

《纽约时报》涉华读者来信中  
“人身攻击”论证的语用论辩  
研究

A Pragma-Dialectical Study  
of Personal Attack in China-  
Related Letters to the Editor  
of *The New York Times*

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本文借助语用论辩学的研究框架,分析《纽约时报》涉华读者来信中“人身攻击”论证的使用,并对其使用的合理性进行评价。研究结果显示:《纽约时报》涉华“读者来信”中的人身攻击论证主要可分为三个子类型:辱骂型(侮辱他人)、境况型(怀疑动机)和“你也是”型(你也这样做),部分“人身攻击”论证的使用合理,部分“人身攻击”论证的使用引起谬误。其中造成不合理的“人身攻击”论证使用的原因主要是:(1)其论证的使用阻碍了反方提出质疑或相反立场;(2)在逻辑上存在缺陷或无效,经不起批判性问题的检视。鉴于此,我们建议相关话语主体在类似话语实践中使用论证时应注意:(1)根据语用论辩学的批判性讨论准则(“十大诫律”),合理设计论证;(2)将受众视为罪严苛的理性评判者,确保论证能够经得起任何形式的批判性检视,维护自身理性、负责任的形象。

This article under the research framework of pragma-dialectics, analyses the use of personal attacks in the China-related Letters to the Editor of *The New York Times*, and evaluates its reasonableness. The research results show that the personal attacks in the China-related Letters to the Editor of *The New York Times* can be mainly classified into three subtypes: the abusive variant (insult others), the circumstantial variant (suspect motives) and the *tu quoque* (you also). Both reasonable and unreasonable use of personal attack are identified. The unreasonable use of personal attack is mainly caused by: (1) the use of personal attack prevents the opponents from casting doubts or proposing his or her standpoint; (2) the use of personal attack has deficiency or even is invalid in logic, failing in the examination of critical questions. On account of this, the related discourse subjects in similar kind of discourse practice, should: (1) design their arguments reasonably according to the code of conduct of critical discussion (Ten Commandments); (2) consider the audience as an extremely rigor one, making sure that the

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[关键词] 读者来信; 纽约时报; 语用论辩学;  
人身攻击

argument can pass any critical examination,  
and so the rational and responsible figure of the  
proponents can be guaranteed.

**Key words:** Letters to the Editor; *The New York Times*; Pragma-Dialectics; personal attack.

## 1. Introduction

Letters to the Editor is a standing column in western mainstream news media, serving as a platform for readers to discuss current affairs. Through raising some questions or topics, the column enables readers to “express their opinions, their fears, their hopes and, just as important, air their grievances” (Jackson, 1971: 152). Sometimes, the media may try to guide the public opinion through the Letters to the Editors, because this column seems to give readers a chance to choose their position from several different or even completely contradictory opinions selected in the columns. However, letters selected for this column may be well-designed to give readers an impression that the positions held by the newspaper are reasonable while the opponents’ are relatively unreasonable.

China Threat Theory, China Rising or something like Pax Sinica are always hot topics in western media, and so are they in the Letters to the Editor. But still, we can hear more and more voice appealing for a rational judgment on China’s rising. Those above are an epitome of the west’s complicated attitude towards the revival of China, and it is notable that the public opinion can greatly influence Sino-Western relations. While supporting their standpoint about China, personal attacks are frequently used by writers of Letters to the Editor to reinforce persuasiveness. Moreover, different types of personal attack used in different contexts, whether reasonable or unreasonable they are, may take completely different effects.

Extensive research has been done on Letters to the Editor by scholars, mainly from the perspectives of journalism and communication. Some researchers focus in particular on the function and social influence of the letters of the editor (刘荣忠, 2001; 彭垒, 2007; Bromley, 2008; 李娜, 齐红志, 2009). Other researchers pay more attention to opinions expressed in the Letters to the Editor, instead of the verbal characteristics (王彩霞, 2002; Richardson & Franklin, 2004; Wober, 2004). From those researches mentioned above we can find that the role of discourse in those letters is

totally ignored, let alone its argumentative nature. We believe that the ultimate function of Letters to the Editor is to serve as a part of well-designed argument to justify the media's standpoints or as a part of weak argument to decrease the acceptability of their opponents' standpoints. The reasonable use of certain arguments may intensify the persuasiveness while the unreasonable use may cause fallacies. That is to say, if our research aims to reveal the persuasive mechanism embedded in the letters, we should systematically study those letters from the perspective of dialectics, exploring the reasonableness of argument used in the Letters to the Editor.

