king of the Xia Dynasty, established around 2100 B.C. and conquered by the Shang around 1600 B.C. Historically, Jie, together with Zhou (earlier mentioned), is an embodiment of despotism. But unlike Zhou, the existence of Jie is not positively supported by historical evidence.

²² Founder of the Shang, one of the legendary sage-kings in Chinese history.

²³ My translation, based on the original Chinese version in *The Complete Four Books and Five Classics with Annotations*, edited by Han (1995). See “Tai Shi (middle section), Book of the Zhou,” *Shang Shu* (p. 1434).

²⁴ *Shang Shu* is historically classified as a pre-Confucius classic, though Confucius and his disciples may have played a role in its editing or even revising.

relation to Heaven” had been quite established in early Chinese thought for both “political” and “religious” reasons (Schwartz 1989, p. 43). In this sense, we might say that King Wu’s ethos—in the name of the Mandate of Heaven—is a cultural construct of his time.

Schwartz and Ching, among others, have traced the permeance of Heaven in Chinese culture and its association with kingship in Chinese thought to the practice of shamanism in early stages of Chinese civilization. “The emergence of Ti [Heaven]” with its supreme power, speculates Schwartz, “may be associated with the theological meditations of shamans and other religious specialists who were in the royal entourage” (Schwartz 1989, p. 30).²⁵ In that “motivational speech” quoted above, King Wu’s accusation that King Zhou did not revere Heaven may be seen as a recognition of Heaven’s “ultimate sovereignty” (Schwartz 1989, p. 30) over all humans under Heaven, including the king. The mention of “sacrificial ceremonies” and “divination” by King Wu is suggestive of the practices of a shamanistic or religious nature in the early stages of Chinese civilization—practices that were used to reveal the power of the divine and to confirm “the king’s claim to a monopoly of access to Ti” (Schwartz 1989, p. 30).

In *Mysticism and Kingship in China*, Ching shows that Chinese kings of the early ages were often “shamanic figures” themselves (Ching 1997, p. xiii).²⁶ For obvious reasons, those “shamanic kings,” as well as “their heirs,” “fabricated the tales of divine ancestry” to create the “mystical” role of kingship as “mediator between Heaven and Earth” (Ching 1997, pp. xii–iii). The legends of “sage-kings,” who have “semi-divine attributes and the ability to maintain communication with the divine” (Ching 1997, p. 67), were indeed the invention of “later times”—possibly by Confucius, Mencius, and other pre-Qin thinkers—who created the “myth” of sage-kings “for the sake of having real rulers emulate such mythical figures” (Ching 1997, p. xii). Confucians and the like may have invented the “sage-king” myth for the purpose of promoting their own moral or political agendas; but in doing so, they were also, wittingly or unwittingly, institutionalizing the office of kingship, together with its “heavenly” authority, just as those shamanic kings in the earlier period had used sacrificial ceremonies, divination, ancestral worship, and other ritualistic practices to institutionalize their rule over all under Heaven. In a way, this may explain why Confucianism was later “declared the official creed of the nation” by the court of the Han (in the second century B.C.), and Confucian classics “became the principal study, if not the sole, of all scholars and statesmen” in post-Qin China (De Bary et al. 1960, p. 19). But perhaps we are witnessing something even more significant here: the institutionalizing (Confucianism) finally turns into the institutionalized.

Though Ching does not use the word “ethos” to describe the authority of the king’s “mandate,” the following excerpt is quite telling in terms of how ethos was created for the king and how it was institutionalized for its own sustention:

... the charisma associated with shamanic ecstasy created the aura for the office of kingship, giving it a sacred, even a priestly character. But this charisma was eventually institutionalised and routinised, by a line of men who no longer possessed the gifts for summoning the spirits and deities. To support their power, however, they frequently resorted to the suggestion of charisma and of divine favour. They fabricated tales of divine or semi-divine origins; they consulted with the deities and spirits through divination, sacrifices, and other rituals. Such examples abounded in the rest of Chinese history. (Ching 1997, p. xii)

It will probably not change the semantics of “charisma,” “aura,” or “divine favour” if we substitute them here with the rhetorical term “ethos.” But what is more revealing is the fact that the power of early Chinese kingship clearly depends on the creation or fabrication of ethos or, in Ching’s words, of “charisma,” “aura,” “a sacred and priestly character,” etc.

