AAPI Voices in Composition: Comparative Rhetoric as Wasian Representation

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As a first-year master's student in Professional Writing, I stand at the mouth of a career path that forks in two: industry or academia. After so many months pivoting around DEI censorship and the collapse of scholarship opportunities, the promise of a career independent from the Department of Education grows more enticing each day. Furthermore, as I look toward the possibility of remaining in academia, I cannot help but feel a deep sense of invisibility. As a Wasian woman—a person of white and Asian (for me, Korean) descent—I rarely see my identity reflected in the field of composition and rhetoric. The experiences, voices, and hybrid cultures that shape who I am often go unacknowledged, which leads me to wonder: what groundwork exists for Wasian and biracial compositionists to begin conversations about our identities? What unique insights do we bring to the field? What methodologies could we use?

The CompPile search portal of the WAC Clearinghouse yields 72 results with the keyword "ASIAN-AM" (Asian American) out of 117,166 total records. Of these 72 results, none discuss the experiences of second generation Asian American compositionists. In the book R*eclaiming Composition for Chicano/as and Other Ethnic Minorities*, Ruiz (2016) writes the term "Asian" only six times, once claiming that "classes [are] dominated by majority students (white and Asian)." Ruiz suggests Asian students share the privilege of white students by being part of a "majority;" there's power in numbers, after all. Perhaps this is true of Ruiz's classrooms in Southern California, but this claim certainly does not reflect my experience at the University of Cincinnati, where 5.3% of students are Asian and 4.4% are two or more races (University 2025). I exemplify this quote from Ruiz to make clear that the term "minority" alienates my experience as a second generation Korean American, even thrusting me into a white majority whose ethnicities do not wholly reflect my own. It is an umbrella term rammed through with holes.

However, there exists a field which—at least in theory—acknowledges the disparity of second generation, biracial representation in composition. Comparative rhetoric is the cross-cultural examination of rhetoric as it exists in cultures around the world. By definition, it is engaged with the intersection of different cultures, a point in which I soundly reside. Compositionist LuMing Mao has published several works concerning comparative rhetoric between Western and Eastern cultures, particularly American and Chinese, tracing a thorough history of comparative rhetoric from the 1960s onward and discussing the burgeoning discipline's context in the present day. By examining these influential texts by Mao, I hope to investigate comparative rhetoric and identify sites of multicultural studies that might give voice to my lived experience as a Wasian woman.

Groundwork

What is Comparative Rhetoric?

As mentioned earlier, there are no published documents in composition about the experience of second generation Asian Americans. However, there is a rich subsection of peer-reviewed articles about cross-culturalism—particularly between Western and Eastern societies—in comparative rhetoric.

Comparative rhetoric has existed in composition since Robert Oliver's series of works on Asian rhetorics was published beginning in 1950. In this way, the model of comparative rhetoric was one that compared Western practices to Asian ones, conducted by an American practitioner. This perspective, although at risk of bias, set a standard for comparative rhetoric which several other American rhetoricians would follow into the late 20th century (see Figure 1). As more research appeared, works commonly fell into a deficiency model fallacy, a theory generated by LuMing Mao which suggests a comparison between two entities is at risk of

portraying one as deficient due to the researcher's bias (2003). Comparative rhetoric then contrasted known, commonplace American rhetoric with unfamiliar and therefore *lesser* Asian rhetoric. For example, Morrison claimed in his work "The Absence of Rhetorical Tradition in Japanese Culture" (1972) that Japanese culture was not capable of sustaining rhetoric, citing stereotypes that painted the Japanese as "submissive, rhetorically nonargumentative, religiously mediative, and linguistically handicapped." Other rhetoricians would fall into this deficiency model until David Jollife's piece "Writers and Their Subjects: Ethnologic and Chinese Composition" in 1993, as catalogued by Mao (2003).

