

4 THE BA GU WEN (八股文)

This chapter provides a brief history of the Chinese civil service exam and then describes and critically discusses the most (in)famous essay structure associated with the exam, the *baguwen*. It concludes with an example and analysis of a contemporary *baguwen*. Despite its re-emergence in a modern form, we argue that this is unlikely to herald the re-emergence of *baguwen* as a popular Chinese text structure. While this chapter focuses on the civil service exam and the *baguwen* itself, the next chapter, Chapter 5, provides a historical account of the famous *shuyuan* or academies where students would be taught to compose *baguwen*, among other academic skills. Chapters 4 and 5 are therefore complementary.

The *baguwen* is defined in the DCR as being a regulated exam style of the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing dynasties (1644-1911). While this is true, it hides what the *baguwen* came to represent in post-imperial China. The views of the following three scholars, expressed over a time period of some sixty years, can be taken as generally representative:

Because the function of the *baguwen* was to attain emolument and had ossified forms and rules, they therefore always comprised fawning and empty flattery. (Zhu Zicui 395)

There is no question that the 8-legged essay holds no place whatsoever in China's intellectual history except as a glaring example of demerit. (Chen Shou-yi 509)

The term *baguwen* has long been a byword for petrification in the world of letters: it stands nowadays for empty formalism, saying nothing at great length and with tiresome posturing. (Pollard 167)

There is some evidence, however, that attitudes towards this rhetorical form may be changing. After briefly reviewing the history and form of the *baguwen*,

we shall argue, using contemporary Chinese sources in support of our argument, that there is a call for the *baguwen* to be re-evaluated and to be classified as an important Chinese rhetorical style. The significance for Chinese of this shift in attitude for Chinese rhetoric will also be considered.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The history of the *baguwen* is inextricably linked to the history of the Chinese imperial civil service exams, so we shall start by providing a brief history of the exam system, known in Chinese as the *keju* system. It was founded during the Sui Dynasty (581-618) (Chaffee 15). The Sui dynasty survived less than forty years and was followed by the Tang (618-907), one of the golden ages of Chinese history. The Tang examination system comprised six different degrees, three specialist and three general. Law, calligraphy and mathematics were the three specialist degrees. The *jinsshi* (进士) was the most important of the general degrees. The exams were held, annually, in the capital. However, the number of civil servants who entered the service via the exam route during the Tang Dynasty was very low, between 6-16%. The vast majority of civil servants were drawn from the families of people who were already holding office. This is not to say that there was no interest in scholarship or in becoming an official. In fact, there was intense competition to become a civil servant and scholarship was highly prized. There were four categories of scholarly writing. These were: canonical scholarship; state ritual scholarship; scholarship associated with the compilation of dynastic histories; and the publication of bibliographical catalogues and literary anthologies (McMullen).

Skill in the composition of both prose and verse was highly prized and needed to cover a range of some fifteen or so genres and meant “demonstrating command of a tacitly acknowledged memorisation corpus of canons, histories and belles-lettres, facility and even speed in composition. It required an aesthetic sense and an ability to innovate, within certain limits, which themselves changed over the dynasty” (McMullen 203). These composition skills became very important in the examination process and this led, by the end of the seventh century, to the pre-eminence of the *jinsshi* exam as this was the examination which tested composition skills. Study of the memorisation corpus and practise practice in fashionable verse and prose styles became obligatory. McMullen also shows that, compared with the Neo-Confucian attitude of the later Song Dynasty, the dynasty during which the *baguwen* became an established part of the exam system, there was a relatively open attitude to dissent. Permitting Confucian scholars to argue among themselves was seen as a way of ensuring

their loyalty and support. The dynasty adopted a pluralistic approach—this, after all, was a time when Buddhism was embraced—and when the dynasty endorsed a particular interpretation of a canonical tradition, it did not become exclusively wedded to it.

By the time of the Song Dynasty (960-1279), it was possible to receive a doctorate in letters (the *jinshi*), law, history, ritual or classical study. The chief emphasis was placed on “the study of the older writings as a guide to present conduct” (Kracke 62); Kracke’s study shows us that the doctorate of letters exam was different from the other exams, and knowledge and reasoning were tested in a different way. The candidate was required, for example, to demonstrate his knowledge of the Analects by completing from memory ten test passages to which he was given a few words as a clue.

