

Evaluation in the Post-Truth World

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Chapter 6

In search of effective communication with decision-makers for the post-truth era

Discourse strategies from pre-imperial China

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Introduction

Evaluation, as a part of policy sciences, has been focusing on helping decision-makers undertake better-informed policy decisions (Chelimsky, 2006; Wildawsky, 1979). In practice, the transmission of knowledge between evaluators and decision-makers is rather limited. As literature indicates, there is a communication gap between the communities of researchers and decision-makers, and that gap hampers the flow of knowledge (Caplan, 1979). As C. Weiss (1980) pointed out, knowledge does not flow, it at best creeps into decision accretion. Thus, evaluation use remains a major challenge (Palenberg & Paulson, 2020). We understand evaluation use (also called utilization) as a process in which decision-makers use the findings of evaluations for strategic or operational decisions related to design and implementation of public policies.

The recent emergence of discourse strategies and persuasion tools of the post-truth era makes evaluation's mission even more challenging. In this chapter, we follow definition provided in an Introduction to this book. Post-truth is defined as denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping decision-making than appeals to emotions and personal beliefs (McIntyre, 2018). In this context decision-makers are even less capable of rational decisions, and more prone to bounded rationality and biases or even irrational perception of reality (Kavanagh & Rich, 2018).

Although the post-truth phenomenon, especially in its technological aspect, is new, the underlying mechanisms that drive it are, as discussed in the earlier chapters of this book, rooted in universal human nature and behavior patterns. In other words, this distortion of policy decision-making is a well-known phenomenon, and it is only its spread and scale which are different. Modern modes of social communication can be viewed only as radical ways of exploiting universal decision-making biases that have shaped human interaction regardless of time and place, and are deeply rooted in human mechanisms of bounded rationality (Bendor, 2015; McIntyre, 2018; Nichols, 2017). Thus, in search for new, effective decision-making strategies for the post-truth era, it is worth gaining a wider perspective, examining the heritage of global political thought and practice of the past, especially that which is rooted outside the Western civilization.

In this chapter, we recognize the challenge of persuading decision-makers to listen attentively to what we—the evaluators have to say. We identify the need to search for effective ways of delivering our message so that it is genuinely considered in the decision-making process.

In search of inspiration about effective communication with decision-makers, we look outside the box of the evaluation practice and, more broadly, beyond the well-trodden paths of our own cultural and temporal context to explore the rich heritage of Asian cultures. Accordingly, we put forward the following question: **What specific persuasion strategies from Chinese pre-imperial political discourse could serve as a source of inspiration for our communication with decision-makers in the post-truth era?**

Our work is novel in two ways. Firstly, it reaches out beyond our Western cultural context. The evaluation practice, and more broadly public policy sciences, are grounded in American pragmatism (Lasswell, 1951), dominated by linear causality thinking. Research indicates that thinking and problem-solving patterns of other cultural traditions can differ from Westerners (Nisbett, 2004; Jullien, 2004). Thus, we want to explore a different human tradition of thinking about relations and causality, namely the Chinese tradition.

Secondly, we reach beyond our discipline. Evaluation is based in social sciences, but in this chapter we scout for ideas in the area of the humanities, and with the use of their analytical methods. It is a truism to say that literature is a vessel of human collective experience and wisdom. But recent publications add to confirming the power of narratives in grasping human attention (Fludernik, 2009; Phelan, 2020), and shaping understanding of socio-economic behaviors (Shiller, 2020). This indicates the worth of exploring communication strategies coded in the literature.

This chapter consists of three sections. In the first section we provide the rationale for choosing the specific historical period of the Chinese tradition (the Warring States Period, 453–221 BCE), and body of literature sources (*Zhanguoce*, *Zhuangzi*, and the *Lüshi Chunqiu*). We also briefly explain the approaches to text analysis in the humanistic paradigm. The core of the chapter is devoted to an in-depth analysis of the original Chinese sources. We discuss three main communication strategies that emerged from the analyzed texts. We illustrate them with narrative examples from original sources. In the closing part of the chapter we link those findings to the current literature on biases and failures in decision-making, and we consider possible applications for our evaluation craft in the post-truth era.

We hope that the chapter can be a valuable contribution to the research on evaluation, and more broadly, research on public policy decision-making, providing some inspiration in tackling the challenges of the post-truth era. We believe that this path has a potential for finding practical solutions and for advancing the theory and craft of evaluation, as well as building interdisciplinary research between evaluation and the humanities.