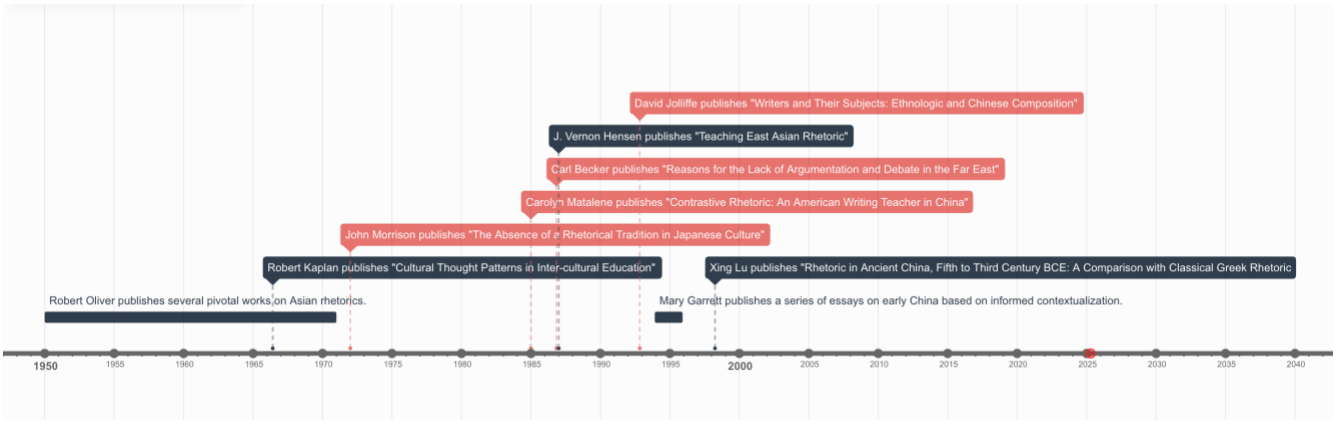

Figure 1: Timeline of influential comparative rhetoric works. Red works are characterized by their reliance on a deficiency model.

Mao's deficiency model is further exasperated by the "methodological paradox" which acknowledges that complete impartiality is impossible; that a researcher must begin *somewhere*. In this aspect, all comparative rhetoricians risk their work falling into a deficiency model. However, there is great strength in looking to Wasian people (despite their absence from composition) and people of mixed nationalities because they live at the very intersection which comparative rhetoric is concerned with scrutinizing.

LuMing Mao and Ethical Comparative Rhetoric

A prominent compositionist credited with textbooks and dozens of peer-reviewed articles, LuMing Mao teaches in the University of Utah's Department of Writing and Rhetoric Studies and has established himself as a scholar of comparative and global rhetoric. Mao's career has been inextricably linked with his identity as a Chinese-American. He investigates "hybrid" rhetorics as the result of cultures—in this case Chinese and American—being "in contact and in conflict with each other" (2006). To this end, he embodies Western and Eastern ideologies as a practitioner of composition and Chinese-American man.

Western rhetoric, rooted in Aristotelian tradition, places significant emphasis on logos, ethos, and pathos as the primary means of persuasion. While these elements are foundational to Western rhetorical education, comparative rhetoric places these traditions in contrast to those of Asian cultures which employ different persuasive strategies shaped by distinct cultural values, language characteristics, and philosophical frameworks. Mao addresses this difference in "Doing Comparative Rhetoric Responsibly" as a means of identifying ethical means of researching comparative rhetoric. When interpreting literature by ancient Chinese philosopher and rhetorician Zhuangzi, Mao says, "Yes, I want to get it right—not because I am in pursuit of some transcendental truth or local expediency, but because I favor a way of constructing knowledge that promots dialogism, thick description, and consciousness of the consequences of one's own claims" (2011). In doing so, Mao advocates for rhetoric that resists ethnocentrism and embraces intercultural understanding, inviting scholars to approach non-Western rhetorics not as deviations from a Western norm, but as equally complex systems worthy of thoughtful, context-sensitive engagement.

