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### **Citation**

Li, X. (2024). The Application of Contemporary Western Argumentation Theories in English Speech and Debate in China. *Proceedings Of The Tenth Conference Of The International Society For The Study Of Argumentation*, 561-569. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4107843>

Version: Publisher's Version

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# The Application of Contemporary Western Argumentation Theories in English Speech and Debate in China

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**ABSTRACT:** Western argumentation studies in contemporary China were not revived until the twentieth century with a heavy influence of Western epistemologies, especially pragma-dialectics and informal logic. In recent years, a new domain of argumentation studies has emerged in China as English speech and debate have flourished in Chinese universities over the past three decades. This essay focuses on how Western theories are applied in this emerging domain in China.

**KEYWORDS:** contemporary Chinese argumentation, English speech and debate in China, Western contemporary argumentation theories

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, English speech and debate emerged as a trend of critical thinking education in Chinese universities. The nature of persuasion in speech and forensic education is inherently connected with argument and reasoning, providing Chinese educators and students with a unique approach to explore and practice the theories of argumentation. With the background of the overall argumentation studies in contemporary China, this paper focuses on how Western theories are applied in the emerging domain of English forensic education. In what follows, I first provide a brief introduction of the influence of Western theories in contemporary argumentation studies in China. I then provide a brief review of the development of English forensic education in China over the past three decades and explain how some of the Western argumentation theories are applied in speech and debate curriculums in Chinese higher education. Finally, I conclude by arguing the application of Western theories in Chinese forensic education should inform Chinese contemporary argumentation theories.

## 2. CONTEMPORARY ARGUMENTATION STUDIES IN CHINA

Although ancient China has a rich tradition of argumentation, such tradition did not thrive after its peak in the Spring and Autumn or the Warring State Period (van Eemeren, 2019). The study of argumentation “lost its popularity completely” after Confucianism became the institutionalized orthodoxy since the West Han dynasty (p. 775). The tradition of argumentation was not rediscovered until the early twentieth century when Chinese scholars tried to find a counterpart of Western logic in ancient China. Subsequently, the

study of the classical tradition of argumentation is known as *Chinese Logic*, and controversy occurred among Chinese scholars on whether it should incorporate traditional Chinese values or simply adopt Western methods of thinking. For example, Hu Shi 胡适 (1891-1962), a prominent Chinese scholar trained in America advocated Western scientific methods while his opponents Liang Qichao 梁启超 (1873-1929) and Liang Suming 梁漱溟 (1893-1988) upheld the Chinese traditional values after a critical examination of Western culture. According to Lu (1998), two lines of research developed over the study of Chinese persuasive discourse and speech theory from the early late nineteenth to the subsequent century. The first line upheld Chinese rhetoric to be an integral part of “Chinese philosophy” and the second line attempted to “conceptualize the discipline under the original Chinese notion of *ming* 名 (naming) and the Western notion of logic (*luo ji* in Chinese)” (p. 40). To some contemporary Chinese scholars, the concept of *ming* is “equivalent to the Western notion of logic” although the Chinese translation of logic or 逻辑 *luo ji*, as Lu points out, “is a borrowed Western term and concept, having never appeared or been used in ancient Chinese writings” (p. 42). Lu concludes that contemporary Chinese scholarship on logic or argumentation in general focused more on interpretation of classical theories instead of evaluating these theories or advancing new theoretical dimensions. Furthermore, because of a lack of exchange between Chinese and Western scholars as well as barriers of language and translation, Chinese works of *ming* or logic were not introduced to the West and Chinese scholars have not fully embraced or applied the Western theories of rhetoric and argumentation, causing confusion. In fact, some saw the Western theories as “a form of cultural imperialism” over indigenous Chinese terms of logic (p. 42).

