

Yin and *Yang* rhetoric and the impossibility of constructive dissent in China

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In considering the problems associated with the voicing of constructive dissent in today's China, where the surveillance of the population by the authorities is probably at its most pervasive level as at any time in its history, I shall first briefly review the Chinese rhetorical tradition and provide examples of persuasive texts to show how dissent or disagreement was expressed in earlier times. The texts exemplify "the art of indirect criticism"¹ — the use of *yin* strategies of rhetorical persuasion, although direct criticism was also possible in certain circumstances. I shall then turn to the current situation. Using three contemporary dissident texts as examples (an essay by Zhou Youguang, Charter 08 and the annual letter written by the mothers of those who died in Tiananmen Square), I shall argue that, particularly since the Cultural Revolution, the "art of indirect criticism" has been all but lost and replaced by an antagonistic *yang* style of rhetoric. Not only does this mean that there is no agreed rhetorical style in which constructive criticism can be framed, the current confrontational style commonly leads to the arrest (or worse) of the participants, and increased surveillance and suspicion by the State.

Conventional wisdom holds that traditional Chinese rhetoric preferred obliquity and indirectness and there is much evidence which supports this view. The hierarchical nature of traditional Chinese society meant that persuaders normally needed to employ methods of indirect criticism. Many of the rhetorical devices employed in two commonly used techniques — chain reasoning and reasoning by analogy — were ideal for indirect criticism. The Zong Heng philosopher Gui Guzi (?481-221BCE) understood how important the relative status of persuader and the person to be persuaded was in shaping rhetorical style and strategies. He was the first to categorise indirect speech as *yin* and direct speech as *yang*. In his eponymous book he advised:

Yang (persuading from above to below) encourages straightforward speaking. *Yin* (persuading from below to above) encourages speaking in forked tongue.²

¹ Karl Kao, "Chinese rhetoric" in William Nienhauser, ed. *The Indiana companion to traditional Chinese literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985): 121.

² Tsao Ding-jen, *The persuasion of Gui Guzi* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota PhD Dissertation, 1985): 103.

Examples of both *yin* and *yang* persuasion will be provided below.

Han Feizi (b. 280 BCE) is known as the founder of the Legalist school of philosophy which, as its name suggests, promoted the rule of law. This deviated significantly from the Confucian ethical code which held that, if the Emperor set a good example and attended correctly to the necessary rites, others would follow and all would be well. Legalism took a more down-to-earth view of human nature, mandating the threat and use of severe punishments to ensure that people kept order. Han Feizi also understood the influence of hierarchy and power upon methods of persuasion. A section of his book, *The Han Feizi*, is called *On the difficulties of persuasion*. He writes:

Men who wish to present their remonstrances and expound their ideas must not fail to ascertain their ruler's loves and hates before launching into their speeches... If you gain the ruler's love, your wisdom will be appreciated and you will enjoy favour as well. But, if he hates you, not only will your wisdom be rejected but you will be regarded as a criminal and thrust aside... The beast called the dragon can be tamed and trained to the point where you may ride on its back. But on the underside of its throat it has scales a foot in diameter that curl back from the body. Anyone who chances to brush against them is sure to die. The ruler of men too has his bristling scales. Only if a speaker can avoid brushing against them will he have any hope of success.³

Some parallels with Ciceronian precepts can perhaps be drawn here, especially the attention Cicero advised authors to give the relative status of addressor and addressee, and the importance of securing the addressee's good will (*captatio benevolentiae*). The Ciceronian influence can be found in the *Ars dictaminis* letter writing manuals of thirteenth century Medieval Europe:

Of course, among all people, some are outstanding; others are inferior, and still others are just in-between. Now people are said to be 'outstanding' to whom no superiors are found, like the Pope or the Emperor. Therefore, when a letter writer undertakes to write, and the difference between the ranks of the persons involved is known, he must take into account... whether writing to equal, inferior to superior, to superior to inferior.⁴

³ Burton Watson, trans. *Han Fei Tzu: Basic writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964): 79.

⁴ James Murphy, ed. *Three Medieval rhetorical arts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971): 9-10.