²⁵ *Ti*, also *Di* or *Shang-Di* in Chinese (i.e., Lord on High), was the god worshipped by people of the Shang Dynasty. It was replaced by Heaven in the Zhou Dynasty, but with the meaning remaining the same.

²⁶ For example, the author cites a study by the Japanese scholar, Kato Joken, as saying that King Wen and his son, King Wu, were both “shamans” (p. 17).

The association of ethos with “power” helps explain why it (i.e., ethos) was eventually “institutionalised and routinised,” but we may push the argument further: the reason ethos is institutionalized is precisely because it partakes in the process of institutionalizing kingship and its power. Hence the conclusion that ethos and power, or the institutionalizing and the institutionalized, imply each other and are intertwined.

Perhaps we can push the argument even further: if logos is the “signifier” and “signification” of truth in the Western tradition of “logocentrism,” then ethos is certainly the “signifier” and “signification” of power in the Chinese tradition of what I would have to call “ethocentrism.”²⁷ The notion of ethocentrism, I believe, should explain, in the fundamental way, why ethos has taken center stage in the development of Chinese, especially classical Chinese, rhetoric. (With this ethocentrism in mind, Westerners may better appreciate why the notion of face, which is also sort of ethos, has carried such a massive weight in the life and thought of the Chinese.)

7. Ethos as an Institutionalized Discourse Formation

Because of the cruciality of shamanic ethos (or charisma) in sustaining the power of kingship, the creation of such ethos (which, in postmodernist jargon, we might say is a discourse practice or a function of discourse practice) was well incorporated into the institutions of the early Chinese dynasties. For example, the Shang Dynasty set up the offices of *Duo-Bu* and *Zhan* specially to take charge of divination, and the *wu* (shaman) at the time was the official bureaucrat responsible for mediating between gods or spirits and humans (Guo 1976, p. 208). In the Zhou Dynasty, the *shamanic* bureaucracy became even more complex and more powerful,²⁸ given their status as ranked second only to the king. In fact most of the six highest-ranking offices, such as *Tai-Zhu* (Grand Invocator, in charge of sacrificial ceremonies), *Tai-Bu* (Grand Diviner), and *Tai-Zong* (Grand Genealogist, in charge of recording royal lineage), were directly responsible for religious or shamanic practices (Guo 1976, p. 265). The bureaucratic system of the Shang or the Zhou went, of course, beyond the periphery of shamanism, but we could see that the system was quite dedicated to mystifying (and, in doing so, to sustaining) the authority or power of kingship—which it achieved by suggestion of divine or heavenly charisma, aura, etc., in connection with the state-run, institutionalized apparatus of signification (such as divination and sacrificial ceremonies).²⁹ And the remark made by King Wu, in a speech quoted earlier, that “the dream I dreamed accords with the signs revealed through divination,” can thus be taken as a strategy of ethos signifying his relation to Heaven and, as such, implying his Heaven-bestowed power as well.

The “bizarre machinery”—as Foucault (1972, p. 135) would call it—involved in the process of signifying the ethos and therefore the power of early Chinese kingship is a good example of Foucault’s thesis in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*: namely, that discourses are institutionalized formations (as in the case of heavenly ethos in China) “made possible by a group of relations [...] established between institutions, economical and social processes, behavioural patterns, systems of norms, techniques, types of classification, modes of characterization” (Foucault 1972, pp. 44–45). He goes on to suggest that the power of institutions, etc., cannot escape the “totality” of discourse (Foucault 1972, p. 55) because, after all, discourses are “practices that systematically form the object of which they speak” (Foucault 1972, p. 49). I do not wish to dwell on Foucault’s discourse theory, but it