Scope and method of the analysis

In search of inspiration from China, we turn to primary literature sources from the Warring States Period (453–221 BCE), which immediately precedes the founding of the first imperial rule (Qin Dynasty, 221–206 BCE). This is a time of great social shifts and political upheaval (Yang Kuan, 2016). Deepening economic, political, and military rivalry between different Chinese states led to the rise of errand advisors, diplomats, strategists, and thinkers representing the new professional elites (the *shi* class) (Li Fulan & Li Yan, 1998). Rapid progress in political, strategic, and social thought of the period is reflected in its rich literary heritage, including some of the best known gems of Chinese culture, such as the *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi*, or *Sunzi's Art of War* (*Sunzi Bingfa*).

The Warring States Period, and more specifically, its second half (end of the 4th and the 3rd century BCE) is not only formative for Chinese culture as we know it today, but has numerous parallels with the modern VUCA world (short for volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014). The changing geopolitical situation, technical progress, the threat of military conflict, and social unrest were some of the factors that shaped Chinese thought in the period, and which at the same time correspond closely to the challenges faced by expert communities today. Moreover, some 2,300 years ago in China, much like globally today, experts needed to compete for the attention of the decision-makers who were themselves under immense pressure. Advisors were often faced with the seemingly impossible task of trying to persuade rulers to listen to advice on complex, long-term diplomatic solutions, rather than heeding short-term, military gains. Just like today, informed and evidence-based advice had to compete with short-sighted, intuitive decision-making of the rulers (Yu Kai, 2015).

Due to the highly challenging political environment, the Warring States Period developed a unique, rich tradition of persuasive discourse. It naturally reflects the feudal, patriarchal society of the period, and the norms and values represented in this discourse, including social stratification and social roles of the sexes, are very different from the acceptable standard of modern society. Bearing in mind the above contextual limitations, we believe that these written works, just like classic European works of that time on politics and statehood, can still provide a source of inspiration for expert communities of today. Of special interest are historical anecdotes which recount dialogues of various persuaders with the rulers of Chinese states and other persons of authority. Despite the fact that the historical accuracy of these accounts is doubtful (Crump, 1964), the persuasive strategies they record can be subject to scholarly analysis. These narratives function in a specific cultural and historical context, which needs to be taken into account in any analysis. In order to ensure this, the methodological approach chosen in this study combines traditional Chinese hermeneutics with rhetorical narratology, and more specifically, the rhetorical analysis of

the narrative. Modern research in rhetoric narratology recognizes the persuasive value and effectiveness of the narrative (Phelan, 2020; Fludernik, 2009; Rowland, 2009). It also acknowledges the widespread use of persuasive narratives in ancient literature of various cultural traditions (Dinkler, 2016).

The corpus of extant texts of the Warring States Period includes hundreds of historical anecdotes. Only a certain proportion of them is in the form of narratives with direct dialogues. These are dated mostly between 4th and 3rd century BCE, some occur in later compilations. The four main sources of such Warring States Period narratives are: *Zhanguo*, *Zhuangzi*, *Han Feizi*, and the *Lüshi Chunqiu* (Chen Puqing, 1992). Three of these texts form the basis of the present analysis. For reason of space and due to high level of proximity between the narratives in the last two texts, the *Han Feizi* is excluded from this analysis in favor of a lesser known, but equally fascinating work, the *Lüshi Chunqiu*.

Zhanguo (ZGC) is a compilation of over 400 historical anecdotes which refer to times between 466 and 221 BCE (Wen Honglong, 2010). Most of their protagonists are political advisors, diplomats and strategists, especially the likes of Zhang Yi (?–310 BCE) and Su Qin (?–284 BCE). Anecdotes are organized in 33 chapters devoted to 12 warring states.

Zhuangzi (ZZ) is a famous oeuvre of Daoist philosophy and literature, attributed to the legendary thinker Zhuang Zhou (c. 369–286 BCE). It is also a compilation of various texts, similarly arranged in 33 chapters, which are further subdivided into sections. 70 percent of the total number of 249 sections of the book are in the form of philosophical anecdotes, parables, and fables. Many are devoted to the area of politics, most are strongly persuasive.

Lüshi Chunqiu (LSCQ) is the youngest of the three. It was compiled ca. 241–238 BCE (Zhu Yongjia & Su Mu, 1995; Knoblock & Riegel, 2000) by a group of philosophers, strategists, and experts in various fields, under the auspices of an influential merchant and politician active in the state of Qin—Lü Buwei (d. 235 BCE). This well-preserved but less researched work of political thought of pre-imperial China unites various philosophical schools of the period (Confucianism, Daoism, Legalism) to produce an almanac of practical, political recommendations for rulers of the future Empire (Wang Qicai, 2007; Knoblock & Riegel, 2000). It is divided into three parts and 26 chapters, and includes 298 narratives, used in various persuasive contexts.