Therefore, this paper, based on the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation, is going to make a detailed analysis of China - related Letters to the Editor from *The New York Times*, concentrating on identification, classification and evaluation of personal attack, and aiming to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What subtype(s) of personal attack are prototypically used in the Letters to the Editor of *The New York Times*?
- 2) Are those personal attacks used in Letters to the Editor reasonable in *The New York Times*? Why?
- 3) What are the functions of the personal attack used in Letters to the Editor in *The New York Times*?

## 2. Research Framework of Pragma-Dialectics

Pragma-dialectics, deriving from 1970s, is one of the most important western contemporary argumentation theories. This theory, on the one hand, return to the tradition of ancient dialectics, regarding argumentation as a critical discussion between protagonist and antagonist aiming to the resolve the difference of opinion; on the other hand, based on the classic pragmatic theories, it treats the critical discussion of the two parties as complicated speech acts, analyzing which speech acts execute which argumentative functions.

In pragma-dialectics, argumentation refers to “a verbal, social and rational activity aimed at convincing a reasonable critic of the acceptability of a standpoint by putting forward a constellation of one or more propositions to justify this standpoint” (van Eemeren et al., 1996: 5). During an argumentation, the protagonist tries to defend his stance, whereas the antagonist casts doubt on the standpoint at issue through a systematically verbal or written exchange of views. Both parties try to

persuade the opposite to accept the former's or abandon the latter's standpoint.

Considering that argumentation, by its essence, is a kind of critical discussion, the reasonableness of argumentation should be judged according to an ideal model of argumentation. In this model, four stages are distinguished in the process of resolving a difference of opinion:

the confrontation stage in which the difference of opinion is developed, the opening stage in which the procedural and other starting points are established, the argumentation stage in which the argumentation is put forward and subjected to critical reaction, and the concluding stage in which the outcome of the discussion is determined (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: 134).

Although the real argumentations in daily life do not always progress along the sequence of this model, any arguer who is (or seemingly is) intended to resolve the difference of opinion on the merits will in fact, directly or indirectly complete the communicative tasks endowed by the four stages. Those tasks are establishing the difference of opinion, identifying the protagonist and antagonist, establishing the starting point, advancing argument and drawing conclusion.

In order to evaluate the reasonableness of both results and process in argumentation, pragma-dialectics set up for the critical discussion a "code of conduct" consisting of ten fundamental rules - often referred as "Ten Commandments" - that must be taken into account in resolving a difference of opinion on the merits (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004). If followed, these rules will help to optimize the resolution of difference of opinion, but any violation of those rules will lead to different types of fallacies. Here are the ten rules.

1) The freedom rule: parties must not prevent each other from putting forward standpoints or casting doubt on standpoints.

2) The burden-of-proof rule: a party who puts forward a standpoint is obliged to defend it if asked to do so.

3) The standpoint rule: a party's attack on a standpoint must relate to the standpoint that has indeed been advanced by the other party.

4) The relevance rule: a party may defend his or her standpoint only by advancing argumentation related to that standpoint.

5) The unexpressed premise rule: a party may not falsely present something as a premise that has been left unexpressed by the other party or deny a premise that he or she has left implicit.

6) The starting point rule: no party may falsely present a premise as an accepted starting point, or deny a premise representing an accepted starting point.

7) The argument scheme rule: a standpoint may not be regarded as conclusively defended if the defense does not take place by means of an appropriate argument scheme that is correctly applied.

8) The validity rule: the reasoning in the argumentation must be logically valid or must be capable of being made valid by making explicit one or more unexpressed premises.

9) The closure rule: a failed defense of a standpoint must result in the protagonist retracting the standpoint, and a successful defense of a standpoint must result in the antagonist retracting his or her doubts.

10) The usage rule: parties must not use any formulations that are insufficiently clear or confusingly ambiguous, and they must interpret the formulations of the other party as carefully and accurately as possible (van Eemeren, Grootendorst & Henkenmans, 2002: 110-136).