²⁷ By ethos as “signifier” of power, I mean that ethos has the function of signifying the power, say, of Chinese kingship; by ethos as “signification” of power, I mean such power is also implied in the process of the signification, for example, in the case of institutionalization. And I believe Derrida is suggesting the same—truth is signified by logos and at the same time is implied by logos. Or, I might put it this way: because of truth, that is why we have logos as signifier; because of logos as signification, that is why we have truth. Likewise, because of power, the Chinese king has ethos to signify it; because of ethos as signification, that is why the Chinese king has power!

²⁸ Ching believes that “religious fervor had greatly diminished” during the Zhou times (8), but I doubt it happened right away in the beginning of the Zhou. Since the Zhou covered a span of over 800 years, it is more likely (and even certain) that religious or shamanic practices played a lesser role in the political system in the later periods of the dynasty.

²⁹ As Schwartz points out, the king is “in some sense the ‘high priest’ of the worship of *Ti* [Heaven]” (p. 35).

is important to point out the obvious: that is, the mutually-defining relationship that Foucault describes between the institutionalized (i.e., discourse) and the institutionalizing (i.e., the authorizing institutions) is applicable to the “ethocentric” system of signification in the early ages of Chinese civilization, where ethos and power were mutually implying each other.³⁰

So far, I have explained the central position of ethos in the development of early Chinese rhetoric by focusing on its intertwinement with divine power in early shamanic or religious practices—practices that often served to link the authority of kingship to that of Ti or Heaven. This point, as I have argued, helps explain the centrality of Heaven to Chinese ethos. Shamanism in early Chinese culture ought not to be dismissed as “utter nonsense.”³¹ It is more important to see its practice as a way of signification reflective “of the needs or desires of society and institutions and of available methods [...] of coming to know something,” to quote Bizzell and Herzberg (Bizzell and Herzberg 1990, p. 1127). The unique historicity of the early shamanic or religious practices, of the methods of knowing and signifying characteristic of such practices, and, finally, of the association of ethos with power intimated with such practices and methods, ought to lead us to conclude that Chinese ethos, as a discourse formation, is fundamentally a function of a cultural heritage rather than a creation of a personal image making (as ethos, again, is typically perceived in Western rhetorical tradition).

8. A Philosophical Paradigm

The fact that Heaven has played such a crucial role in creating Chinese ethos may prompt one to speculate whether or not the rampant (ab)use of Heaven in classical texts might have something to do with a human desire to appropriate Heaven to “boost” the ethos of the writers behind those texts. While the king may control access to Heaven, it is fair game for anybody else to say that he has the *zhi* (knowing) of how Heaven operates: for example, in terms of punishing evil or bringing down good to those who have diligently obeyed *tian-ming*, or the Mandate of Heaven. (In many cases, the king would need such claims to support his own authority.) As Dong Zhong-Shu (179?–104? B.C.), the leading Confucian scholar of the Han Dynasty,³² once said: “[To know] is to predict accurately. [...] The person who knows can see fortune and misfortune a long way off, and can anticipate benefit and harm” (Ching 1997, p. 5).³³ From that statement, we can infer that the *zhi* in ancient Chinese society implied some sort of knowing about Heaven (allowing one to “see fortune and misfortune a long way off” or “anticipate benefit and harm”) that was not monopolized by the king. In the *Analects*, Confucius is presented as someone who knows the Dao of Heaven, being blessed by “a special relationship with Heaven” (Ching 1997, p. 79), which I think can be taken as a rhetorical move on the part of his followers to add to the appeal of the Great Master. Confucius claims that he is the one who understands “the Mandate of Heaven” and lashes out at “the petty person” for failing to appreciate the Mandate (Ivanhoe and Norden 2001, p. 43, 50). But, again, we may interpret this as a strategy of ethos, used to legitimize his moral mission to restore the *li* of the early Zhou times, which the historical Confucius believed was “the Golden Age of humankind” (Ivanhoe and Norden 2001, p. 1).