In the present analysis, ZGC, ZZ, and LSCQ were chosen as text corpus, which was coded using four formal criteria of critical narrative analysis (Rowland, 2009):

- i) **characters:** advisor/sage/expert/strategist/philosopher as the protagonist, and ruler of a state/aristocrat/another person representing power and authority as the antagonist;
- ii) **setting:** court of the ruler or another setting where power dynamics are favorable for the person representing authority. Direct dialogue between the protagonist and the antagonist;

- iii) **plot:** introductory, situational opening, direct dialogue between the protagonist and the antagonist, persuasive speech by the protagonist, reaction of the antagonist and/or result of the persuasion;
- iv) **theme:** effective persuasion of the ruler/person of authority in a situation/setting unfavorable for the protagonist. Showing the power/effectiveness of persuasive strategies.

Seven anecdotes from the text corpus were identified as best fulfilling the criteria of the formal analysis specified above. In the next step, the seven anecdotes were subject to functional analysis using both close text reading in the Chinese hermeneutical tradition (original text and commentaries), as well as thematic analysis from the toolbox of rhetoric narratology (Phelan, 2020). As a result, three distinct discourse strategies of persuasion were identified.

The coding in the formal analysis stage was conducted on source texts in classical Chinese (the original language of the corpus). The functional analysis was conducted on the seven selected anecdotes both in the original, as well as in translations into Modern Standard Chinese and into English. For convenience of the reader, only the English translations are quoted and commented on in the present analysis.

Discourse strategies from pre-imperial China

The focus of the functional analysis of the seven selected narratives was on strategies of persuasion employed by the protagonist in his (they all happened to be male) direct dialogue with the antagonist. As the formal conditions of each narrative were all similar, the analysis rendered results in the form of three, quite distinct discourse strategies. These strategies are briefly labeled below, followed by descriptions of their original context in the narratives where they were found. Most come from ZGC, as this text conforms best to the object of the present study.

Discourse strategy 1: overcoming negative bias of the ruler through initial accord

In this strategy, the protagonist faces the ruler who despises moral teachings, and is not interested in what the protagonist has to say. He attempts to secure the ruler's attention against this strong, initial negative bias. This is achieved in a roundabout way, utilizing the protagonist's knowledge of the ruler's preferences and interests. The protagonist moves gradually and cautiously from what the ruler thinks he will hear to what the protagonist actually wants to say.

Anecdote 1.1: *Zhuangzi*, Chapter 30 (Huang et al., 2008:432–434; Mair, 1998:312–316)

In this unusually lengthy anecdote, the philosopher Zhuang Zhou (Zhuangzi) is summoned by the heir apparent of the Zhao state to try and convince the ruler, king Wen (King Huiwen, reigned 298–266 BCE), to abandon his love of swordsmanship, crude physical power and violence. The king surrounds himself solely with swordsmen for whom he organizes endless, bloody duels, and does not want to see anyone else. Zhuangzi secures his audience only by disguising as a warrior, and claiming that he comes with a very special weapon: “My sword cuts down one man every ten paces, and for a thousand tricents it doesn’t pause in its march forward” (Mair, 1998:314). This secures the king’s attention and creates space for Zhuangzi to use his power of persuasion. What follows is a story of three types of swords. When Zhuangzi finishes, the king realizes that the three swords are metaphors of different styles of leadership. The “sword of the son of heaven” means ruling using mastery of the elements, and mystic knowledge of the universe. The “sword of the feudal lord” means ruling using a well-selected group of noble, uncorrupt, and able officials. The “sword of the common man” is in fact a ruthless critique of what the king likes most: brutal, physical power that takes one nowhere. Zhuangzi concludes: “Now, your majesty occupies the position of the son of heaven, yet has the preference for the sword of the common man. I venture to deplore it on your behalf.” The anecdote ends with a powerful statement on the effectiveness of the persuasion: “King Wen did not leave his palace for three months, and the swordsmen all committed suicide in their rooms” (Mair, 1998:316).

Zhuangzi sees the king at a huge personal risk and with not much chance of success. The king would not listen to any advice, and is completely engulfed in his obsession with swordsmanship. Zhuangzi initially seems to be offering him a new stimulus in his addiction, communicating as one of his kind. Using metaphors from the realm of martial arts that the king understands well, Zhuangzi manages to show him a world beyond the narrow horizons of his obsession.

Anecdote 1.2: *Lüshi Chunqiu* (LSCQ) Views Chapter 3, “Smooth Persuasion” (Zhu & Su, 1995:557–558; Tang, 2010:170–172)

In a very similar setting and facing a similar antagonist, one Hui Ang from the family clan of the famous philosopher Huizi (incidentally, Zhuangzi’s friend), comes to the court of the notorious King Kang of the state of Song. The king

appears in several other anecdotes of the Warring States Period as the epitome of a violent despot. He punishes by death left and right, loves war and makes rash, uninformed decisions.