The controversy over Chinese logic lasted until the middle of the twentieth century when there was more enthusiastic reception of modern logic and argumentation studies in China. However, it was not until the 1990s when Western theories like pragma-dialectics were embraced by a new generation of scholars in China. The local research of argumentation studies in modern China has been heavily influenced by Western traditions, especially pragma-dialectics and informal logic. van Eemeren et al. (2014) identify the Institute of Logic and Cognition at the Sun Yet-san University (SYSU) as one of the leading institutes of modern argumentation studies in China, which hosts researchers from a variety of backgrounds including philosophy, logic, psychology, and computer science with “a strong tradition of studying argumentation from the perspectives of modern formal logic, cognitive science, and artificial intelligence” (p. 776). Besides Sun Yet-san University, a few other Chinese universities including Jiangsu University and Zhejiang University have established research centers for argumentation studies. Originally established in 2011, the Jiangsu University Center for Argumentation Studies has a strategic cooperation with the International Learned Institute of Argumentation Studies (ILIAS).<sup>1</sup> The Center of the Language and Cognitive Research (CLCR) at the School of Linguistic Sciences and Arts at Zhejiang University hosted the first Chinese Conference on logic and argumentation in 2016 (“*Zhe jiang*”, 2016). In recent years, more schools, such as the College of Philosophy in Nankai University, have established academic cooperation and exchanges with international institutes of argumentation such as the University of Windsor in Canada. With the influence of Western logic studies and the

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<sup>1</sup> Information of the Center of Argumentation Studies is from the official website of the School of Foreign Studies at Jiangsu University. Retrieved from <https://sfl.ujs.edu.cn/info/1012/1024.htm>

collaboration with scholars from the West, Chinese scholars incorporate Western argumentation theories in their teaching and research to develop local argumentation studies.

According to van Eemeren et al. (2014), both informal logic and pragma-dialectics have had a significant impact on modern argumentation scholarship in China. Song Ruan wrote the first series of papers introducing the basics of informal logic in 1991. Hongzhi Wu published *An Introduction to Informal Logic* in 2009, providing a more elaborated and comprehensive overview on the theoretical framework and methods of informal logic. A few major works regarding pragma-dialectical theories have been translated by Chinese scholars between 1991 and 2006, including *Argumentation, Communication, and Fallacies* (by van

Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992), *Critical Discussion* (an earlier version of *A Systematic Theory of Argumentation* by van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004), *Fundamentals of Legal Argumentation* (by Feteris 1999), and *Argumentation: Analysis, Evaluation, and*

*Presentation* (by van Eemeren et al. 2002). The continuous import of Western informal and pragmatic-dialectical theories from the 1990s has a clear influence on the current

argumentation research by Chinese scholars. For example, connecting with pragma-dialectical and informal logic theories, the research group led by Qingyin Liang and Minghui

Xiong conducted a series of research on legal argumentation. Minghui Xiong published *In Litigational Argumentation: A Logical Perspective on Litigation Games* in 2010, providing a new framework for legal argument analysis. Shier Ju, leading a research group from SYSU,

focused on the study of argumentative practices in different cultures from anthropological and sociological perspectives. Research on argumentation studies also reveals a distinction

between informal logic and pragma-dialectics. For example, Yun Xie (2008) analyzed the divergence between “the ‘product-driven’ context of the ‘solo argument construction’ of Johnson’s dialectical tier” and “the ‘process-driven’ dialogical context of the ‘duet cooperative discussion’ between two parties of pragma-dialectics,” reflecting on the different meanings or functions of dialectic under the informal logic and pragma-dialectic frameworks (p. 283-285). These examples are among the representations of the emerging scholarship of

argumentation studies by Chinese scholars in recent years. In general, contemporary argumentation studies in China manifest the considerable influence of Western theories, whether seen from the earlier controversy between inheriting traditional values or adopting Western methods, or from the impact of informal logic and pragma-dialectics in recent argumentation research. While the recent argumentation studies in China have spanned across different disciplines such as logic, philosophy, law, or computer science, the existing literature has little discussion on the application of Western argumentation theories in the

emerging domain of English speech and forensic education in China. In what follows, I provide a synoptic brief review of the development of English debating in Chinese mainland

universities since the 2000s and briefly analyze

the influence of some of the contemporary argumentation theories on the evolution of English debate education in China.