³⁰ The fact that the power of kingship is implied by a system of signification suggests that the system can sometimes override the power of the king. For example, according to Legge (1963), *Yi-Jing* (the *Book of Changes*, used as a divination manual) has intimations that “only defensive war, or war waged by the rightful authority to put down rebellion or lawlessness, is right,” that “the younger men [. . .] would cause evil if allowed to share [power] with the oldest son,” etc., (*The I Ching*, p. 24), suggesting that the king has to follow what has been unveiled through divination, or signification. Similarly, Ching (1997) points out that the kingship system, which includes the system of signification, “became a factor that restrained a ruler’s arbitrary exercise of authority, and sometimes functioned as an ultimate control over state power itself” (p. 34).

³¹ The fact that so many Chinese and Western scholars are still fascinated by *Yi-Jing*, which was written starting in the twelfth century B.C. as a divination manual, is quite telling about the shamanic wisdom.

³² The Han was the first post-Qin dynasty in Chinese history, lasting from 206 B.C. to 220 A.D.

³³ Dong is credited as the most important figure in Chinese history for establishing Confucianism as the official creed of the nation.

But perhaps a more “logical” explanation regarding the “high-frequency” occurrence of Heaven in classical Chinese texts, one seemingly supported by documentary evidence, is a philosophical longing among the ancient Chinese for “seeking a higher consciousness of oneness with the universe” (Ching 1997, p. xiii)—which may be rephrased as “maintaining harmony with nature,” “striving for unity between man and nature, and between man and the Dao,” etc. The idea is that humankind is part of nature or the universe, and therefore, like anything else, is governed by Heaven as a “guiding Providence” (De Bary et al. 1960, p. 17). This sort of idealism, believed to form a philosophical paradigm in early Chinese thought (Ching 1997, pp. 99–131), underpins almost all the schools of philosophy in pre-Qin China, particularly Daoism and Confucianism.

For Daoism, “Heaven’s net casts wide,” with nothing to slip through “its meshes” (*Dao De Jing*, chp. 73). It advocates “caring for others and serving heaven” (chp. 59) and “realiz[ing] one’s true nature” by leading a life of “simplicity,” “cast[ing] off selfishness,” and “temper[ing] desire” (chp. 19). Its ideal of *wu-wei* or doing-nothing (chp. 2) is sometimes seen by Westerners as a “nihilistic” manifestation, but actually it carries a political message for rulers in, for example, advising them against using a heavy hand in governing (chp. 58). Morally speaking, *wu-wei* cautions people not to be obsessed with material gains, for the “Tao [Dao] of heaven is to take from those who have too much and give to those who do not have enough” (chp. 77). The nihilistic overtone probably comes from the notion of “non-striving” as embedded in *wu-wei*; but, as T. Merton (1965, p. 24) explains, Daoism actually emphasizes conforming one’s action to the “divine and spontaneous mode [...] of action” of the Dao, which remains the “source of all good.” So, philosophically, we may say that the ideal of *wu-wei*, and Daoism at large, has formulated “an expression of the continuum between the human being as the microcosm of the universe as macrocosm” (Ching 1997, p. xi).

“The Dao of Heaven” stands at the core of Confucius’ call for the return of *li* and for moral rectitude.³⁴ For the Great Master, the consummate ritual system (*li*), established by the Zhou founders, King Wen, King Wu, and the Duke of Zhou³⁵, has carried within it “a set of sacred practices” (Ivanhoe and Norden 2001, p. 1) embodying the Dao of Heaven. Therefore, his teachings on *li* can be regarded as an attempt to “lead his fallen world back to the Dao, ‘Way,’ of Heaven” (Ivanhoe and Norden 2001, p. 2). Once Confucius claimed, “though my studies are lowly, they penetrate the sublime on high. Perhaps after all I am known—by Heaven” (De Bary et al. 1960, p. 22), thus linking his teachings to the order of the divine. At another time he uttered, “If I have done anything contrary to the Way, may Heaven reject me! May Heaven reject me!” (Ivanhoe and Norden 2001, p. 18), implying that the Dao of Heaven is the ultimate guiding principle for all human actions. But then what exactly is the Dao of Heaven for Confucius? An excerpt from the *Analects* gives us a clue:

Confucius said: “I wish I did not have to speak at all.” Tzu Kung [his student] said: “But if you did not speak, Sir, what we disciples pass on to others?” Confucius said: “Look at Heaven there. Does it speak? The four seasons run their course and all things are produced. Does Heaven speak?” (De Bary et al. 1960, p. 30)

The Great Master seems to pose a paradox for himself by suggesting that true knowledge is not to be taught or learned but rather comes directly from Heaven, a point that rings quite similar to Socrates’ “soul knowledge.”³⁶ For, if this were true, his sacred mission of

³⁴ The word *dao* literally means “path” or “way” in Chinese. It is used metaphorically to refer to some sort of transcendent governing force of the universe in Chinese philosophy. “The Dao of Heaven” (*tian-dao*), which occurs in the *Analects* (Section 5), could have two connotations: The one is that Heaven itself is governed by the Dao; the other is that Heaven is representative of the Dao. Either way, we can see that Heaven serves as an attendant notion of the Dao, pointing to some kind of absolute truth beyond.

³⁵ The brother of King Wu (1043–1036 B.C.). After King Wu died, he served as the prince regent, resisting the advice of many to usurp the throne, hence widely regarded as a paragon of virtue by later generations. Historically, he is more significant for his role in establishing and perfecting the rituals and institutions of the Zhou Dynasty, the model for *li* to Confucians.

³⁶ See, for example, the *Meno* in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* (1961), where Socrates says that “the truth about reality is always in our soul” (p. 371) and that “there is no such thing as teaching, only recollection” (p. 364).

transmitting the wisdom about the Dao of Heaven would certainly lose its practicable basis. That aside, we may sense that Heaven as referred to by Confucius is indeed “a natural order” (De Bary et al. 1960, p. 17), which does not speak but yet reveals itself through the cycle of four seasons, the growth of ten thousand things, etc.³⁷ For Confucius, such an order carries norms (as in the “season-comes-season-goes” cycle), or messages of the Dao, which he believes must translate into “a moral order” (De Bary et al. 1960, p. 17) in society. So, the idea of *li* is really about the norm of human behavior, as seen, for example, in his motto: “Rulers must act like rulers, subjects like subjects, fathers like fathers, and sons like sons.”

In a word, Confucius’ teachings, like Laozi’s, fit into the philosophical paradigm described earlier of ancient Chinese thought: the oneness of Heaven and humanity (*tian-ren he-yi*). But Daoism and Confucianism have different leanings: Daoism, in general, is more interested in transcending humanity to the Dao of Heaven, whereas Confucianism is more intent on applying the Dao of Heaven to this world, focusing on what is right for human mortals.³⁸ The “Dao,” as Schwartz points out, has thus become “Confucius’ inclusive name for the all-embracing normative human order” (Schwartz 1989, p. 63).

9. Oneness of Ethos and Logos

If we take a closer look at Heaven in Daoism or Confucianism and Heaven in earlier shamanic practices as the ultimate source of ethos for the king, we may realize that these two “Heavens” actually refer to two different concepts: in the former case, Heaven represents an impersonal, natural process, more or less in the category of truth (e.g., transcendent truth), whereas in the latter, Heaven is a personal god or a supreme deity, more or less in the category of power (e.g., the power of awarding the good and punishing the evil). Thus, the word “Heaven” has symbolized what Westerners would see as an antithesis: an “active conscious will” and the “source of universal order” (Schwartz 1989, p. 51) or, to put it in philosophical terms, “the category of ontological creativity and the categories of the primary cosmology” (Neville 1991, p. 72).