In the story, Hui Ang comes to court with a task of teaching the king about two fundamental Confucian virtues: benevolence and righteousness. And this is how the conversation starts:

... the king stamped his feet and coughed when he said in a hurried voice, "What I like are men who are brave and powerful. What I do not like are men who profess benevolence and righteousness. What advise the guest can give me?"

Hui Ang answered, "I have an art that can ward off a brave man's stab and a powerful man's strike. Is Your Majesty not interested in it?" The king said, "Good. That's what I want to hear."

(Tang, 2010:170–171)

As in the previous story, the king soon learns that his visitor will not teach him how to ward off stabs and strikes at all. Hui Ang progresses from talking about defending against attack, to the main point of his persuasion: the best art of defense is simply becoming a person that others admire and have no intention of attacking. And of course, such mastery in the art of fighting without fighting can be achieved through no other than practicing benevolence and righteousness that King Kang despises so much. Benevolence and righteousness were two key concepts for the schools of Confucius (551–479 BCE) and Mo Di (Mozi, active ca. 430 BCE), and these are the two philosophers that Hui Ang brings forward:

Confucius and Mo Di had no territories but were as honorable as rulers. They had no official positions but were respected as high officials. Men and women in the world all stretched their necks and stood on tiptoe to look at them and wished they were secure and successful.

(Tang, 2010:171)

Again, as in the case of Zhuangzi, the king is overpowered by the persuasion:

The king of the state of Song had nothing to say for an answer. When Hui Ang had departed, he said to those who were present, "An eloquent speaker! The guest has convinced me."

(Tang, 2010:171)

Anecdote 1.3: *Zhanguoce* (ZGC), The Book of Zhao, no. 250 (Wen, 2010:499; Crump, 1996:303–304)

The third anecdote has the clever persuader and diplomat Su Qin as the protagonist. He demands audience with Li Dui who is an official at the court of King Wuling (reigned 325–299 BCE) of the state of Zhao. Su Qin hopes for an opportunity to show the depth of his knowledge “on affairs of the empire.” If Li Dui is impressed by his advice, he should get a financial reward which would enable him to continue his journey to the state of Qin. However, Li Dui does not seem to be interested in hearing what Su Qin has to say. He agrees to meet him only under the condition that he speaks “the words of spirits, for I know all there is to know of the affairs of man” (Crump, 1996:303). This patronizing attitude does not discourage Su Qin, and after he promises that he will “use the words of spirits,” the audience is granted.

His rhetoric strategy is similar to the previous two anecdotes: Su Qin starts exactly with what the antagonist wants to hear. This time, it is quite a strange fable about two sculptures used for religious purposes, one made of earth, and another made of wood. The earthen idol mocks the wooden one that it will be blown off easily by the wind or washed away by the rains, and end up in the sea. “In all the vast waters there would be no place for you to stay” (Crump, 1996:304). Su Qin moves quickly to explain the meaning of the fable: Li Dui is like a wooden idol, just about to be blown away from his position of power and influence by his enemies. Su has an idea how to save him, if only Li Dui cares to listen to his advice.

What happens later might seem surprising: Li Dui is not prepared to change his plans, and at the same time he knows that Su Qin is a powerful persuader. He therefore sits at the second audience with Su Qin with stops in his ears, so that he does not hear anything the persuader has to say. Just like Li Dui, we do not learn the content of Su Qin’s speech. But Su Qin is still satisfied though, as he gets his money and can continue on his journey to the state of Qin.

The anecdote might not be the best example of a successful persuasion, but shows an effective way of overcoming initial reluctance of the antagonist to listen to what the protagonist has to say, consistent with the previous two examples.

Discourse strategy 2: securing the ruler’s attention through unexpected behavior of the persuader

In this strategy, the protagonist presupposes that the ruler might not give him full attention. The protagonist is also aware of the fact that he will have very limited time to discuss complex issues with the ruler. Therefore, the persuader uses the device of surprise to intrigue the ruler before starting the delivery of the main line of argument.