And on the importance of securing goodwill:

Goodwill is secured by the person sending the letter if he mentions humbly something about his achievements or his duties or his motives. On the other hand, it will be secured according to the person receiving the letter when, not only the humility of the sender, but also praises of the recipient are duly indicated.⁵

Yet clarity, succinctness and directness were also appreciated in traditional China. In summarising Confucius thoughts on speech, Pu and Wei say, “Explaining things plainly and simply is good enough”.⁶ In a quote that suggests that Confucius would not have tolerated sophistry, Lu points out “What is deprecated by ancient Chinese philosophers is not speech in general but rather glib speakers with flowery and empty words”.⁷

The philosopher, Wang Chong (32-92 CE), was famous for his directness. His views of the great Chinese historian, Sima Qian were less than flattering. “He relied on what had already been completed and made a record of former events, and he did not produce anything from within himself”.⁸ The well-known French sinologist, Francois Jullien has argued that Wang Chong’s prose was unpopular because of his “clarity of discourse”.⁹ But it needs to be stressed that his prose, his “clarity of discourse”, was unpopular only with those whom he criticised. Others considered him brave and worthy of admiration. As will be illustrated later, there are comparisons between the directness of Wang Chong with that of Liu Xiaobo, the lead author of Charter 08.

Naturally, emperors were able to employ the *yang* style of top-down rhetoric as a matter of right. This example of a king instructing one of his ministers comes from Chen Kui’s guide to writing, written in the Song Dynasty in the late twelfth century.

The King said: Feng! You need to be careful! Don’t do things that

⁵ *Ibid*, 17.

⁶ Pu Kai and Wei Qun, “Shilun wo gudai xiuci yanjiu-de tedian” (“An exploratory discussion on the study of classical Chinese rhetoric”), in *Xiuci Yanjiu (Rhetoric Research)* (Anhui: Anhui Education Press, 1983): 111.

⁷ Xing Lu, *Rhetoric in Ancient China: Fifth to third century BC* (Columbia: South Carolina University Press, 1998): 31.

⁸ Stephen Durrant, “Creating tradition: Sima Qian Agonistes?” in Steven Shankman and Stephen Durrant, eds. *Early China/Ancient Greece: Thinking through comparisons* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002): 285.

⁹ Francois Jullien, *Detour and access: Strategies of meaning in China and Greece* (New York: Zone Books, 2000): 374.

cause people to hold grudges, do not use incorrect methods or unfair laws in such a way that you conceal your honest heart. You should model yourself on the sensitive conduct of earlier sages to settle your thoughts. You should frequently ask yourself whether your words and deeds are appropriate and establish far-reaching policies to govern the country. You need to promulgate magnanimous policies, to make the lives of the people peaceful and secure, and then they will not eliminate you because of your faults.¹⁰

The top-down nature of this communication is characterised, among other things, by the use of the imperative and modals of obligation. Again, as will be illustrated later, there are comparisons here with the rhetorical style adopted by Liu Xiaobo and the authors of Charter 08.

A famous example of the *yin* or oblique style is provided in a letter written by a civil servant, Li Mi, (225-290 BCE) to the emperor. The emperor has asked that Li Mi serve in his court. But as the emperor has just defeated Li Mi's own state, Li Mi does not want to accept the position and so writes a letter asking if he might turn down the position the emperor has asked him to assume. It is a long letter and begins:

Your servant Mi states: Because of a parlous fate, I early encountered grief and misfortune. When I was an infant of only six months, my loving father passed away. When I was four my mother's brother forced my mother to remarry against her will. Grandmother Liu took pity on this weak orphan and personally cared for me.¹¹

Li Mi is skilfully using the conceit of filial piety to bolster his argument. He proceeds on the theme of his debt to his grandmother and her current illness for a further thirty lines, and then writes:

I humbly believe that this Sage Dynasty governs the empire by means of filial piety, and all among the aged and elderly still receive compassion and care. How much more needful am I whose solitary suffering has been especially severe!