Two major changes in the exam system can be traced to the Song. First, the advent of printing and the desire of the Song Dynasty emperors to attract men of talent to the civil service led to an exponential increase in education and a resultant increase in the number of men taking the exams. This led to the rise of a new intellectual class in China, which Miyazaki has likened to the rise of the bourgeoisie in Europe. As indicated earlier, it was the emergence of this new intellectual class and their need to pass the civil service exams which created the market for Chen Kui’s *Rules of Writing*. The introduction of the *baguwen* itself into the exam system can indeed be traced to the Song reformer, Wang Anshi (1021-1086), although it was not until the following Ming Dynasty that the rules for the composition of the *baguwen* were explicitly laid down.

The second major change in the exam system resulted from the shift from the pluralism of the Tang to a neo-Confucian orthodoxy based on the works of Cheng Yi (1033-1107) and Zhu Xi (1130-1200). This was reflected in the need for exam applicants to write their essays in accordance with this new orthodoxy. As this more or less coincided with the introduction of the *baguwen* as an exam essay form, the form soon became associated with Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy. The later Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1905) preserved this orthodoxy (Woodside and Elman) and thus the *baguwen* form became inseparably linked to neo-Confucian orthodoxy. Writing *baguwen* meant writing the orthodox line that had been determined from above. It is this association between form and content and between form and unquestioning acceptance of authority that led the scholars to the views quoted above. A second quote from Zhu underlines this, “Actually, the *bagu*, as everyone knows, was a senseless thing, but the ruling classes used it to engage the intellectuals...talent selection became talent obliteration” (406).

Qi (1) sums these views up:

The *baguwen* has been called stale and rotten, cliché-ridden, rigid and well past its use by date. It is despised and rejected and those who are against it have given it the epitaph of being the essence of all evil.

Dissatisfaction with the *baguwen* was also occasionally expressed during imperial times. For example, at the beginning of Kang Xi's reign (r 1661-1722), the empire was ruled by the Oboi regents who issued an order rescinding the need for all exam essays to follow the *baguwen* form (Elman 119). However, the order was so unpopular with the Chinese scholars who had invested their entire careers in mastering the form, that the order was revoked a few years later. Elman also reports that, as Emperor, Kang Xi oversaw further efforts at reform, but none were long-lasting. And Kang Xi's grandson, the Emperor Qian Long, who reigned from 1736-1796, is on record as complaining that he could not understand many of the *baguwen* essays written in the exams.

Nevertheless, despite some changes—for example the length of the *baguwen* essay gradually increased from 550 characters to 700—it remained an integral part of the examination system until the system was abolished in 1905. In other words, the *baguwen* was part of the imperial Chinese exam system for some 1,000 years.

THE FORM OF THE BAGUWEN

Several scholars have argued that the *baguwen* is some form of amalgam of the *qi-cheng-zhuan-he* structure and both the *pianwen* and *guwen* style. Wu Yingtian has said that the *baguwen* usurped the *qi-cheng-zhuan-he* structure (217ff. Tang Tao has labeled the *baguwen* the “bloodchild” of *pianwen* and *guwen* and quotes Zhou Zuoren, the brother of China's greatest contemporary writer, Lu Xun, as describing it as the “crystallisation” of Chinese literature (28). This indicates that not all scholars view the form completely negatively. The form itself is, if nothing else, complex, as the following description and example will demonstrate.

Zhu Binjie identifies three key features of the *baguwen* (472ff.). The first two concern content: they had to be based on the Confucian canon and they had to take the neo Confucian “*Cheng-Zhu*” school as orthodox. The third feature was that they had to follow a regulated format. Zhu provides alternative names for some sections of this format, and we give these in brackets after the English translation.

1. *Poti* (破題) (Opening the topic). Here two sentences were required to introduce the topic.

2. *Chengti* (承题) (Carrying the topic forward). This section provided further information about the topic and could contain 3 or 4, or 4 or 5 sentences.
3. *Qi Jiang* (起讲) (Elaborating). A more profound discussion about the topic was provided here. The length of this section might vary considerably, from “a few sentences” to “more than ten.”
4. *Ruti* (入题) (Revealing the topic) (*Lingti* 领题, *Tiju* 题举, or *Rushou* 入手). This section used either 1 or 2, or 4 or 5 sentences and its function was to clarify ideas of an essay topic that was of some length. For example, an essay topic could be a substantial extract from one of the Confucian classics. Thus, this section was optional. In the example *baguwen* provided below, this section actually occurs after section five, the first of the parallel legs.