Mao further emphasizes the importance of ethical comparative rhetoric in "Essence, Absence, Uselessness: Engaging Non-Euro-American Rhetorics Interologically," another

document dedicated to providing research guidance. He refers to rhetoric traditions outside the United States as "non-euro-American," casting a wide net to capture all *alternative* rhetorics. "The art of re-contextualization is invention, intervention, and transformation all rolled into one dialectic." Therefore, non-euro-American rhetorics are considered with equal weight to prominent euro-American ones. "It is about discovering and articulating rhetorics in places where they have hitherto been ruled non-existent or not readily available" (2016).

While Mao's intentions are clearly grounded in expanding the field, casting all rhetorical traditions outside of Euro-American ones under a single label like "non-euro-American" flattens important differences between them. For someone like me, a Wasian person whose identity already resists easy categorization, this kind of broad grouping is erasing. It overlooks the complex, hybrid realities that do not fit neatly into a single racial or national framework. When traditions are generalized in this way, the unique intersections of mixed-race and diasporic experiences are easily missed, making it harder to find spaces where my own rhetorical practices are recognized or valued.

Rather than being entirely incompatible, Mao argues Western and Asian rhetorical systems are complementary. Comparative rhetoric allows us to see how literature is shaped by cultural assumptions and how hybridity might emerge in intercultural contexts. By moving beyond the logos, ethos, and pathos triad, a richer, more nuanced understanding of rhetoric emerges from the intersection of cultural boundaries, though I believe extra caution should be cast in claiming there is a strict separation between "euro-American" and "non-euro-American" identities as someone who exists as both.

Insights

Importance of Asian American Rhetoric

A central component of Asian American rhetoric is the critical examination and reclamation of representation. “Representation is a central concern in the project of Asian American rhetoric. Not only does such a project involve the representation of Asian Americans in the Rhetorical Tradition and in doing rhetorical work, it is also about how Asian Americans and their cultures have been represented through the use of language and other symbolic means” (Mao, 2008). This rhetorical framework seeks to challenge dominant narratives, resist stereotypes, and create space for the voices and lived experiences of Asian Americans. By doing so, it not only critiques past misrepresentations but also redefines what counts as rhetorical agency within and beyond traditional academic discourse.

Asian American rhetoric is also a field deeply situated, understandably, within cultural studies. “Asian American literary and cultural studies has exploded over the last twenty-five years, as a generation of students and faculty, trained and prepared to engage in research and teaching of Asian American texts, began to develop and contribute scholarship about literature produced by writers of Asian descent. But in the early 1990s, there existed only a handful of critical studies that examined Asian American literature as their central focus” (Mao, 2003). This growth highlights the increasing recognition of Asian American narratives as valuable sites of inquiry, particularly in how they intersect with broader issues of race, identity, and power in rhetorical contexts.

In a fascinating move, Mao applies the Western concept of ethos to Asian American experiences, stating “Self-presentation or the development of ethos is an important rhetorical act for Asian Americans, who have often been subject to having ethos imposed upon them by others… Asian American rhetoric is an embodied practice, where Asian Americans are in a

constant process of challenging the ways they have been constructed through the available, and yet-to-be-available, means of persuasion" (2003). This reframing of ethos emphasizes agency and adaptability, underscoring how Asian Americans navigate and reshape the rhetorical landscape to assert their presence, challenge marginalization, and articulate identity on their own terms. The comparison becomes an actualization of wasian rhetoric, applying the Western *ethos* to an Asian body.

Asian Literacy Narratives

Furthermore, looking to the literacy practices of Asian Americans can help represent minorities who otherwise may not have the outlets to share their histories. Literacy is not explicitly rhetoric, but it does provide the foundation for it. After all, it's impossible to formulate an argument without the ability to communicate. The Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN) is a public resource that accepts and catalogues the stories of people learning literacy, typically by learning to read, write, and speak a language (DALN 2025). A search for "Asian" yields 203 narratives, including written, video, and audio responses. Compared to the aforementioned 72 results from the WAC Clearinghouse, the DALN compiles a massive number of documents about Asian literacy and rhetoric… though the search term "Wasian" yields no results—a common trend, it seems. Still, the DALN is an incredible resource for documenting the literacy practices of all types of people.