He then continues for a further twenty lines detailing the hardships he has suffered and pointing out that his grandmother is now ninety-six. Only at the end of the long letter does he get to the request itself:

¹⁰ Liu Yancheng, *Wenze Zhuyi (A commentary and translation of the Wen Ze)* (Beijing: Beijing Shumu Wenxuan Press, 1988): 194.

¹¹ David Knechtges, trans. "Han and six dynasties parallel prose", *Renditions* 33-34 (1990): 63-110.

With all my filial devotion, I beg to be allowed to care for her to her final days... I hope Your Majesty will take pity on my naïve sincerity and will grant my humble wish...

The final line reads: "I respectfully present this memorial to inform you of my feelings".

The emperor granted Li Mi his wish — it is hard to see how he could have refused, given the skilful way the author uses the central Confucian concept of filial piety coupled with his actual situation of needing to care for his grandmother. Its length, its inductive style, whereby justifications for the request all precede the request itself, and the author's use of self-deprecatory terms of self-reference ("your servant Mi", "my naïve sincerity", "my humble wish") are all marks of the indirect *yin* style.

Not surprisingly, given the hierarchical nature of the society and the power superiors exerted over their subordinates, the *yin* style was the most common style of persuasion, although, as has been illustrated, it was not the only one. It is important to stress that the *yin* or oblique style was often successful. It was also used to criticise government policy. A famous example of such is the essay "A sanitarium for sick plum trees". This was written much later (1869) by a scholar, Gong Zichen, who had just returned to his post after a period of exile. The essay follows the four-part structure of *qi-cheng-zhuan-he* (opening-joining-turning point-conclusion), an extremely common prose structure which allowed for indirect criticism, in particular through arguing by analogy. This essay uses "sick plum trees" to refer to scholars who have been crushed by the reactionary Qing dynasty rulers. In the *zhuan* part of the essay, the author recounts how he bought some sick plum trees and how he was able to regenerate them. He concludes:

Ai! How I wish I had the free time and the idle land so that I could gather in the sick plum trees of Jiangning, Hangzhou and Suzhou, and within my lifetime cure them!

In essence, the author is vowing to fight to cure society's ills brought about by a corrupt and reactionary regime.

It is impossible here to give more than a most cursory account of traditional Chinese rhetoric, but the main point to be made is that, in traditional Chinese society, an oblique or *yin* style of rhetoric was regularly employed by persuaders of all types whose audience were more powerful than they were. This "art of indirect criticism" was skilfully and successfully practised, although direct *yang* styles were also used, but when they were used it was usually for specific effect. Otherwise, the *yang* style was the preserve of the Emperor and the powerful.

I now turn to consider three examples of contemporary criticism and

argue that there has been a fundamental shift from the use of the *yin* style of rhetoric to a more agonistic and confrontational *yang* style. Charter 08 and the annual letter written by the mothers of those who died during in Tiananmen Square in 1989 make up two of the examples and are written in an antagonistic, authoritative *yang* style. The first example, however, follows a *yin* style. This is also unusual in that it follows a format derived from the infamous eight-legged essay style. People who wanted to become civil servants during the imperial period had, since the sixth century CE, to pass a set of exams. As part of the exams, they were required to write essays following a strictly prescribed format known as the eight-legged essay. While some changes in the format were introduced over the hundreds of years, the eight-legged essay was an integral part of the exam — it was only abolished in 1905 — it remained essentially the same. The eight-legged essay attracted a great deal of criticism as it was seen to be designed to stifle creative thought and ensure that civil servants would promote the status quo. Qi summarises the views expressed against the essay style, known in Chinese as the *baguwen* :

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.¹²

The negative views of the eight-legged essay have led to its decline, although some scholars have called for its revival, arguing that it represents an important part of the rich Chinese rhetorical tradition. One such scholar is Zhou Youguang who recounted that it was because he had been asked by so many people about the *baguwen* that he decided to write a modern version of one.¹³ The *baguwen* he wrote, however, while conforming in many ways to the rigid prescribed structure, was unique in that he used it to criticise the policies of the then President of China, Jiang Zemin. Rather than use the *baguwen* to extol the virtues of the regime, therefore, which had been its main original function, he subverted its role to criticise the current regime. Traditionally the exam candidates would be given the topic or title of the *baguwen* they were to write, and this was invariably a quotation taken from the Confucian classics. The topic of Zhou's piece is 'Moving with the Times', which readers would have readily identified as a slogan much used by President Jiang. Rather than praising President Jiang for 'Moving with the Times', however, Zhou criticises the government for being reactionary and

¹² Qi Gong, *Shuo Bagu (Talking about the bagu)* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju Press, 1994): 1.