Anecdote 2.1: *Zhanguo* (ZGC), The Book of Yan, no. 445 (Wen, 2010:894–895; Crump, 1996:467–468)

The errand diplomat Su Qin is again the protagonist in the story on how to persuade the king of a state to do what at first seems utterly irrational. The historical setting of the story is quite dubious, and the dates and reigns of kings do not match. In the story, set in 332 BCE, Qi, one of the biggest and most powerful of the warring states occupying today's Shandong Province, attacked the weaker, Northern neighbor Yan (the area of today's Beijing and further North) and took over ten of Yan's towns. Su Qin, whose mission is to persuade the victorious King of Qi on Yan's behalf, begins his audience with the king from congratulations and condolences communicated almost instantly. He doesn't need to wait long for a reaction: "The king of Qi seized his dagger-ax and made Su Qin retreat: 'What mean these congratulations and condolences all in the same breath?' he cried" (Crump, 1996:467). Su Qin then proceeds to explain what he meant using a metaphor of a poisonous plant aconite: "When men are starving [...] the reason they will not eat deadly aconite is because it might fill their bellies but would be the death of them none the less. At this moment Yan is weak, but it is related by marriage to mighty Qin [a state even more powerful than Qi] [...] Qin is there to take advantage of the aftermath and to bring down upon you the most mettlesome troops in the empire. This is exactly like filling the belly with aconite" (ibid.). Su Qin then suggests to the king to return the newly accrued territory to Yan and to apologize solemnly to the state of Qin for attacking Yan. The king, to the reader's surprise, listens to the persuasion. He "returned the ten Yan towns, and offered a thousand ounces of gold in apology. He made a deep and humble obeisance on the bare earth and pleaded to become a fraternal state with Yan" (Crump, 1996:468). Su Qin accomplishes his task using a shocking effect and a persuasive metaphor of eating poisonous food when hungry. The opening of the anecdote is the key; Su Qin takes a big risk (remember the dagger-ax) and decides to shake the King of Qi out of his comfort zone in the very first sentence. After all, what would be more unnerving and irritating than listening to condolences after a military victory? The bet gives Su Qin a good return: the king is now focused on the conversation and is thus well-prepared to succumb to the persuasive power of the metaphor.

Anecdote 2.2: *Zhanguo* (ZGC), The Book of Zhao, no. 287 (Wen, 2010:632–633; Crump, 1996:344)

A similar tactic is used by one Feng Ji in his audience with King Xiaocheng of the state of Zhao (reigned 265–245 BCE). Feng Ji appears several times in ZGC, but we know almost nothing about him apart from these narratives. In the story, he manages to secure a personal appointment with the king, but when the audience starts, refuses to say anything. He stands in silence “with hands clasped and head bowed, wanting to speak but not daring to” (Crump, 1996:344). This prompts the king to inquire the reason for such a theatrical performance, upon which Feng Ji begins his rather lengthy speech. It includes one embedded, historical anecdote and two historical *exemplae*. All with one purpose in mind: to show that enlightened rulers of old were prepared to listen to advisors even though they did not know them well and had not established any meaningful relationship with them. Feng Ji is evidently a newcomer at the court of the Zhao king. The king might not, therefore, be quick to talk with him about important matters during the very first audience. But Feng Ji seems in a hurry to be heard. After his imaginative speech and the king’s favorable response, the protagonist finally asks: “Heretofore I have had very little intercourse with your majesty, but I do wish to speak of deep matters. Is it permitted?” ‘I request your instructions’ replied the king, and Feng Ji then spoke” (ibid.).

We do not learn what Feng Ji had to say, as the story ends here. It seems that for the compilers of ZGC, Feng Ji’s words of wisdom for the king of Zhao did not seem as important as his persuasive strategies to secure the king’s attention.

Both anecdotes show that for persuaders of the Warring States Period the first moment of the interaction with the ruler was of key importance. They needed to make an impact in order to be heard, and one of the devices they used was taking their listeners by surprise: through a potentially insulting statement or through a puzzling silence. It is also interesting to note that in both anecdotes, after the shock opening, the protagonists continue their speeches basing heavily on metaphors, historical *exemplae* and embedded narratives—all these are indirect tools of persuasion. These seem to be deemed much more effective than direct arguments. They come only later, after the indirect tools take their effect on the interlocutor.

Discourse strategy 3: Persuading the ruler through pragmatic reasoning against action which has already been decided and which is emotionally charged

In this strategy, the persuader faces the challenge of stopping the execution of a decision which has already been made and which is based on an emotional rationale. The persuader concentrates on building a pragmatic argument for changing the decision, counterweighing the emotional factors influencing the ruler.

Anecdote 3.1: *Lushi Chunqiu* (LSCQ) Comments Chapter 1, “The Beginning of Spring” (Zhu & Su, 1995:897–898; Tang, 2010:284–285), same story also in *Zhanguo Ce* (ZGC), The Book of Wei, no. 308 (Crump, 1996:362–363)

In this quite long narrative, the son of the deceased King Hui from the state of Wei (reigned 370–318 BCE) wants to bury his father according to previously decided schedule despite very unfavorable weather conditions: high snow and biting cold. He refuses to change the schedule despite many pleas of his court officials. The heir feels that as a filial son, his obligation toward his dead father takes precedence over the comfort and safety of his subjects or the costs of the ceremony organized in such demanding weather conditions. Court officials turn to the sage Huizi (the protagonist of Anecdote 1.2) in their last hope to persuade the heir.