Therefore, according to this theory, a pragma-dialectical study of Letters to the Editor should be comprised by the following two parts: (1) Reconstruction of argumentative discourse: First, establish the difference of opinion. Then, delete every part of the discourse that is irrelevant to the process of resolving the difference of opinion concerned; add all the information that remains implicit but is relevant to the resolution (including unexpressed premise; unexpressed conclusion; anticipated doubt and so on); rearrange according to the ideal model, the discourse that is relevant to the resolution but is not presented in an appropriate order; substitute the equivocal discourse that fulfil a specific function in the resolution with clear expressions (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004: 108-110). After that, an analysis overview composed by those key elements of argumentation including difference of opinion, standpoint, protagonist, antagonist, argumentation structure, argument scheme and conclusion, can be extracted. (2) Evaluation of the reasonableness: Evaluate whether the speech acts that bear those key elements violate the Ten Commandments. If violating, clarify which fallacy the speech act cause.

### **3. Personal Attack Viewed from Pragma-Dialectical Perspective**

Studies on personal attack have begun since Hellenistic period (Chichi, 2002; Walton, 2004) when many elocutionists used such an argumentative strategy to attack their opponents' credibility in order to

disable opponents' (potential) doubts or counter arguments, while increasing the acceptability of their own standpoints.

The basic form of personal attack is: *a* is a bad person.

Therefore *a*'s argument  $\alpha$  should not be accepted  
(Walton, 2007: 183).

Traditionally, personal attack is studied under the framework of logic and is generally regarded as a kind of fallacy, namely *argumentum ad hominem*. It is defined as “one in which the thrust is directed, not at a conclusion, but at some person who defends the conclusion in dispute” (Copi, Cohen & McMahon, 2014: 118). Most logicians classify *argumentum ad hominem* as a fallacy of relevance (武宏志, 2000; Whatly, 2008). It is fallacious because “the personal character of a man is irrelevant to the truth or falsehood of what he says or the correctness or incorrectness of his argument” (Copi, Cohen & McMahon, 2014: 54). However, more and more scholars argue that in some situations, personal attack could be reasonable (Johnstone, 1952; Walton, 1985; 黄展骥, 2000; 马永侠, 2003).

In pragma-dialectics, both reasonable personal attack and its fallacious use - *argumentum ad hominem* are studied. The *argumentum ad hominem* is regarded as the “derailment” of personal attack strategic maneuvering<sup>1</sup>, and it is the unreasonable use of personal attack, while personal attack is the general category or neutral counterpart of the fallacy of *argumentum ad hominem*. Therefore, in this paper, we use the general category meaning of the term personal attack, which contains its fallacious use - *argumentum ad hominem*.

In order to evaluate more precisely the argumentation where different types of personal attack occur, it is necessary to identify which kind of type is used when confronting a personal attack in a given case.

According to van Eemeren & Grootendorst (1992: 110-113), there are three variants of personal attack. The first one is the “abusive” variant, which refers to derogating one’s opponent by casting doubt on his expertise, intelligence, character, or good faith. For example, “Mr. Green is a person with low moral standard.” The second is the “circumstantial” variant. The arguer shows suspect to the motive of his opponent’s standpoint or doubt and claims that the opponent has an interest in the

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<sup>1</sup> For more details about strategic maneuvering, see F. H. van Eemeren, 2010. *Strategic Maneuvering in Argumentative Discourse*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

matter. For example, “Peter is a Catholic priest, and he could not be trusted, because he will only do what Pope says is right.” The third variant is usually referred to by its Latin name the *tu quoque*. It is an attempt made to find a contradiction in one party’s words or between his words and his deeds (who fails to practice what he preaches) so as for the other party to undermine his credibility. For example, the US always appeals for democracy, while in Middle East, it always supports Saudi Arabia, a country ruled by dictators, but the US is also strongly against Iran, a country where citizens can freely elect their president. The first type attacks the personality directly while the second and the third types attack the personality indirectly.

In pragma dialectics, the fallacious use of all the three subtypes of personal attack often violates the first rule of the Ten Commandments - the freedom rule, by declaring that the opponent has no qualification to be one party in an argumentative discourse, because the other party is prevented from putting forward standpoints or casting doubt on standpoints, and the resolution of difference is hence impeded.