¹³ Zhou Youguang, "Baguwen moxie" ("A description of the eight-legged essay") *Xiuxi Xuexi 2 (The study of Rhetoric)* (2004):1-2.

preventing freedom of thought and the development of democracy. I translate some excerpts from Zhou's essay below. The third paragraph reads:

Every country is developing. How could China be any different? The economy progresses through industrialisation to the information age; the political system progress 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.

He continues this theme in paragraph six:

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 eighth paragraph, the final one, concludes:

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 and 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 an extraordinary document for a number of reasons: it adopts a style traditionally associated with stifling creative thought to promote it and it adopts a style traditionally associated with propping up the regime to attack it. Remarkably, it employs an oblique *yin* style derived from a traditional form associated with restricting creative thought and promoting the status quo in order to criticise the President and to challenge the status quo.

It is worth reiterating that Zhou was moved to write this because he had been approached by people asking him about the eight-legged essay. This reflects the lack of knowledge of the Chinese rhetorical tradition among most people in contemporary Mainland China. A colleague and I have elsewhere argued that one reason why the great majority of Mainland Chinese are unfamiliar with the rich Chinese rhetorical tradition is because, such is the perceived need to promote participation in globalisation — in particular in the advances of science and technology — all Chinese university students today receive a great deal of instruction in how to write in English. However, apart from Chinese majors, who comprise a tiny majority of university students,

Chinese university students receive little, if any, instruction in how to write in Chinese. We suggest that this is one reason why there is a lack of constructive public discourse in contemporary China.¹⁴

Finally, it is worth noting that the themes with which Zhou engages in his *baguwen* are the need for China to embrace democracy and create conditions to allow creative ideas to flourish. These are also the major themes of Charter 08, to which I now turn.

Charter 08 was co-authored by some 300 writers, the best known of whom is Liu Xiaobo, the Nobel Peace Laureate, now serving an eleven year sentence, partly because of his involvement with Charter 08. Charter 08 adopts an extremely *yang* style. The preamble reads:

After experiencing a prolonged period of human rights disasters and a tortuous struggle and resistance, the awakening Chinese citizens are increasingly and more clearly recognising that freedom, equality and human rights are universal common values shared by all humankind, and that democracy, a republic and constitutionalism constitute the basic structural framework of modern governance. A 'modernisation' bereft of these universal values and this basic political framework is a disastrous process that deprives humans of their rights, corrodes human nature, and destroys human dignity.¹⁵

The authors continue:

The power bloc continues to insist on maintaining the authoritarian regime, rejecting political reform. This has caused corruption in officialdom, difficulty in establishing the rule of law, and no protection of human rights, the loss of ethics, the polarisation of society, warped economic development... and the continuous rise in resentment. In particular, the intensification of hostility between government officials and the ordinary people, and the dramatic rise of mass incidents, illustrates a catastrophic loss of control in the making, and the anachronism of the current system has reached a point where change must occur.

While it is hard to disagree with the points being made here, the *yang* rhetorical style, which contrasts markedly with Zhou's essay above, is guaranteed to enrage the Chinese leadership. The authors themselves note the "hostility between government officials and ordinary people", but one

¹⁴ Andrew Kirkpatrick and Xu Zhichang, *Chinese rhetoric and writing: An introduction for language teachers* (Boulder: Parlor Press, 2011).