These first four sections, along with the conclusion, were written in a relatively free prose style. After these opening four sections, there followed the parallel legs from which the eight-legged essay derives its name. Unlike the first four sections and the concluding section, each of these sections required at least two sentences and they had to provide stylistic balance. The required style has been described “as one falls another one rises” (Tang 27). It should be noted, however, that the form varied. First, as noted above, the *Ruti* section was optional. Second, while four sections of parallel legs are described here, the final parallel leg, the *Shugu*, was also optional. This meant, of course, that an essay that omitted the final *Shugu* might have only six legs. The third point of note, however, is that each parallel “leg” might have more than two legs. Some *baguwen* had as many as twenty legs. The four customary parallel legs were:

5. *Qigu* (起股) (Opening legs) (*Qibi* 起比, *Tibi* 题比, *Qiangu* 前股 *Tigu* 题股).
6. *Zhonggu* (中股) (Middle Legs) (*Zhongbi* 中比).
7. *Hougu* (后股) (Latter legs) (*Houbi* 后比).
8. *Shugu* (束股) (Concluding legs) (*Shubi* 束比).

After these parallel legs, the *baguwen* ended with a final section, the conclusion.

9. *Dajie* (大结) (*Luoxia* 落下).

The Baguwen: A Traditional Example

As an example of a traditional *baguwen*, we provide one translated by Andrew Lo in an edition of the Chinese translation magazine *Renditions* (“Four Examination Essays” *Renditions* 33 & 34 169–72). We have included comments in italics in brackets. This essay was written by Tang Shunzi and helped him win first place in the examination of 1529. Lo uses some of the alternate terms for some of the sections but we have retained the terms proposed above by Zhu, for ease of reference.

The topic of the essay was:

“*Zi Mo* (子莫) holds on to the middle...Holding on to the middle is closer to being right, but to do this without the proper measure is not different from holding to one extreme.”

(The topic is an extract from a quotation by the Confucian scholar, Mencius.)

Poti (Opening the topic)

Mencius’ contemporary Zi Mo wanted to rectify the deviation of heterodox teachings, but did not realise that he himself fell into deviation.

(This and the chengti section following provide a brief introduction to the main ideas. As Lo points out, names should only be referred to obliquely in this section, but could be referred to directly in later sections. The Chinese has the equivalent of “his” for Mencius’ and simply “his contemporary” for Zi Mo.)

Chengti (Carrying the topic forward)

The fact is, the middle is defined as “not deviant,” and the correct application of the middle is the proper measure. Zi Mo wanted to rectify the deviant ways of Yang Zi (楊子) and Mo Zi (墨子), but did not know the proper measure, so this was but another deviation. This was the standard Mencius used to repudiate his error and to establish our way.

Qijiang (Elaborating)

To elaborate, for our Way is the principle one, but the manifestations are many; egoism and indiscriminate love certainly deviate from the Way. And our way uses the one principle to join together the many, but those who hold on to egoism or indiscriminate love are certainly holding on to an extreme which leads nowhere. Thus there was Zi Mo who understood the errors of Yang Zi and Mo Zi, and thereupon mediated between the two in order to grasp the middle course.

(As Lo points out, the author brings in “Confucian authority” here to support his argument. In the parallel legs below, the argument develops incrementally.)

Qigu (Beginning legs)

Zi Mo would probably say, I cannot bear to be like Yang Zi, who cut off all ties with others in a niggardly fashion; I simply stop short of loving indiscriminately.

I have not time to be like Mo Zi who joyfully sacrifices himself for others: I simply stop short of being an egoist.

Because one rejects egoism, one may be thought to be escaping from the error of Yang Zi and heading towards benevolence.

Because one rejects indiscriminate love, one may be thought to be escaping for the error of Mo Zi and heading towards righteousness.

(There are two sets of parallel legs here and we have made a line space between each parallel leg in each section. As pointed out above, however, in this particular baguwen, the ruti section follows the beginning legs.)

Ruti (Revealing the topic)

Zi Mo seems to be close to the Way, but he does not understand the following: the proper measure is defined as following the

Way at the right time; the middle is defined as others with the proper measure; and the position between Yang Zi and Mo Zi is not the place to seek the middle.