#### **4. Identification and Classification of Personal Attack in Letters to the Editor**

In this paper, a corpus with 135 China-related Letters to the Editor in *The New York Times* from January 1st, 2013 to March 31st, 2016 is set up, and a pragma-dialectical analysis has been made. As a result, 17 letters containing personal attacks are detected by comparison between the typical argument scheme of personal attack and the argument scheme we extracted from the reconstruction of argumentative discourse. Argument scheme refers to the manner how an arguer defends his standpoint. “By means of the argument scheme, the arguments and the standpoint being defended are linked together in a specific way, which may or may not be done correctly” (van Eemeren, Grootendorst & Henkenmans, 2002: 96). Pragma-dialectical theory abstracts three basic categories of argument scheme: argument scheme for the symptomatic relation, argument scheme for the relation of analogy and argument scheme for a causal relation.

After analyzing the data through the pragma-dialectical way of argumentation, we clarify all the personal attack in the letters and find that all the three types of personal attack are prototypically used, including 4 letters with the abusive variant, 7 letters with the circumstantial variant, 6 letters with the *tu quoque* and 1 letter with both the circumstantial variant and the *tu quoque*.

Some representative cases analyzed are illustrated as follows:

#### 4.1 The abusive variant

Case 1 is a segment selected from the Letters to the Editors of *The New York Times* on Oct. 8, 2014, which reflects the division of the protesters during the Occupy Central event in Hong Kong. Here it illustrates the abusive variant of the personal attack.

##### Case 1:

Hong Kong's business elite is potentially its most powerful private bulwark against despotism, but it seems to lack what the French call "civisme", or what we call public spirit. Placing their own economic self-interest above the movement for a stronger democracy, these tycoons have missed the opportunity to take the lead in supporting democratic reform in Hong Kong (*The New York Times*, October 8th, 2014).

In this segment, the author casts doubt on business elite's qualification of leading the so called "supporting democratic reform demonstration" in Hong Kong, by arguing that those elites do not have enough public spirit. And to most of us, those who engage in public affairs must value the public interest. Therefore, we can conclude that the difference of opinion in this discourse is whether Hong Kong's business elite is qualified of taking the lead in supporting the democratic reform, and to this question, the author says "nein". Then, we can generalize from the segment of this letters as a kind of symptomatic argument scheme which is described as:

In argumentation based on a symptomatic relation, a standpoint is defended by citing in the argument a certain sign, symptom, or distinguishing mark of what is claimed in the standpoint. On the grounds of this concomitance, the speaker claims that the standpoint should be accepted (van Eemeren, Grootendorst & Henkenmans, 2002: 97).

And such symptomatic argument scheme can be expressed as follows:

Standpoint: Y is true of X  
premise 1 *because*: Z is true of X  
premise 2 *and*: Z is symptomatic of Y  
(van Eemeren, Grootendorst & Henkenmans, 2002: 99).

Fitting this letter into the symptomatic argument scheme, the argument can be reconstructed as follows:

**Standpoint:** The business elite in Hong Kong is not qualified to lead the supporting democratic reform in Hong Kong.

**because:** The business elite in Hong Kong seems to lack public spirit.

**and (unexpressed premise):** Lack of public spirit is symptomatic of not being qualified to lead the supporting democratic reform.

Whether the allegation in this case is true or false does not need to be considered immediately. What we should do now is to perceive the personal attack element in the argument scheme. Here the author attacks the business elite's personal character for lacking public spirit and lacking public spirit is a kind of bad character. Because they have such a bad character, they may value more their self-interests than the masses'; that is to say, they may never sacrifice their own interests for a democratic reform. Therefore, their leading position is unacceptable.

The abusive personal attack scheme is put forward by Walton (1998), which is illustrated as follows:

*a* is a person of bad character.

Therefore *a*'s argument *a* should not be accepted (Walton, 1998: 249).

In Case 1, we can describe the personal attack as:

The business elite has a bad character for lacking public spirit.

Therefore, we should not accept them as leaders.

It is clear for readers to find that the argument scheme extracted from Case 1 completely corresponds with Walton's argument scheme of *abusive* variant. Therefore, we can confidently say that the abusive variant of the personal attack in Case 1 is successfully identified.

#### 4.2 The circumstantial variant

Case 2 is a segment from a letter written by a retired director of a hotel who is strongly against the possible sale of the hotel to a Chinese company.