Huizi begins his persuasion with a story of how King Wen of Zhou (11th c. BCE) reacted when waters exposed the coffin of his father, buried on a hillside. King Wen, who was a model of loyalty and duty, was not in a hurry to rebury the coffin. Instead, he interpreted the event as allowing the dead king a chance to see his subjects again: “King Wen had the coffin dug up, put it behind a curtain and held court in front of it so that people could all come and see the former king. He had the coffin reburied three days later.” Huizi draws a parallel between the natural exposure of the coffin of the father of King Wen, and the weather conditions forcing the postponement of the burial of King Hui of Wei. Both are unexpected and beyond human control. Both might be interpreted as resulting from actions of the spirits of the deceased rulers. The difference is in the way the living react. King Wen heeds the “call” of his dead father and holds ceremonial audiences for him. The heir of Wei wants to go on with the schedule of the funeral regardless the circumstances, and so might be turning a blind eye on his dead father’s wish. Huizi then activates his main moral argument: “The deceased king must wish to stay a while longer to comfort the state and the people. That is why he has made the snow fall so heavily. If the funeral is postponed and the date is changed on this account, Your Highness will be performing the duty of King Wen. If Your Highness does not do so, it will mean that Your Highness does not want to follow the example of King Wen.”

The heir of Wei now has a very different choice to make: stick to the original plan and risk being criticized as not filial to his father and not following the revered examples of sage kings of the past, or listen to Huizi, make the court officials happy, and go in the footsteps of the noble King Wen of Zhou. This makes him change his mind, and the funeral is postponed.

Anecdote 3.2: *Zhanguo* (ZGC), The Book of Qin, no. 98 (Wen, 2010:126; Crump, 1996:129)

The last anecdote is not only a great example of persuasion but also shows the pragmatic side of ancient Chinese ruling elites. This time, the antagonist is Queen Xuan of the state of Qin, mother of King Zhao (reigned 306–251). After she became a widow, she had a lover from the Wei state, called Chou. She was so fond of him that when she was on her deathbed, she ordered him to be killed and buried with her so that, in compliance with contemporary beliefs, he could accompany her in the afterlife. Understandably, Mr. Chou (or Wei Chou, as he is called in the text) was not too glad when he heard of the plan. His acquaintance Yong Rui made an attempt to speak to the dying queen on his behalf. Let's quote the entire dialogue:

"Does your highness believe that there is sentience after death?" he asked.

"No, I do not," replied the queen.

"Ah! Your highness's godlike intelligence clearly perceives that the dead feel nothing. Why then would you have one whom you loved alive buried with the dead who feel nothing? If the dead are sentient, your highness, then your husband, the deceased king, will have been harboring his anger against you for a long time now and you will scarce have time to make amends to him – and certainly no time left for further dalliance with Wei Chou."

"True," said the queen and desisted.

(Crump, 1996:129)

Yong Rui shows to the queen that her order to bury her lover with her makes no logical sense. She seems not only intelligent, but also honest enough to admit this, accept the argument, and change her decision. Yong Rui's persuasion is successful, and Mr. Chou is saved.

These two anecdotes touch upon ancient Chinese beliefs in the afterlife, and both topics concern decisions which are directly connected with these beliefs. Persuaders do not appeal to these beliefs, nor to emotions, but to reasoning. Through clever construction of the argument, they show to their interlocutors that the only rational choice is to change their initial decisions.

Lessons for evaluation practice

In this section, we try to link the strategies from pre-imperial China with current developments in public policy and speculate about practical adaptations to evaluation craft. We want to clearly stress that we look for smart ways of

closing the gap between decision-makers and evidence providers (in our case evaluators and policy advisors). This does not mean manipulating decision-makers, nor compromising the quality of evidence in order to fit listeners' ears. We look for effective discourse strategies that would allow us to keep the integrity of the message and at the same time reshape decision makers' mental models (causal thinking and understanding) in a constructive and effective way.

We have identified five lessons—the first two emerge from observations common to all analyzed Chinese narratives, while the remaining three lessons are linked to specific pre-imperial strategies. For each lesson we provide core conclusion coming from our analysis of Chinese sources, we link it with contemporary public policy research, and we discuss key implications and takeaways for evaluation practice.

Lesson 1: Understanding addressee's mental models

All strategies show deep understanding of the addressee of the message—the ruler or other person in the position of power. Advisors in those stories recognized the antagonist's way of thinking and his/her *modus operandi*. And then they align the communication strategy with it.