¹⁵ The translation is from the online forum "Human Rights in China": <http://www.hrchina.org/public/index> .

reason for this is that both sides have adopted an aggressive inflammatory rhetoric, which came to the fore during the Cultural Revolution. As Xing Lu points out, the confrontational style of the Cultural Revolution lives on. One of the people she interviewed reported that the government was guilty of using this style:

The language used to attack Falun Gong is exactly the same language as that used to attack 'cow ghosts and snake spirits' during the Cultural Revolution. On hearing such language I felt that the language of the Cultural Revolution had returned.

Another of Xing Lu's informants noted that the dissidents had also adopted this style:

There is definitely a trace of the cultural revolutionary style, even in the writings of political dissidents... The language they use to attack the CCP is very similar to the Red Guard style.¹⁶

To return to Charter 08, the authors call for the reaffirmation of six fundamental concepts. The language used, however, is that of the authoritarian *yang* style. For example, in the statement on equality, they write:

The principle of equality before the law and a citizen's society must be implemented; the principle of equality of economic, cultural and political rights must be implemented.

The authoritative tone further strengthens in the nineteen basic standpoints the authors put forward. For example:

All levels of the legislative bodies shall be directly elected. Maintain the principles of fairness and justice... The judiciary shall be non-partisan, free from any interference. Ensure judicial independence, and guarantee judicial fairness. Establish a constitutional Court... Abolish as soon as possible the Party's Committees of Political and Legislative affairs at all levels... Avoid using public tools for private objectives.

This use of imperatives and modals of obligation occurs throughout Charter 08 and gives it its *yang* style. Other rhetorical tropes typical of *yang* discourse include the use of hyperbole and metaphor and the lack of hedges or

¹⁶ Xing Lu, *Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution* (Columbia: South Carolina University Press, 2004): 196.

mitigating devices. In bottom-up *yin* discourse, “we do tend to leave implicit all propositions that we believe to be known or derivable by the recipients”.¹⁷ Charter 08 thus employs rhetorical techniques which are associated with top-down demands. A Chinese colleague, on reading Charter 08, remarked that it gave him the impression of being full of the scent of gunpowder, followed by bullets out of a machine gun. Certainly, Charter 08 inflamed the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, as its authors must have realised it would. It is hard to see Charter 08 as a genuine attempt to persuade the leadership. Rather, its main aim seems to have been to gain international recognition concerning the lack of political freedom and right to criticise that currently permeates Chinese political life.

The final text to be illustrated comprises excerpts from the 2010 letter written by the mothers of those who died in Tiananmen in 1989. The translation is also taken from the Human Rights in China website.¹⁸ The letter is an attempt to persuade the authorities to undertake a thorough inquiry into the cause of the massacre with the aim of reclassifying the ‘political disturbance’ (the current official line) as a ‘massacre’.

The letter runs to fifteen paragraphs and is titled “Please show courage, break the taboo, face June 4 head on”. Paragraph 1 immediately adopts a *yang* tone. It reads:

In the last century, on June 4, 1989, the Chinese authorities launched a massacre against peaceful demonstrators and civilians in the capital, seriously violating our country’s constitution and breaching their duty, as leaders of a sovereign state, to protect the people. This was an unconscionable atrocity that grew from longstanding contempt for human rights and civil rights.

This opening is about as far as one could possibly get from a *yin* style and from Gui Guzi’s advice to “speak with a forked tongue” or from Cicero’s to secure the goodwill (*captatio benevolentiae*) of the addressees. The letter goes on to note that the scene of the massacre is now “decorated with plants and flowers and has become a scene of peace and prosperity”. It continues:

Can all this conceal the sins of that time? Can it erase the sorrow of the relatives of the victims that deepens year after year? No! It absolutely cannot. The June Fourth massacre has long secured its place in history’s hall of shame.

¹⁷ Teun van Dick, *Discourse and context: A sociocognitive approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 184-5.

¹⁸ For a fuller discussion of this text and Charter 08 see Kirkpatrick and Xu, *Chinese Rhetoric and Writing*: Chapter 9.

In paragraph 6, the mothers write:

If Deng Xiaoping, then Chairman of the Central Military Commission of the Communist Party of China was wrong in ‘suppressing the counter-revolutionary rebellion’, then we must overturn it and correct it through established legal procedures and publicly announce it to the whole society, and should not explain it away with the vague term of ‘political disturbances’.