### 3. WESTERN ARGUMENTATION THEORIES IN ENGLISH DEBATE EDUCATION IN CHINA

A new domain of argumentation studies emerged in China as English speech and debate flourished in Chinese universities over the past three decades. This emerging domain developed in a broad context of English education becoming “a subject of paramount importance” in China during the last quarter of the twentieth century (Hu, 2005, p. 5). English Language Teaching (ELT) was among “perceived priorities” for national development and English language proficiency can lead to “a host of economic, social, and educational opportunities” for individuals (p. 6). English forensic education surged in China from the mid-1990s when public speaking and academic debate became new forms of English learning activities among Chinese college students. In general, competitive English speech and debate developed from popular extracurricular activities to become part of national core curriculums for college English education in recent years. Because debate is a sub-category of argumentation practice, English debate education in China has become a domain of practical application of Western argumentation theories. Although pragma- dialectics has had a dominant influence on argumentation scholarship in the Chinese academia, the realm of English debate in China has been predominately shaped by informal logic theories. The major theoretical framework guiding the instruction of English debate, whether in tournaments or classrooms, is largely adapted from informal logical theories of practical reasoning and an Aristotelian tradition of rhetoric and argumentation. In addition, argumentation theories serve primarily as pedagogical tools to train students effective critical thinking capabilities.

The early training materials for English debate workshops in China around the 2000s were mostly handouts of lectures or brief pamphlets compiled by trainers who helped Chinese teachers and students prepare for competitive tournaments. The early trainers were often international debate coaches or college professors whose areas of specialty involved competitive debate or argumentation studies. As debate spread from tournaments to classrooms, the need for more systematic textbooks increased. Such need pushed the publication of textbooks written by American experts. For example, Gary Rybold from Irvine Valley College wrote a training pamphlet for debate workshops in Xi'an around the 2000s, which was turned into the textbook *Speaking, Listening and Understanding: Debate for Non-Native English Speakers* published by International Debate Education Association (IDEA) in 2006. In 2010, a second textbook by Rybold, *Debating in English: A Critical Thinking Approach to Effective Speaking*, was released by the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (FLTRP). Both books provided basic introduction to critical thinking in speech and debate for non-native English learners, especially novice debaters. For example, the second textbook involved topics of like developing effective public speaking skills, impromptu and extemporaneous speaking, motions, propositional case development, oppositional counter-case development, refutation and rejoinder, logical fallacies, and competing in debate tournaments (Rybold, 2010). In 2011, Steve Johnson from the University of Alaska Anchorage published *Winning Debates* in China. Johnson was invited by the organizing committee of the FLTRP Cup national English debating competition, to be the chief trainer and adjudicator of the event between 2004 and 2011. Compared with Rybold's critical thinking approach to English speech and debate, Johnson (2011) provided a review of the basics of argumentation theory with a focus on the British Parliamentary

style of debating. The themes of *Winning Debates* include a philosophy of debating, arguments and argumentation, stasis and structure, basic strategy and skills, the speakers and speeches, decision making and strategies, the paradox of debating, advanced tactics and adjudicating debate. The influence of practical reasoning and informal logical theories can be traced in both Rybold's and Johnson's approaches to debate and argumentation. For example, the influence of the Toulmin model of argument is particularly evident. Rybold (2006) quoted the model and its three major elements including "claim", "grounds", and "warrant" recommending debaters to understand the model because "it helps keep your argument linear and to the point" (p. 77). Johnson argued that "the true magic of argument" happens in the process of finding the "inference" between a claim and its support (p. 18). These interpretations of argument are essentially compatible with the Toulmin Model of argumentation as an example of practical reasoning. Toulmin's influence is also exemplified in debate textbooks written by Chinese teachers. For example, Fan (2013) discusses a similar model of argument in *Parliamentary Debate: Formats and Strategies*. Jin et al. (2016) also adopts the Toulmin model as a framework of argument in a textbook of English debate written by teachers from Beijing Foreign Studies University. As demonstrated in the existing textbooks of debate by international or local teachers in China, the Toulmin model as an exemplar of practical reasoning has served as a rule of thumb for Chinese students to lay a foundation for understanding of argumentation.