The DALN also supports a wide variety of mediums to discuss literacy. As contributors can share their stories through written and video/audio formats, people can tell stories through all sorts of genres. For example, contributors have uploaded essays, interviews, visual art, poetry, and casual conversations. This openness to multimodal storytelling allows individuals to express their literacy journeys in ways that honor their cultural contexts and personal experiences. For Asian Americans especially, people whose literacy practices are

often shaped by navigating multiple languages, traditions, and expectations, this flexibility may offer a richer, more authentic representation than traditional written narratives alone could capture. By embracing multiple forms of expression, the DALN helps expand the definition of what counts as literacy and whose literacy matters—though it is clear there is still room to grow when it comes to representing multiracial experiences like those of Wasian people.

Methodologies

Multimedia, Beyond Language

Mao writes "transnational Asian American rhetorical practices… have taken the form of cultural projects across a variety of disciplines and everyday cultural practices that engage in the reinvention, rearticulation, and rememory of transmigrations," but neglects to name products other than ethnographies, autobiographies, and autodocumentaries (2006). There are so many visual rhetorics and physical artifacts that go uncelebrated, and that foregoes the presence of Wasian narratives at all, which have been proven to lack the visibility of other Asian studies in my search of the WAC Clearinghouse and DALN.

Understandably, it is my desire to see Wasian stories surge in popularity and volume. My investigation of Asian rhetorics and literacies in this paper has been valuable in revealing what work has been done and what is yet to be documented. There are mediums to share our stories, particularly in journals of comparative or cultural rhetoric, autobiographies, and the DALN. However, these avenues often remain confined to academic audiences, limiting the reach and resonance of Wasian narratives. To truly amplify these stories, we must embrace a broader range of mediums—such as digital storytelling, visual arts, podcasts, zines, and community-based public scholarship—that can bridge academic spaces and everyday lived

experiences. Expanding the methodologies through which we document and celebrate Wasian literacy and rhetoric is not just a matter of representation; it is a necessary step toward legitimizing the complex, hybrid realities that have long existed but rarely been given voice. I hope for a day that Wasian community is not something I have to seek out or advocate for—that it is always within arm's reach.

Conclusion

The breadth of literature in composition and rhetoric offers invaluable context for future action, but it is clear that Wasian representation remains almost entirely absent. Comparative rhetoric, cross-cultural rhetorics, and literacy studies provide frameworks to think critically about identity, language, and power, but they have yet to fully account for Wasian experiences like mine. Ultimately, what we do with the knowledge these fields provide rests on the individual compositionist. Awareness alone is not enough—action must follow. We must question not just how we study marginalized rhetorics, but how we make space for them in ways that are visible, valued, and sustainable. What is this action? Conversations; art. Authentic narratives from Wasian people for Wasian people in public forums. What I need to thrive is not just a place in a classroom, journal, or conference, but a true invitation to bring my full self into dialogue. To write and speak not as an exception, but as part of an ongoing, living conversation.

Yet, I also recognize the privilege that grants me access to the theories and histories that allow me to even name these absences. Comparative rhetoric feels validating, but only because I am positioned—at this moment—as a graduate student with access to archives, research databases, and institutional support. What happens beyond this protected environment? If knowledge remains locked behind paywalls and academic gatekeeping, how can it empower those it seeks to represent? Composition must be made accessible, tangible,

and actionable for the communities it claims to serve. Otherwise, it risks becoming another archive of good intentions, untouched by the people it was meant to uplift.

After the conclusion of this class, I hope to talk about my discoveries with friends, family, and peers. Perhaps beginning conversations about intersectionality is outside my ability as a first-year graduate student, but certainly I can begin to make change within my social circle. Sharing these ideas, challenging assumptions, and creating spaces where mixed-race experiences like mine are seen is a meaningful first step. Change does not always have to start at the institutional level; sometimes it begins in living rooms, group chats, and quiet moments of connection. By bringing what I have learned into my personal life, I can lay the groundwork for broader conversations, and eventually, broader transformations.

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