Zhonggu (Middle legs)

If one just knows that one should not sever ties with others but does not know how to weigh others to give evenly, then there is no danger of becoming an egoist, but on the other hand those who follow the Way and strive to perfect themselves will also be seen as approaching egoism and consequently one will not dare act in like manner.

If one understands that one should not sacrifice oneself for others but cannot give to others on an individual basis, then there is no danger of loving indiscriminately, but on the other hand those who follow the Way and strive to perfect the whole Empire will also be seen as approaching indiscriminate love and consequently one will not be willing to act in like manner.

Hougu (Latter legs)

One may say that I plan to escape from Yang Zi. However, Yang Zi saw himself and not others, while Zi Mo saw a fixed position not an open passage. In essence, all these are but parochial teachings. Really, can those who know how to adapt to myriad changes be like this?

One may say that I plan to escape from Mo Zi. However, Mo Zi saw others and not himself, while Zi Mo saw tracks and not transformations. In essence all these are but one-sided delusions. Really, can those who respond to eternal inconstancy be like this?

Shugu (Concluding legs)

The point is, egoism is one extreme, and indiscriminate love is another extreme. That is why it is easy to understand that Yang Zi and Mo Zi each held on to an extreme.

The middle is not an extreme: but if one holds on to the middle without applying the proper measure, then this is also an extreme. That is why it is difficult to understand that Zi Mo was holding on to an extreme.

Dajie (Conclusion)

If Mencius had not demonstrated this with his eloquence, then most people would have thought that Zi Mo was able to be one with the Way.

CONTEMPORARY CRITIQUE

A number of Chinese scholars who see nothing but bad in the *baguwen* were cited earlier, along with some who have classified it more positively. It is, perhaps, not altogether surprising that many scholars view it negatively, given that the *baguwen* has become so closely associated with the dying end of a corrupt imperial system that it has sometimes been seen as one of the causes of the corruption and failure rather than a symptom of it. The rigidly prescribed structure exemplified above also tended to rigidly prescribe the views of the writers. This was also the case in other types of essays that students were required to write, the policy essay (*ce*) and the discourse essay (*lun*). “The examinees’ opinions were often trampled in the policy essay” (You, “Building Empire” 25). Cahill has written that “since its late nineteenth century demise no Chinese or Taiwanese writers appear to have regarded the *baguwen* as worthy of resuscitation.....” (235). While this is certainly true in a general sense, a number of Chinese scholars, albeit a minority, are beginning to call for a reassessment of the *baguwen*. Qi argues that the *baguwen* is merely a form of writing and therefore cannot intrinsically be either evil or good. He is scathing about critics of the *baguwen* who do not know that it is the name of a genre, much less being able to provide a rational explanation for why it is bad.

In the same book, Jin Kemu stresses that the *baguwen* existed for several hundred years and that it was a special textual style composed by China’s literate elite and one that has had a profound influence upon Chinese cultural history. He is saddened that so few people have seen a *baguwen* or even heard of it. It deserves, in his view, scientific study. A major problem in this is that so few people have a thorough understanding of the *baguwen* and how to write it.

An earlier voice for a reassessment of the *baguwen* is provided by Tang Tao (28) whom we quoted above as classifying the *baguwen* as the “bloodchild” of

pianwen and *guwen* styles. He argues that, while, in general it was used by people to seek position, power, fame and fortune, it should not be viewed with distaste on these grounds. It represented a mix of Chinese prose styles and parallelism and reflected Chinese written culture.

The most complete study and spirited defence of the *baguwen* is provided by Tian Qilin. Illustrating his argument with scores of examples of *baguwen* from different periods, Tian points out that the imperial exam system and the *baguwen* were uniquely Chinese and have had a profound influence on Chinese culture. Despite being consigned by most to the “dustbin of history,” the *baguwen* is, in Tian’s view, an immensely complex cultural and literary phenomenon that needs to be studied. As he points out, a huge number of politicians, philosophers, scientists and outstanding scholars all went through it. Tian concludes that the *baguwen’s* place in history is indisputable. While there are those who see it as rotten and to blame for China’s humiliation at the hands of the West and call it a “heap of cultural rubbish” (1221), he classifies it as a representative of China’s unique cultural heritage. Tian’s book is an attempt to preserve and pass on knowledge about the *baguwen* for future generations.