This observation corresponds with modern practices in service design. The inspiration from this field has major place in recent public policy (Peters, 2018). One of the key element of this practice is thinking in terms of users and their specific profiles (Kumar, 2012; Liedtka & Ogilvie, 2011; Martin & Hanington, 2012). It means understanding what drives specific group of users and under what circumstances they operate. From a method perspective it means developing, based in interview, observation and survey insights, profiles or, so-called, personas of users.

For the practice of evaluation we can think about our audience as specific group of knowledge users. Each type has different knowledge needs, communication preferences, and—what is most important—operates with a different mental model. Evaluators have to put an effort into understanding mental models driving the behaviors and decisions of specific knowledge users, and plugged-into specific *personas*.

This user-oriented approach is already emerging in evaluation practice—see: Learning Agendas and Knowledge Brokering practices emerging in the context of US federal agencies (Newcomer et al., 2021). They recognize different types of knowledge user, they acknowledge that users are engaged in different decision moments, and express different information needs as well as preferences for the form of communication. This does not mean distortion or compromising the integrity of evidence. It only means that the discussion should start with mental model/thinking pattern of the audience and gradually lead the audience to the evidence.

Lesson 2: Applying rhetoric strategies

All narratives use logical parallels, metaphors, historical *exemplae*, surprise, and curiosity as methods to grab the interlocutor's attention—often relating to obvious examples from everyday reality that is familiar and logical for the decision-maker. These are all rhetoric strategies that are well-known and thoroughly characterized in Western classical rhetoric (Jasinski, 2001; Plett, 2010) but seem to be often neglected in modern discourse.

The power of narrative and framing the issue is well recognized in the current public policy literature and, more broadly, in communication literature (Mulholland, 2005). Stories and metaphors are also effectively used to change behaviors and thinking patterns in Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) (Esmail, 2020).

So far in evaluation literature, the accent has been on building narratives with quantitative data (Evergreen, 2019). We think that there is a space for narratives of a more qualitative nature. We can put more attention on developing stories with data and Theories of Change that we reconstruct from the programs. Showing key decision-makers, program operators, and stakeholders the narrative (often incoherent) of hidden assumptions underlying the program can be most valuable. In fact, the idea that program “theories represent the stories that people tell about how problems arise and how they can be solved” has been put forward by classic evaluation literature (Weiss, 1995). The recent advancement focuses the stories more on actors and their behaviors, which can be even more straightforward in communication with decision-makers (Koleros et al., 2018; Olejniczak et al., 2020).

Lesson 3: Triggering cognitive dissonance

This lesson emerges from the first strategy identified in our analysis. Its mechanism is based on triggering cognitive dissonance. We first elevate the user's position, recognize his/her high profile, and then show the gap between (a) his/her aspirations/standard for the ruler/position and (b) his/her actual behavior. This discrepancy is usually a trigger for change in behavior or correction of beliefs.

This behavioral mechanism is on the shortlist of strategies applied in contemporary public policy interventions to convince the addressees to behavioral change and compliance. It has been specially promoted with the rise of nudges (Shafir, 2013; Gofen et al., 2021). However, the issue of cognitive dissonance can create a challenge for evaluators. People seek to avoid or reduce “cognitive dissonance” often by dismissing the evidence that is inconsistent with their worldview, beliefs, current understanding of the situation, or in general, their mental model (how things work and what to do to change things) (Sunstein, 2013). Thus, when using this strategy, evaluators have to recognize how determined their addressees are in holding certain propositions and how strong evidence or counterpoints must be used to shake the specific mental model.

Lesson 4: Enlightening about long-term implications

This lesson emerges from the second strategy identified in our analysis of Chinese texts. It is based on a surprise strategy for colliding short and long-term perspectives. The first story discussed in our exemplars switches perspective and contrasts short-term vs. long-term implications of decisions. That enlightens the addressee and allows him to see a more strategic perspective of his decisions.

In current public policy, literature myopia is identified as one of the shortcomings of performance measurement systems. The decision-makers' insufficient ideas about the system's behavior in time, with its delayed side-effects is often the reason for policy failures (Dörner, 1990). Recent evaluation literature started to explore approaches and methods for advocating a long-term perspective for policy evaluation and going beyond the typical short-term perspective that programs and evaluators usually operate with (Fross et al., 2021).

In our view, bringing “the future” to the current attention of decision-makers could require more advanced methods than just face-to-face communication. Thus, the folk wisdom that “experiencing is believing” directs our attention to experiential learning methods such as serious games and simulations. Games can be used as “time machines” that bring future implications into the current policy landscape of considerations. Decision-makers that engage in a simulation can experience first-hand longer-term consequences of their decisions, explore different scenarios of trickle-down effects, side-effects, and feedback loops, and assess the sustainability of their policy solutions (Olejniczak et al., 2020).