Case 2:

I am dismayed at the possible sale of the hotel to Chinese interests. The Waldorf is the official residence of the United States ambassador to the United Nations. As such, we should be concerned about national security. Will the

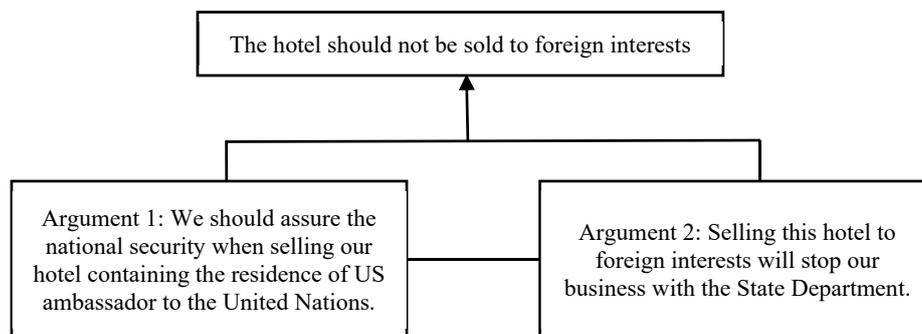
State Department continue to house our ambassador and visiting heads of state in a foreign-owned hotel (*The New York Times*, October 20th, 2014)?

In this case, the difference of opinion is whether the Waldorf-Astoria should be sold to Chinese company, and the author expresses his opposition in the first place. In order to support his standpoint, the writer takes two steps (two arguments). First, he reminds us that national security should be concerned in this incident (one necessary precondition of selling this hotel is to assure the national security). The second step is that he argues through a rhetorical question that selling this hotel to foreign interests will spur the State Department to stopping housing their ambassador in this hotel. Such structure of argumentation is classified a coordinative argumentation.

Coordinative argumentation is one single attempt at defending the standpoint that consists of a combination of arguments that must be taken together to constitute a conclusive defense (van Eemeren, Grootendorst & Henkenmans, 2002: 65).

To present the results of the analysis in a clear and concise way, the argumentation structure is displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Argumentation structure of case 2



Next, we will try to identify the personal attack from the structure we reconstruct. In argument 2, the hotel is the official residence of the US ambassador to the UN, so the hotel needs to be secured without any risk, and the writer also emphasizes that the hotel may lose their business with the State Department without any further proof (argument 2). Perhaps the emphasis (argument 2) can only be regarded as a claim, but after a further

analysis, we can find that it is actually an argument with an unexpressed premise. That is, to some people, foreign capital may actually serve its own country and therefore, bring more risk on national security such as spy, especially the capital from China, a country ruled by the Communist Party who was once hostile to the US. And apparently, the State department will never endure any threat to national security.

Here, argument scheme in argument 2 could be classified as a causal argument scheme. According to pragma-dialectics, by making a relation of causality between argument and standpoint, “the standpoint, given the argument, ought to be accepted on the grounds of this connection”. Such kind of argument scheme could be illustrated as follows:

Standpoint: Y is true of X  
 premise 1 *because*: Z is true of X  
 premise 2 *and*: Z leads to Y  
 (van Eemeren, Grootendorst & Henkenmans, 2002: 101).

Fitting this letter to the causal argument scheme, we can reconstruct the argument as follows:

Standpoint: Selling this hotel to foreign interests will made the State Department stop business with us.  
*because*: Threat to national security will make the State department stop business.  
*and* (unexpressed premise): Selling the hotel to foreign interests will threaten national security.

Now, we can clearly see that a bias within it. Is that true the claim that a foreign company taking charge of the hotel will threaten the security of the government agency in the hotel? Or more extremely, is that fair to accuse all foreign companies and label them as untrustworthy? Still, we do not make any judgment here, and what we know now is just that the author has a bias of discriminating all foreign interests when they try to do business with US government.

For this situation, Walton (1998) also provides his argument scheme (though he calls it “poisoning the well” personal attack, it can be classified as a subtype of circumstantial personal attack).

1. For every argument  $\alpha$  in dialogue D, person  $a$  is biased.
2. Person  $a$ 's bias is a failure to take part honestly in a type of dialogue D (activity), which includes  $\alpha$ .
3. Therefore  $a$  is a bad person.