Throughout the letter, the Chinese authorities are in subject position. They “launched a massacre” and later “forbade discussion” and “prohibited the media”. The tenor here is that the authors are presenting the indisputable truth. There is no hedging or mitigation. “The Tiananmen mothers have always held one belief, and that is: act and speak according to the facts; accept no lies”.

Interestingly, in paragraph 11, the tone changes. The authors use the inclusive “we” pronoun and call for dialogue:

If we are able to use dialogue to prevent confrontation on the problem of ‘June fourth’, it would benefit the whole country and be a blessing for all our people. The more dialogue we have, the more civility and law and order, and the less ignorance and tyranny. Dialogue does not lead society towards opposition and hatred, but rather, towards tolerance and reconciliation. Using dialogue to solve the problem of ‘June fourth’ is an imperative path toward societal reconciliation.

It is hard to disagree with this call for dialogue, but as suggested throughout this essay, this will remain impossible until a new form of public discourse is established which assumes a more *yin* tone and dispenses with the authoritarian, ‘demand’ *yang* rhetoric, currently adopted by so many ‘petitioners’. This will require the Chinese rediscovering — and then teaching — the Chinese rhetorical tradition where examples of the “art of indirect criticism” abound. Others see indirectness and obliquity as preventing dissent. To cite once more from the work of Jullien,

In the name of what, therefore, can a Chinese man of letters break free from the forces of power, affirm his positions and thus speak openly?... With such obliquity, dissidence is impossible.¹⁹

But it could equally be argued that *without* such obliquity, dissidence is

¹⁹ Jullien, *Detour and access*, 379, 137.

impossible in today's China. Adopting a traditional *yin* style of rhetoric is perhaps the dissident's best hope. The extent of control and surveillance exercised in contemporary China quite possibly exceeds that of any time in its history. Recently released figures show the extraordinary amount China spends on surveillance. Indeed the internal law and order budget is US\$ 95 billion in 2011, more even than the budget for the entire People's Liberation Army (US\$ 91.5 billion in 2011).²⁰ This presages — or perhaps even shows — a country at war with itself. As Chris Buckley, the respected Reuters China correspondent, has recently written:

The Chinese government's bid to maintain stability at all costs is creating a security system so expensive that experts and officials say it is sapping funds needed elsewhere to sustain the country's economic health... China swaddles all its big meetings, events and sensitive dates with police and guards to scare off trouble makers, extinguish protests and project power. The massive security for the 2008 Olympics in Beijing has become a general template. On top of that, the ruling Communist Party's smothering of public support for Nobel Peace Prize winner and jailed dissident, Liu Xiaobo, is the latest example of the lengths, and costs, the authorities are willing to go to keep a lid on even minor events that might seem to threaten its hold on power.²¹

In addition to the arrest of internationally known figures such as Liu Xiaobo and Ai Wei Wei, it is well known that thousands of others, including many journalists and lawyers, are under arrest, often for no more than expressing constructive criticism. Given this unprecedented level of surveillance and the Communist Party's paranoia of criticism of any sort, it would seem only a return to obliquity and a *yin* style of rhetoric is likely to be tolerated. In the meantime, the likelihood of the development of a form of constructive public discourse and a "new political ecology of rhetoric"²² through which civic-minded citizens can become engaged in the development of a modern and more democratic society seems remote indeed. Instead, the rulers will continue with ubiquitous surveillance and the ruled will be cowed into silence or driven to increasingly antagonistic *yang* outbursts.

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²⁰ <http://factsanddetails.com/china.php?itemid=301&catid=8&subcatid=50> : accessed 24 October 2011.

²¹ Chris Buckley, Reuters, October 14 2010: <http://factsanddetails.com/china.php?itemid=301&catid=8&subcatid=50> : accessed October 24 2011.

²² Philippe-Joseph Salazar, *An African Athens* (Mahwah, NJ/London: LEA/Routledge, 2002): xvii.