In summary, a number of scholars are now beginning to argue that the *baguwen* deserves serious study. It is a literary form which is part of the Chinese rhetorical treasury and thus needs to be understood. The form is not to blame for the use to which it was put by earlier authorities and there is an urgent need to educate Chinese about it before it becomes completely forgotten.

The question that now arises is whether this reassessment of the *baguwen* is seeing a re-emergence of its use. In response to the claims of some Western scholars that they could identify the influence of the *baguwen* in the English essays of their Chinese university students, Kirkpatrick has elsewhere argued that it is unlikely that the *baguwen* exerts an influence on the contemporary writing in Chinese of Mainland Chinese writers, both because of its association with the imperial past and also because it is a form that requires time and skill to master (“Traditional Chinese Text Structures”). We make no such claim about Taiwan, where it is quite plausible that the tradition has been maintained. But, in a review of contemporary Mainland Chinese composition textbooks, Kirkpatrick was unable to find even a reference to the *baguwen* let alone advice on how to write one (“Chinese Rhetoric by the Book”). However, You argues that the series of *English* composition textbooks for university students written by Cai Jigang in the late nineties and early two thousands encourage a *baguwen*-type style in that the writers are given no freedom to express their own opinions and are required to follow a given five-paragraph pattern and to express ideas that conform to the accepted ideology (“Conflation of Rhetorical Traditions”). However, You is here talking about English composition rather than Chinese

composition, and the form of the five-paragraph pattern is quite different from the form of the traditional *baguwen*, although the heuristic aim of the essays might be similar. In fact, as You points out, the form of the five-paragraph pattern required in English composition in China has strong similarities with the standard American pattern (You *Devil's Tongue* 52). We return to this in Chapter 10 when we discuss current Chinese composition textbooks.

A CONTEMPORARY EXAMPLE OF A BAGUWEN

After several years of fruitless searching for contemporary *baguwen* essays in Mainland Chinese publications, to come across an article written in the form of a *baguwen* was a happy surprise. This article was written by Zhou Youguang in a 2004 issue of the Chinese journal *Xiuci Xuexi*, *The Study of Rhetoric*. Zhou Youguang, needs some introduction, not least because of his rich past and scholarly eminence.

Zhou Youguang was born in 1906 and, at the time of writing, was still living in Beijing. While he had an extremely distinguished academic career, he also worked overseas and in other occupations. For example, he spent time in New York as an employee for the New China Bank. He returned to China in 1949 to become Professor of Economics at the prestigious Fudan University in Shanghai. He was a member of the language reform committee whose major task was to seek ways of increasing the literacy rate of the Chinese people through reform of the written language. To this end, the Committee introduced a raft of simplified Chinese characters and introduced the Roman *pinyin* script. In 1958 he gave courses in language reform at both Beijing University and The People's University in Beijing. As well as his work on the language reform committee, Zhou is the author of some twenty books on Chinese language and culture including *The New Language of the New Age*. In 2010, he published a new book, *Collecting Shells*, which “expresses the bitterness and anger of thousands of intellectuals of his generation who felt that the Communist Revolution betrayed them and wasted their talents and patriotism” (O'Neill). But as he says “I am 105. I will die tomorrow, so I can say the wrong things” (O'Neill).¹⁵

In the 2004 article, Zhou uses the traditional form of the *baguwen* to criticise the then President of China, Jiang Zemin. Zhou first provides the briefest of histories of the *baguwen*, saying its “fountainhead” was at the time of Northern *Song* and that its zenith occurred during the *Yuan*, *Ming* and *Qing* dynasties. He gives 1906, his date of birth, as the date of the *baguwen's* death. In the article he explains that he was encouraged to write the article because many of his friends had recently been approaching him asking him to tell them what a *baguwen* was. Zhou provides an example of a traditional *baguwen*, but then provides one

he has written himself in Modern Standard Chinese. We translate this modern *baguwen* below and provide notes in the brackets. We have not attempted to place the legs in parallel as with the traditional example above, primarily because the author does not write the legs in such an explicitly parallel style, although he does use a great deal of repetition. We have retained the author's original paragraphing. Thus sections 6 and 7, the middle and latter later legs, both contain three paragraphs in the original. We provide comments in italics and brackets.

The “essay topic”: “Moving with the times” “与时俱进”

(This is a saying of Jiang Zemin's, a past President of China, and would be immediately recognisable as such by all educated readers.)