The influence of Aristotelian reasoning is also evident in the English debate curriculums in Chinese universities. Aristotle's three pillars of speech-ethos, pathos, and logos-are among the most quoted theories of persuasion for beginners of speech or debate classes. As classical Greek rhetoric has been regarded as the root of modern Western argumentation studies (Lee, 2020), Aristotle's conception of logic has been loosely introduced as key elements of reasoning in Chinese debate classes. For example, induction and deduction are commonly discussed as basic patterns of reasoning. Arguments of probability, instead of the syllogism, are analyzed for building logical analysis. The model of argumentation taught in a general debate curriculum reflects a "system of analyzing and evaluating arguments" for pragmatic reasoning (Walton, 2008, p. xiii). In specific, a typical instruction to establish good argumentation for debate usually starts with an analysis of the different types of claims, or motions, followed by tactics of case construction for the propositional side, the counter arguments for the opposition along with strategies for refutation, summation or point of information. In addition, adjudication criteria such as matter, manner, method are commonly introduced. For each unit of reasoning, the quality of evidence is highlighted and the standards to evaluate such quality include but are not limited to relevancy, credibility, sufficiency, and diversity. Besides, schemes of warranting are vital components emphasized to guarantee the quality of an argument. For example, common strategies of warranting include building inferences between the premise and conclusion through analogy, generalization, appealing to authority, analysis of consequences, cost and benefits, etc.

It is worth noting, informal logical fallacies are a key element in debate education. Some of basic fallacies introduced in textbooks such as begging the question and hasty generalization can be traced back to Aristotle. An example to exhibit this model of instruction is *Building Global Relations Through Debate*, a textbook published in 2016. The book is co-authored by a group of American professors led by Robert Trapp from

Willamette University and Chinese debate teachers from a few schools with active forensic programs such as Fudan University and Xi'an Jiaotong University.

In recent years, Chinese teachers continued to explore more localized approaches to apply Western argumentation theories in debate classrooms. Some pioneering exploration has been made to shift the debate format centered paradigm of instruction drawn from competitive events to an argumentation-based curriculum design treating debate as an area of application for critical thinking and reasoning. Although the theoretical framework of such curriculum is still largely influenced by informal logic theories and Greco-Roman rhetoric, more efforts have been made to place argumentation within the framework of Chinese cultural context with intercultural perspectives. This localized progress is best exemplified in the publication of an argumentation and debate textbook, *Critical Thinking in Argumentation*, by Fudan University in 2023. The textbook embodied the collaboration of Chinese college English teachers to bring in a systematic theoretic framework of Western rhetoric and argumentation as the foundation of speech and debate classes. For example, the book provided a stipulative definition of argumentation as “the study of reasoning for the purpose of constructing, analyzing, and evaluating the quality of arguments” (Wan & Li, 2023, p. 8) and an introduction of the classical roots and modern development of Western argumentation theories including some of the basic theories by Aristotle, Toulmin, Perelman, and the school of Pragma-dialectics. Chinese cultural elements were included in the exemplification of argumentation concepts with cross-cultural notes provided to compare classical Chinese and Western world views. Furthermore, the book treated academic debate as one genre of argumentation along with other argument practices in organizational or interpersonal contexts, extending the scope of argumentation studies in the debate community to a broader picture of practical reasoning in human communication, which essentially reflects an informal logic approach to study argument as the “products of communication” (Blair & Johnson, 1987, p. 147) in natural language practices.

In the context of Chinese higher education, debate and argumentation are widely recognized as effective tools to enhance higher order critical thinking (CT) skills among EFL learners (Yang & Rusli, 2012; Qin, 2013; Wang, 2021). Developing CT skills is one of the essential purposes of Chinese college English (Zhang & Kim, 2018). One piece of strong evidence of the function of debate in CT cultivation in China is that beginning in 2018 debate has been made, along with public speaking, as part of the national core curriculum for college English majors by the Ministry of Education. Over the years, English speech and debate has gradually developed to be a paradigm of critical thinking education among the community of college English educators. The exploration of how speech pedagogy can facilitate CT cultivation has been a constant theme of national teachers' workshops. For example, Wang (2020) argued that oral English education in China after 2018 “should break the traditional single language skill training mode and cultivate students' critical thinking ability” through the curriculum design of English parliamentary debate (p. 69). Wang (2021) explored an analytical framework of English debate in Chinese classrooms and discussed the challenges of developing CT skills through teaching debate. Zhang et al. (2023) argued that “a systematic curriculum framework of critical thinking” should be developed in Chinese universities and English language debate shall be one of the “*embedded* courses” (p. 404). In an interview study, Hu (2015) confirmed the positive role of forensic participation in improving college students' critical