4. Therefore  $\alpha$  should not be given as much credibility as it would have without the bias (Walton, 1998: 255).

Trying to fit this letter in this more precise argument scheme, we can draw that:

1) For every business with the State Department in US (including providing residence for the US ambassador to the UN), a foreign company is biased for gaining interests for their own country.

2) Such foreign company's bias makes itself unable to honestly take part in doing business with the State Department (including the providing residence for the US ambassador to the UN).

3) Therefore, foreign company is unreliable (bad).

4) Therefore, a foreign company providing residence for the US ambassador to the UN should not be allowed because the foreign company cannot do this without bias.

Finding that this time the argument scheme also corresponds with Walton's scheme, we could say that we have identified the circumstantial variant of the personal attack successfully.

#### 4.3 The *tu quoque*

There are two kinds of the *tu quoque* personal attack. The first is an attempt to undermine the other party's credibility by pointing out a contradiction in the other party's words or deeds, such as not practicing what you preach. The second is to respond like "you are just as bad". Case 3 and Case 4 will explain the two kinds respectively.

Case 3 is a segment from a letter written by the consul general of Japan in New York, discussing the territorial disputes of Japan.

Case 3:

The article's suggestion that resources might be the reason behind Japan's claim ignores the fact that it was China that suddenly began to make its territorial claims on the Senkaku Islands in the 1970s, only after a United Nations report indicated the potential existence of oil reserves in the area. Until then, China had not contested Japan's sovereignty for over 70 years (*The New York Times*, January 17th, 2015).

We can infer from those sentences that the difference of opinion in this segment is the territorial ownership of the Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands

and in this argumentation, the author tries to convince the readers that the Islands belong to Japan by questioning the soundness of China's claim. Easily, we could identify the circumstantial variant of personal attack, because the author criticizes that China's claim for the sovereignty is motivated by the potential oil resources, reflecting that China is biased in the dialogue of territorial disputes. It may be properly interpreted that China's claim for the sovereignty is just for the oil, not because of the historical reality or national law, and it lowers China's qualification to argue in international political stage.

We can find out the first kind of the *tu quoque*. Here, "China that suddenly began to make its territorial claims ... in the 1970s ... Until then, China had not contested Japan's sovereignty for over 70 years", reflects a kind of inconsistency of China's words, and the author wants to prove that China's claim has no plausibility because China has never stuck to his opinion. In this case, the argument scheme could also be abstract as a kind of causal scheme as follows:

Standpoint: China's claim is untrustworthy.

*because*: China is a country who doesn't practice what he preaches.

*and* (unexpressed premise): The claim of someone who doesn't practice what he preaches is untrustworthy.

Here we can clearly see that it is an attempt to undermine China's credibility by pointing out a contradiction in China's words. About this situation, Walton also provides his argument scheme:

1. *a* advocates argument  $\alpha$ , which has proposition *A* as its conclusion.
2. *a* has carried out an action or set of actions that imply that *a* is personally committed to *A* (the opposite, or negation of *A*).
3. Therefore *a* is a bad person.
4. Therefore *a*'s argument  $\alpha$  should not be accepted (Walton, 1998: 254).

Fitting Case 3 in this scheme as follows:

1) China did not advocate the sovereignty of Diaoyu Islands in the past, and we can conclude a proposition that China has no doubt on Japan's ownership of Diaoyu Islands.

2) That China now says that Diaoyu Islands belong to China implies a contradiction with its previous attitude towards Japan's ownership.

3) Therefore China has a bad character for not practicing what he preaches.

4) Therefore, China's claim that Diaoyu Islands belong to China should not be accepted.

Hence, the first kind of the *tu quoque* is identified in Case 3.

The second kind or basic form of the *tu quoque* occurs “when someone casts doubt on a standpoint of which he himself is an adherent” (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992: 111-112). Case 4 is a segment from a letter whose author appeals for a rational perspective on Chinese Navy's development.

Case 4:

The United States has naval bases that are intended to control the China Sea and the Eastern Pacific basin. These bases – in Okinawa, Singapore, the Philippines, Guam and South Korea – are thousands of miles from American shores, yet the United States has the gall to complain that China builds one naval base fewer than 800 miles from its coastline to counter American intrusions (*The New York Times*, April 8th, 2014).