1 *Poti* (Opening the topic)

Of the four words (of the title), “time” and “moving” are linked. “Time” refers to both the present and the past; “moving” refers to development and change.

2 *Chengti* (Carrying the topic forward)

To which era does the twenty-first century belong? It belongs to the era of globalisation. How can we obtain progress? Progress is no more than the regulated development of globalisation. “Time” does not remain stuck in some historical rut; “moving,” and the blossoming of change (allows us) to enter the ranks of advanced nations and to put in place advanced economic and political systems.

3 *Qijiang* (Elaborating)

Every country is developing, how could China be any different? The economy progresses through industrialisation to the information age; the political system progresses through autocracy to democracy; culture progresses through the use of knowledge to confine, to the use of knowledge to liberate. This is the pulse of globalisation.

(The elaboration of the topic is startling here, given Zhou's background and previous positions. He is clearly presenting his own voice here and arguing for a more democratic system.)

4 *Ruti* (Revealing the topic)

The information revolution is the determining characteristic of globalisation. Information technology has developed at a phenomenal rate. Televisions, computers, mobile phones along with an endless stream of specialist IT products have become leading resources. Thus labour has moved from industry and agriculture to sales and service, labour-intensive industries have become knowledge-intensive industries, and white collar workers now exceed blue collar workers. Knowledge has become the leading capital.

In America, farmers account for slightly more than 1% of the population and workers for something more than 10%. The agricultural and working class represents the smallest proportion of the population. Had I not seen with my own eyes the “farmerless farms” and the “worker-free factories” of America and Japan, I would be continuing to promote the slogans “all land to the peasants” and “workers of the world unite.”

(The slogans quoted in the final sentence of this section would be immediately familiar as Communist slogans of the Revolution. Zhou is clearly using these ironically.)

5 *Qigu* (Beginning legs)

There's nothing mysterious about the information age. Speaking, writing, using the phone and using computers are all part of the information age. Being able to travel across China speaking *putonghua* without needing interpreters is part of the information age.

Inputting *pinyin* into a computer and its automatic conversion into Chinese characters are part of the information age. The internet and electronic mail are part of the information age.

Links between a computer and a mobile phone, the sending and transmitting of text, of speech, of figures and of images are part of the information age. The national and international exchange of learning is part of the information age. The information age is standing right next to you. The information age gives you breaking news and new knowledge.

(The author achieves a sort of parallelism here by the frequent repetition of the phrase “part of the information age.” However, these legs are not written in a parallel style comparable to the traditional baguwen.)

6 Zhonggu (Middle legs)

Today each country continues and advances its traditional culture on the one hand, while, on the other, adopts and creates a contemporary international culture. We can call this the age of twin cultures. This age of twin cultures promotes the development of culture but also stimulates cultural clash and, in the clash between the advanced and the backward and in the contradiction between the traditional and the new, lies the ship's wheel guiding the history of “moving with the times.”

The pursuit of advanced productive forces requires moving from imitation to creative invention. An environment that will allow creativity to develop in freedom is a prerequisite. The pursuit of an advanced culture requires breaking free from the fetters of thought. An advanced culture is the flower that springs forth from the soil of freedom.

The use of broadcasting, television, computers and other tools of the information age needs to be fully exploited and not limited. If the information age leads to the restriction of information, how can this lead to the liberation of the self?

The easier times are the easier it is for unrest to occur in society. When chickens and dogs hear each other but never come into contact they can live at peace with each other. But put 18 crabs in a bamboo crate, and how can one not claw the other? How can a woman who drapes herself head to foot in a black

robe saunter hand in hand down *Wang Fu Jin* with another who sports a bikini and has her belly button exposed? Cultural clash is actually the clash between the gap between cultures.

(Wang Fu Jin is Beijing's main shopping street.)

7 *Hougu* (Latter Later legs)

“Moving with the times” is not an automatic choice, but an objective law; it's not unique or special, but general. You can deviate from this only for a short period, you can't do so over a long period. Society's progress is orderly but falling behind or excelling is by chance. Orderly progress is the norm.

Society's development is characterised by four leaps: the first is the leap from backward society to slave; the second is from slave to feudal; the third is from feudal to capitalist; the fourth is from capitalist to post-capitalist.