Lesson 5: Making argument visible

The final lesson emerges from the third strategy discussed in our analysis. It is based on reconstructing the argument and then finding and showing rebuttal based on inconsistency in the addressee's thinking.

The argument-building strategy is also grounded in the Western tradition. The recent reference in public discourse is Toulmin's model of argument building (Toulmin, 2003). The relevance of this is well acknowledged in public policy analysis literature (Dunn, 2017). It is also linked to economic reasoning on social issues that frame social problems in terms of trade-offs (Winter, 2013); only in this case do we develop two lines of arguments—for two competing decisions.

For evaluation practice, we can focus more on visualizing the main structure of the argument, putting side by side the logical connection and assumptions made by decision-makers, and confronting this with them. Thus, we propose to reconstruct policy argument and even provide a visual illustration of its structure for the decision-makers (see Figure 6.1). The visuals allow better to follow the narrative and show differences and gaps in the argumentation and body of evidence on which certain decision is built.

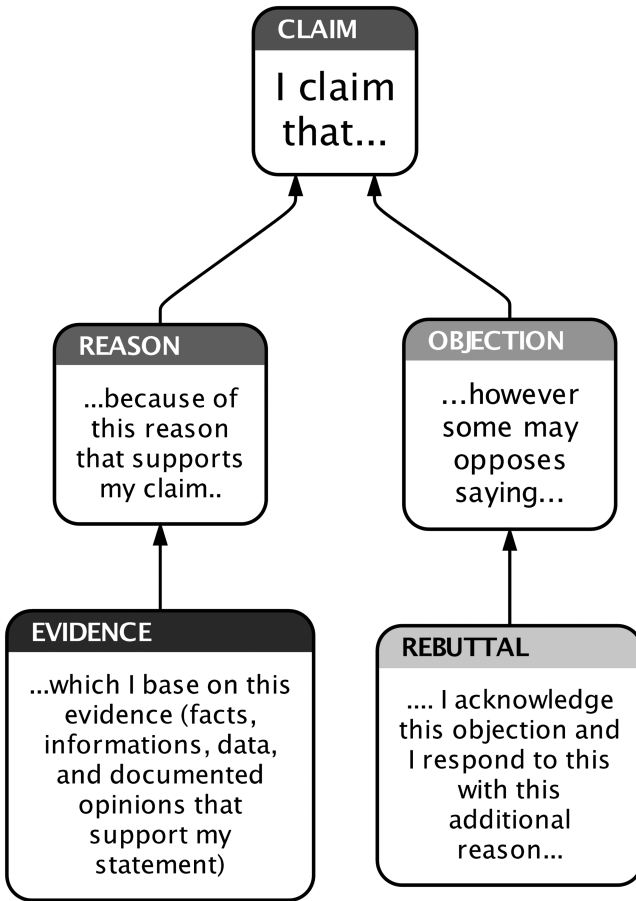


Figure 6.1 Structure of an argument

The exploration of the rich heritage of Chinese pre-imperial political discourse has provided us with specific strategies of persuasion that could be further explored for evaluation work with decision-makers in the post-truth era. With this conclusion, two reservations have to be made. First, our chapter focuses on suggestions for evaluators to better prepare for interaction with decision-makers and how to use various rhetorical strategies in actual communication purposefully. However, these persuasion strategies are just one of the elements in a complicated and dynamic relationship between evidence and decisions in the post-truth era.

Second, as all evaluators know, context matters. Naturally, the sources used in this chapter reflect the feudal, patriarchal society of the period, which is very different from modern society. However, we claim that while context changes, some core mechanisms often remain universal. After all, the works of both Shakespeare and Machiavelli still resonate with us.

The usefulness of employing elements of classical Chinese strategic thought in modern contexts is indicated by practice in politics and commerce. The successes of the People's Republic of China in engaging numerous other countries through a combination of commercial lures and forces dependencies rest heavily on ancient Chinese diplomatic tradition, as shown in the *Zhanguoce*. Servant leadership styles embracing Confucian values and Legalist approaches, as summarized in the *Lüshi Chunqiu*, have been widely employed by politicians all across East and South East Asia, going well beyond Chinese civilization's historical and cultural boundaries. The immense popularity of *Sunzi's Art of War* in Western business self-help literature shows, in turn, that military strategy from the Chinese Warring States Period can be successfully transferred to executive and business education of today. The tradition of the political discourse of the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE in China is very much alive, and despite all its restrictions and anchoring in the patriarchal value-system of old, it continues to be used in a variety of modern contexts not only in Asia.

Therefore, despite these reservations, we hope that the strategies discussed in this chapter can be a valuable inspiration to the ongoing efforts of evaluation practitioners in delivering messages that makes public policies smarter.

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