Many hypotheses have been proposed to solve this puzzle, ranging from the dismissal that the Chinese mind does not know the distinction between theism and non-theism to the admiration that it is more “inclusive” and “balanced,” and therefore able to reconcile what appears irreconcilable to the Westerner (e.g., Neville 1991, pp. 48–74). I have no intention to get into the debate, but I do wish to point out the obvious, something I have mentioned earlier: namely, that Heaven had gone through a conceptual evolution in early Chinese thought—for example, from Lord-on-High worshiped by the Shang people to the “source of norms of conduct” revered by Confucians. Undoubtedly, such an evolution has caused a semantic “problem” for Heaven as a concept—its ambiguity, one of those “corrupting elements” that a positivist feels ought to be purged for the sake of “the reasonableness of discourse” (Bennett 1976, p. 244). However, citing Kenneth Burke, Bennett argues that ambiguity can actually prove an advantage, in that it “makes possible the transformation by means of which a symbolic act develops” (Bennett 1976, p. 247). Burke’s analysis of the speeches on love in the *Phaedrus*, says Bennett, illustrates this advantage: because of “the ambiguity of ‘love,’” the transformation in speech by Socrates, from erotic love to divine love and finally to “the principles of loving speech,” can be made possible (Bennett 1976, p. 248).

Likewise, the reason that the ancient Chinese used Heaven to refer to two seemingly antithetical concepts is because “Heaven” as an ambiguous term had materialized a conceptual transformation. Just as the Western “love” could mean both “erotic love” and “divine love,” the Chinese “Heaven” could be used—with a degree of comfort—to

³⁷ Using the phenomena of four seasons, day and night, life and death, etc., had been a cliché among ancient Chinese thinkers to show the existence of a natural order and, further, of the governing force of the Dao.

³⁸ This may explain, in part, why Daoism later deteriorated into mystic and even superstitious practices, whereas Confucianism came to enjoy the status of state orthodoxy.

represent an “active conscious will,” as well as the “source of universal order.” Because of this “heavenly” ambiguity (which, I believe, has opened wider space for rhetorical maneuvering), we probably can imagine what would happen next: the king, or Son of Heaven, can utilize Heaven to symbolize his power sanctioned by the divine, as well as his moral authority derived from the order of the universe. I would not say that “the centrality of kingship” (Ching 1997, p. 36) in Chinese society up to the 1911 revolution had been built completely upon the ambiguity of Heaven as a conceptual term; however, it is important to realize how Heaven, with its dual association with the divine and the cosmic, has played a central role in formulating a discourse that transformed the king into “the paradigmatic individual, reflecting in himself so much of that which is greater than himself: the universe as an organic whole, vibrant and alive” (Ching 1997, p. 66).

Perhaps more significant, and more relevant to philosophy and rhetoric alike, is that the Chinese “Heaven” has blurred the line of demarcation between ethos and logos. If ethos signifies power and logos truth (as has been discussed earlier), then we might say that Heaven signifies both, because of its conceptual ambiguity or dual association. That is to say, Heaven can be used as both ethos and logos, and for both rhetorical and philosophical purposes. I have already explained the centrality of Heaven to Chinese ethos, which I think is essentially in the rhetorical category because of its conventional, or cultural, nature. The idea of Heaven used as logos seems self-explanatory if we go back to what was discussed a little earlier: namely, humanity as implied in the heavenly, a moral order in the natural, the transcendent in the cosmic, etc., as all of these can be categorized as truthful and therefore philosophical.³⁹

The following passage, from the *Four Texts of the Yellow Emperor* (Chang and Feng 1998), may exemplify Heaven’s ethos/logos ambiguity:

As for the principle of [human] affairs, it depends on whether one complies with [the way of heaven] or rebels against it. If one’s achievement transgresses [the ways of] heaven, then there is punishment by death. If one’s achievement is not enough as heaven requires, then one retreats without any fame. If one’s achievement accords with heaven, one will thereby attain great fame. It is the principle of [human] affairs. One who complies will enjoy life; one who follows the principles will succeed; one who is rebellious will suffer death; one who loses [will have no] fame. (Chang and Feng 1998, p. 139)⁴⁰

In the first place, the passage may be summarized as something like “following the Dao of Heaven,” in that it advises readers to act in compliance with Heaven. In this sense, Heaven is used as logos, because it represents a moral order guiding human behavior, something the ancient Chinese would accept as true and absolute. However, if we take a closer look at the passage, we may sense that it is actually advocating the doctrine of the Golden Mean, advising people against being too aggressive or too shy in getting what they want. Thus, the repeated use of Heaven can be seen as a strategy of ethos for the purpose of adding to the appeal of the message. (That is, even though less appealing, the message itself still stays if the author removed “Heaven” from the text.) What is more, Heaven is invoked for its power in punishing those who rebel and in rewarding those who follow—a clear indication of ethos being applied. I may appear overreaching in my explanation, but what seems clear is that “Heaven” is behind both logos and ethos in the text.

The oneness of ethos and logos is not uniquely Chinese. The fact that Plato tried to split philosophy from rhetoric but failed to do so suggests that the truthful simply cannot be separated from the conventional or culturally acceptable in the first place. However,

³⁹ How to decide what is true or not true is really an epistemological or methodological (e.g., scientific demonstration) issue. Since different cultures may have different epistemological approaches, it is important not to set a universal standard. The Dao, which is regarded as the absolute among the Chinese, may appear ludicrous to the Western mind; the Platonic Truth, which may have an enduring appeal to Westerners, would make little sense to the Chinese. Those Chinese ideas, such as humanity implied in the heavenly, may sound untrue to a Westerner, but they are true or truthful to the Chinese and approached as such by Chinese philosophers. That is why I categorize them as the philosophical and treat them as logos.

⁴⁰ From Chang and Feng (1998) *The Four Political Treatises of the Yellow Emperor*. See Section 8, Book I.

due to the dominance of logocentric thinking, that awareness has gone largely ignored in the Western rhetorical/philosophical tradition. I have argued that the ancient Chinese were pragmatic in their attitudes towards truth; instead of separating them, they blended the rhetorical with the philosophical and the acceptable with the truthful, thus making it possible for ethos and logos to become one. This is seen in the application of Heaven in early Chinese writings, which can help bridge the gap between the two seemingly different categories as presented in the West. We may use a simple diagram for illustration (Figure 1).

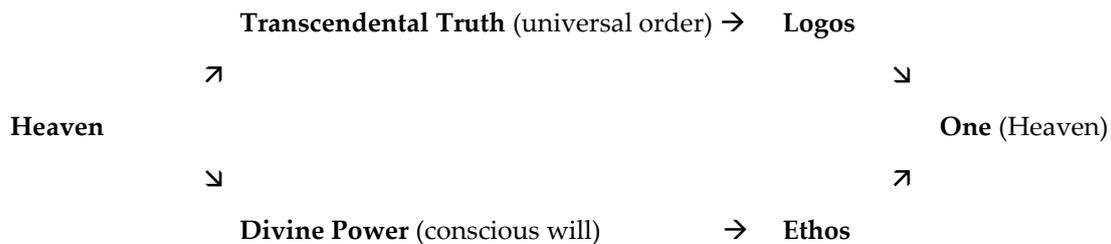


Figure 1. Diagram of Oneness of Chinese Heaven.

