
Language use and modes of editing in Neo-Confucian texts: Luo Rufang's (1515–1588) discourse records

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Abstract

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In the mid Ming dynasty, the quickly growing body of printed texts changed the conditions for text production and thus also influenced knowledge transmission. This is particularly relevant in the field of philosophy, where influential Neo-Confucian thinkers have emphasized the importance of oral instruction for the transmission of their thinking. Indeed, the biography of the mid-Ming thinker Luo Rufang (1515–1588), a later-generation follower of Wang Yangming (1472–1529), conveys the image of a prolific itinerant speaker with an entourage of disciples. While only few texts authentically written by Luo Rufang himself have been preserved, there is a large corpus of so-called "discourse records" (*yulu*) attributed to him. These records read like actual transcripts of Luo's oral lectures and face-to-face teaching sessions, or at least the text attempts to simulate such a discursive setting. Due to the continuous production of editions of *yulu*, the considerable quantity of extant records bearing Luo Rufang's name allows for the study of certain features of this genre of text.

In my paper, I aim to look at two dimensions of textual transmission in these discourse records. One is language use. I shall consider the rhetoric of Luo Rufang's *yulu* with its stylized language, as serving the single didactic goal of promoting the understanding of Luo's thinking. Consequently, the production of *yulu* also reifies the Neo-Confucian didactics implemented by Luo Rufang in his lectures. Word of mouth is transformed into written text, which then continues to circulate by its own rules. The diction of Luo's *yulu* strongly suggests the existence of a Confucian didactics used in an oral context. The use of special terms and vocabulary often is imbued with quotations from literary Chinese, but some passages convey a brimming sense of orality. I will point out these characteristics, and in turn provide an answer to the question how this diction suited Luo Rufang's goal.

Another dimension of textual transmission involves the ever new editions of Luo Rufang's *yulu*. After the publication of two influential *yulu* under the tutelage of Luo Rufang himself, later *yulu* appropriated the individual text entries from the two previous editions. I will analyze how, in some cases, previous passages were recycled for new context. In some instances, the editing is limited to single sentences, and the editorial changes are small; even the overall structure of the text remains the same. In other instances, ambitious editors subjected the inherited text to a new structure; previous complete text passages become fragmented. These were the basic modes of textual appropriation from previous editions.

Printed texts of the *yulu* genre circulated despite a strong ideological preference for word

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of mouth. Even a veteran lecturer like Luo Rufang embraced this genre of published text. In my paper I will argue that *yulu* represented one mode of textual transmission that was perfectly conducive to the educational goals of the Neo-Confucians.

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