In this case, the difference of opinion the author tries to resolve is the reasonableness of China's intention for building naval bases. From the context, we could infer that the author is responding to the US government officers who criticize China's intention of building naval bases and the author appeals for a rational attitude towards such a problem and expresses his understanding of China by indicating that “you Americans also do that”. In compare with the action of American Navy (building much more bases), the author tries to prove the soundness of China's intention. So, an analogy argument scheme is suitable here.

According to pragma-dialectics, this argument is based on a relation of analogy. An arguer defends his standpoint by showing the similarity between what is stated in the argument and what is stated in the standpoint “and that on the grounds of this resemblance the standpoint should be accepted”. The analogy argument scheme could be illustrated as follows:

Standpoint: Y is true of X  
premise 1 *because*: Z is true of X  
premise 2 *and*: Z comparable to Y  
(van Eemeren, Grootendorst & Henkenmans, 2002: 99).

We could also find such an analogy in our case.

Standpoint: China's building navy bases is reasonable.

*because*: America's building navy bases is reasonable.

*and* (unexpressed premise): China is comparable to America (perhaps both two countries are big countries and need strong navy to fulfil their international obligations).

Such analogy expressed that "you also do that". Since America's building navy bases could be understood, so does China's, let alone the fact that China is trying to defend the harassment and the invading from American Navy.

About this kind of the *tu quoque* personal attack, Walton's argument scheme is as follows:

Proponent: Respondent, you are a morally bad person; therefore, your argument should not be accepted.

Respondent: You are just as bad, therefore your personal attack against me should not be accepted as having any worth (Walton, 1998: 256).

Easily, we will see that in a complete form of the second kind of the *tu quoque* argument, there are actually two personal attacks. The first is abusive or circumstantial variant, and the second is the *tu quoque* variant which kicks back the first personal attack to the proponent, and the *tu quoque* personal attack we discuss here is the returning.

Here, case 4 is only the words of the respondent, but the ticking back process is included. In this case, this scheme could be illustrated as follows:

Supporters of US: China, you are bad because your intention of building navy bases threatens ...; therefore, your action should not be accepted.

Supporters of China: US, you are also bad because you build much more navy bases than mine; therefore, your charge of me should not be accepted.

In this case, we find that the writers of the letters return the possible attack of the proponent by arguing that "you also build navy bases", and a typical the *tu quoque* personal attack is identified.

## 5. Evaluation of Personal Attack in Letters to the Editors

Evaluation means to judge whether the argument is reasonable or not, and whether the argument is acceptable or not, or in other words, to find out whether this argument is a fallacy or not.

Usually, in an argumentation containing personal attack, what we know is the standpoint provided by the proponent and an explicit premise (premise 1) to support the standpoint. And the logical connection between premise 1 and the standpoint is usually inexplicit and needs us to infer, which is usually referred to as an unexpressed premise.

In the process of the evaluation, rational readers can put forward some critical questions about the facticity of the premise or about the logical connections between the explicit premise and the standpoint. If the premise is true and the logical connection can stand the test of the critical question, meanwhile the argument does not violate any rule of the Ten Commandments, we can say that such personal attack is reasonable and the persuasiveness is enhanced. Otherwise, such personal attack is unreasonable and leads to a fallacy. Hence, the resolution of the difference of opinion is obstructed.

### 5.1 Reasonable use of personal attack

Walton (1998) believes that when evaluating the abusive personal attack, we have two questions to consider. The first is whether the claim on which the allegation of bad character is made is true; the second and the more important is even if the premise that *a* has a bad character is true, it will not detract from what *a* asserts. From that, we can propose two kinds of critical questions (hereinafter CQ) which will help us to examine the soundness of the personal attack argument.

CQ1: Is the premise true (or well supported) that *a* is a person of bad character (lacking public spirit)?

CQ2: Is the issue of character relevant in the situation in which the argument is used (Walton, 1998: 250)?

In a pragma-dialectical view, we should not and are unable to make any subjective judgment on the authenticity of the fact, because that is beyond our research scope, and some experts from certain areas have more authority to speak for the facticity. Therefore, pragma-dialecticians always focuses on whether the logic connection (premise 2) we infer between the reason (premise 1) the protagonist provides and the standpoint it wants to prove, is reasonable (CQ2) and that is what we need to discuss now.