According to Kenneth Burke, human beings are capable of both using and misusing “verbal symbols,” which can in turn become the “realities of human existence” (Bennett 1976, pp. 243–44). This would imply that language practice, as a symbolic or signifying action, creates meanings that may not cohere with reality in the true sense. Further, it suggests that language itself may even imply or constitute reality (i.e., the signifier becomes the signified, Derrida would say), a point that early Chinese thinkers, such as Laozi and Confucius, would have fully appreciated. Indeed, Heaven would be a good example to illustrate how a language symbol can be used, misused, or even abused to create reality far beyond our imagination. The fact that Heaven had permeated through Chinese culture for thousands of years may point to the triumph of a language symbol and the reality created within such a symbol, despite its conceptual ambiguity. Finally, I would like to point out that the oneness of ethos and logos is indeed the triumph of ethnocentrism, in that it indicates that the rational appropriation of logos cannot be set apart from the irrational, conventional, cultural, or rhetorical projection of ethos—and that philosophy, in the end, stands “in defense of un-reason” (Bennett 1976, p. 243).

10. Conclusions

Aristotelian ethos is unique but not universal, for inspiring “trust” does not necessarily have to go through a process of character-based self-projection, as shown in the example of *cheng-yan* or “ethos of sincerity” in early Chinese rhetoric. Further, the notion of collective ethos casts doubt on the applicability of an individualistic ethos in non-Western cultural settings, as the former is constructed out of a cultural heritage without a rhetor’s avowed authorship of a text. This stands in contrast to Western ethotic practice, in which the rhetor becomes a “signifier” of ethos “standing *inside* an expanded text” (Baumlin 1994, p. xvi), a practice that reinforces the perception of rhetoric as an individualistic enterprise.

Heaven, a concept culturally prevalent in early Chinese society, has been discussed rather extensively in this essay for the purpose of further exploring collective ethos as a function of a cultural heritage, in which Heaven plays a key role in creating Chinese ethos. To put the discussion in perspective, the essay has also addressed, albeit briefly, the centrality of logos to the Western tradition, or logocentrism, versus that of ethos to the Chinese, or ethnocentrism. Just as there are historical, cultural, or epistemological reasons behind logocentrism in the West, the ethocentric turn of Chinese rhetoric has to be appreciated in light of a cultural tradition that carries its own historical complexities and philosophical intricacies. As I understand it, Heaven in its role as a defining attribute of Chinese ethos reveals a unique cultural heritage shaped by a collective human desire

in seeking “a higher consciousness of oneness with the universe” (Ching 1997, p. xiii). Historically, Heaven symbolizes, and has been institutionalized into, the power of kingship because of its dual association with the divine and the cosmic in Chinese culture. In the former case, Heaven represents the ultimate ethos that only a king or emperor can lay claim to; in the latter, Heaven intimates the order of the universe that a king or emperor can appropriate to secure his moral authority over *tian-xia* (all under Heaven). And because the order of the universe (the Dao, indeed) is conceptually close to what might be called the absolute, or Truth, in Western ideology, Heaven can be said to represent the truthful in the philosophical sense. One may thus conclude that in ancient Chinese discourse, the concept of Heaven blends into one power and truth, ethos and logos, and, finally, rhetoric and philosophy.

While it is impossible to exhaust discussions on the subject, what has been presented here ought to give some idea as to how Chinese ethos had evolved on a track rather different from the Western tradition. The collectivist nature of Chinese ethos may be better understood if we look at it in terms of a cultural construct or a function of a cultural heritage, traced all the way back to early Chinese society, where rulers would engage in shamanic or religious practices to signify, and mystify, their power and authority with the suggestion of divine and heavenly charisma.

Nevertheless, I feel that this investigation is far from over, especially if we look at Confucius’ self-cultivation. The idea of self-cultivation has its political and moral purpose of restoring *li*, but it also points to the ideological differences between the East and West in view of the individual and its relationship to society at large. In Chinese culture, the self has been traditionally downplayed, which helps explain why it has been out of the picture where Chinese ethos is projected. Investigating what Confucius and his followers had to say of the virtue of self-cultivation and their impact on the rhetorical practices of later generations might shed additional light on Chinese ethos as a cultural construct.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: The author wishes to thank the peer reviewers for their helpful feedback and thank the editors of this special issue and of *Humanities* for their valuable work and support.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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