reading and evaluating abilities and argued that English debate can help the respondents “to get rid of ego-centric and socio-centric thinking, which paved the way for them to become an accomplished and responsible thinker” (p. 7). Besides, Zhang et al. (2019) examined the effect of English speech education on student’s development of self-efficacy based on a data collection of 455 college students from Chinese mainland universities. As these studies demonstrate, the application of argumentation theories in speech and debate curriculums in China has served primarily a pedagogical function to develop individual skills of critical reasoning and thinking. The informal logic or Aristotelian theories are incorporated in the curriculum for teaching debate and cultivating transferable skills.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The dynamics behind the development of debate education in China poses a unique opportunity to observe the application of Western argumentation theories in Chinese higher education. While contemporary argumentation studies in China have been heavily influenced by informal logic and pragma-dialectics in general, the development of English speech and debate in the past three decades has added a unique chapter of how informal logic argumentation theories shapes the theoretic framework of debate education in China. The study of Western argumentation theories in English forensic education has important implications in contemporary Chinese argumentation studies. First, it reveals the co-existence of two parallel academic communities of argumentation in China, both of which have had rapid development in the past three decades yet neither community seems to be aware of the existence of the other. The first community conducted research adapting theories and methods of the van Eemeren school of pragma-dialectics or the Canadian school of informal logic. Chinese researchers active in these research traditions are from departments like philosophy, linguistics, or cognitive sciences, whose research interests expand through a diversity of fields from legal reasoning to cultural studies. The second circle is the emerging community of English speech and debate education consisting of the college English teachers for ELT education, whose interests are primarily on speech and debate pedagogy in cultivating Chinese learners’ critical thinking abilities. At the current level, the first circle has a great deal of scholarship produced by scholars in a few key universities who have been advancing argumentation research, while the second circle involves faculty members from English programs across the nation with a pragmatic focus on the teaching of English public speaking and debate. While the co-existence of the two circles demonstrates the diversity of argumentation studies in China, it also calls for further awareness from the two communities to converse with one another for a full picture of argumentation studies in China. In the long term, the two communities may converge and collaborate with each other in teaching or research for a thriving future of argumentation studies in the Chinese academia. In addition, the development of English debate education reveals a lack of theories or methodology to approach broader argumentation studies beyond the paradigm of critical thinking education. There is an urgent need for more scholarly conversation about English debate education in China since little research has been done to examine the unique significance of this emerging domain and how contemporary Chinese argumentation theories and practices can be developed to improve pedagogy. The bulk of existing literature related to English debate in Chinese classrooms



focuses on practical concerns research related to CT cultivation. Little scholarship has been made on other functions of argument, such as the epistemological means of “creating knowledge” or axiological purpose of building a just society (Rowland, 1995, p. 351). This lack of foundational work can be bridged through integrating theories and pedagogy of rhetoric, argumentation, or communication education into debate teaching and research, an effort which could be subsumed as a new domain under the broad umbrella of English studies in China. The current community of college English speech and debate provide a preliminary basis for such a new domain of Chinese academia.

Besides, although English debate in China is informed by Western theories of argumentation, there remains the critical puzzle to explain the reason for the unprecedented popularity of English debating in Chinese education mandated by Chinese authorities, as the Chinese culture is believed to be defined by values of harmony-seeking and conflict-avoiding that discourage public discussion of controversy, an antithesis of “the culture of critique” in societies like America (Tannen, 2012, p. xi). It is also thought-provoking that although China has a rich legacy of classical rhetorical and argumentation theories as exemplified in the major schools of thoughts like Confucianism, Mohism, Legalism, Daoism, and the School of Ming, they seem to have had a limited influence upon the modern English forensic education. Nonetheless, while English debate in China takes a Western form and has been influenced by Western theories, Chinese college English teachers in local communities has been exploring a localized path to develop the study of debate and argumentation in Chinese classrooms. There remains a need for further investigation to examine how the forms and function of argumentation have been adopted in the cultural context of contemporary Chinese society. Although such theory development is beyond the discussion of this paper, the review of English debate education in China and the application of Western argumentation theories in this emerging domain point to the possibility of developing a localized contemporary Chinese argumentation theory in further studies.

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