“Moving with the times” alerts people not to make historical mistakes: ruthless autocracy; wantonly engaging in military aggression; the defeat of Nazism; the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The twenty-first century cannot revisit the Breshnev's “society of developed socialism,” because it was all propaganda and none of it was real.

8 *Shugu* (Concluding legs)

Truth also changes over time, it is not immutable. “Practice is the sole criterion for the test of truth.”* Truth is not afraid of criticism; criticism is the nurturer of truth. Whatever fears criticism is not truth. What fears truth are religions or dogmas that are out of step with the times. The superstitious age is going to become a thing of the past,** the age of following blindly is going to become a thing of the past,** Today is the age of independent thought, the age of following that which is good, the age of the unconstrained in which we spare no effort in pursuit of “moving with the times.”

* *This is the slogan of the Chinese Communist Party.*

** *These terms will bring to mind Falun Gong and the Cultural Revolution respectively.*

What is of greatest interest in this contemporary *baguwen* is the content. Far from mouthing the orthodox line, Zhou is explicitly criticising the Chinese government for dragging its heels over the necessary reforms. For example, in Section 3, he talks about the need to move towards democracy from autocracy and about the liberating role that knowledge must play. In Section 4, he mocks Communist Party slogans, and, in the final section, the very motto of the Communist Party itself. In other words, the author is using a rhetorical structure traditionally associated with imperial control to criticise authority. In this way, Zhou turns the traditional function of the *baguwen* on its head. The possibility of this “byword for petrification in the world of letters” becoming a rhetorical style for the expression of dissident voices is intriguing to say the least.

While this modern example of the *baguwen* is written within the framework of a traditional *baguwen*, it does not employ the two different styles required in the traditional *baguwen*, and there is little attempt to balance sentences in the legs of the contemporary version. A major reason for this, of course, is that modern Chinese does not lend itself to this type of parallel writing to anything like the extent the more succinct *wen yan* or classical writing did. Readers may feel they are reading an essay that has been divided up into *baguwen* sections rather than a real *baguwen*. Perhaps the linguistic features of Modern Standard Chinese mean that true *baguwen* are a thing of the past and that contemporary *baguwen*, if they reappear, will capture only an overall argument structure rather than a strict linguistic style. And the overall argument structure is hardly unique. The *baguwen* adopted the traditional four-part poetic structure of *qi-cheng-zhuan-he*, and this structure is certainly not quintessentially Chinese. As Kent Guy has argued, the *baguwen* form “imposed on authors a logical structure of argumentation not unlike that imposed in, say, American collegiate debate format” (170). While this may be true in one sense, the complexity of the traditional *baguwen* form sets it apart and, as suggested above, the linguistic changes that Chinese has seen, mean that *baguwen* of the traditional type and complexity are unlikely to re-occur. However, it may be that the current interest and pride in traditional Chinese culture evidenced most clearly in the resurgence of interest in Confucianism will lead to a resurgence of interest in the *baguwen*. If it does reappear, it will be as a more flexible form than that decreed by the imperial exam system, but one that follows a four-part logical structure that derives its shape from the *qi-cheng-zhuan-he* model.

It is important here to reiterate the importance of *baguwen* as a historical literary genre. It represented an imposed rhetorical pattern through which exam candidates were required to express ideologically orthodox views. As earlier noted, Zhu identified being based on the Confucian canon and taking the Neo-Confucian school as orthodox as two of three criteria of a *baguwen*

(Zhu B. 472ff). The question thus arises as to whether the form used to express unorthodox views can be considered a true *baguwen*.

As suggested above, it will be intriguing to see whether a simplified *form* of the *baguwen* is developing a role as a vehicle for the dissenting voice and that the form, traditionally associated as being an imperial fetter, becomes associated instead with a genre used to criticise the government or the orthodox position. Shu Wu has argued that it can never be forgotten that the *baguwen* was a style of China's "slave literature" (82). There is no reason, however, why a form traditionally associated with imperial control cannot adopt new functions. It remains to be seen, however, whether Zhou Youguang's text represents the start of a new use of the *baguwen* as a form of dissent literature, or whether it will remain a unique example of this. We suspect, however, that Zhou's essay will remain a one-off rather than lead to a renaissance of the traditional *baguwen*.

In Chapter 5, we turn to a discussion of the academies (*shuyuan*) where *baguwen* would have been taught as the main rhetorical style.