In Case 1, it's beyond our duty to judge whether those business elites are really lacking public spirit, so what we need to discuss is just the logic connection or unexpressed premise - "Lack of public spirit is symptomatic of not being qualified to lead the supporting democratic reform" and this seems to be reasonable (the leader of a democratic reform truly needs to own public spirit), so the standpoint becomes more acceptable because of the reasonable use of personal attack.

Case 4 is the second kind of the *tu quoque* personal attack - to respond like "you are just as bad", the respondent's "you also did" also reflects a special kind of inconsistency. That is to say, the proponent attacks the action of respondent but the proponent himself also does that. It's a kind of inconsistency between his speech and deeds, or we can say it's a kind of double standard, because the proponent demands the respondent with one standard, while he demands himself with another standard. And the respondent attacks the proponent on this kind of inconsistency. Therefore, in this situation what the critical question we should ask is the same as the first kind.

In Case 4, the author criticizes America's inconsistent attitude towards building navy bases and casts doubt on the qualification of Americans on complaining about China's building (The United States has naval bases... yet the United States has the gall to complain...). Apparently, it is a reasonable personal attack, because on that condition, the US has no qualification to condemn others on building navy bases, and an unreasonable figure of US with double standard has been successfully constructed. Therefore, the credibility of America's standpoint or counter argument is decreased.

### 5.2 *Unreasonable use of personal attack*

Case 2 is a kind of the circumstantial variant of the personal attack. In order to evaluate the circumstantial variant of the personal attack, we do not need to be entangled with whether the claim that *a* is biased is true, and what we should focus on is whether the circumstantial element is really relevant to the standpoint; that is to say, we should think twice whether the unexpressed premise (premise 2) is reasonable. Therefore, here the critical question we could ask is:

CQ: Is the circumstantial elements (bias) detrimental to *a*'s honestly taking part in the activity (Walton, 1998: 255).

In the argument 2 in Case 2, the Chinese company has a circumstantial element that it is also a foreign company. It is biased for being unable to honestly take part in the business with the State Department and it may only gain interest for their own country. Concerning the standpoint, we can conclude that the unexpressed premise is “selling the hotel to a foreign company will threaten the national security.” Here the critical question we should ask is: Is it true to claim that a foreign company cannot honestly take part in doing business with the State Department just because of such a possibly existing bias? It seems hard to judge whether this connection is reasonable.

But in Pragma-Dialectics, any argumentative move, by any of the parties, that goes against any of the rules of the code of conduct obstructs or hinders the resolution process and is therefore to be considered fallacious (van Eemeren, 2013). Here, the author’s declaration that foreign interests are untrustworthy, violates the rule one, the freedom rule: **parties must not prevent each other from putting forward standpoints or casting doubt on standpoints** (van Eemeren, Grootendorst & Henkenmans, 2002: 110). If the foreign companies are dishonest or untrustworthy, then any response or refutation they want to make is nonsense, because they have been labelled as an unqualified arguer. And no rational arguer or readers will waste any time on the unqualified arguers’ words. Therefore, the resolution of the difference of opinions is obstructed.

So, we can say that this personal attack is unreasonable and it leads to an *ad hominem* fallacy. And to some extent, this personal attack constructs an impolite figure of the author, because he not only insults others’ intention, but also refuses further dialogue.

Please notice that in case 1, the author does not violate the freedom rule because his argument does not prevent those business elites from putting forward further opinions. The writer never suspects the credibility of those elites and lacking public spirit cannot be regarded as character of an unqualified arguer in that event.

In most cases, what is more reasonable is more acceptable. However, it is noteworthy that unreasonableness doesn’t equal to being unacceptable. Not all the readers are rational or professional enough to put forward a proper critical question, or are willing to think critically, perhaps because of some interests involved. For example, in case 2, to those readers who cannot detect the fallacy or who have already hold the bias that China’s capital does harm to American’s security, such unreasonable personal attack is acceptable to them, appealing to their

appetite. Therefore, such use of personal attack, though unreasonable to some extent, maintains or even increases its acceptability to its target readers, and could also be regarded as a well-designed argumentative strategy.

Case 3 is the first kind of the *tu quoque* personal attack - an attempt to undermine the other party's credibility by pointing out a contradiction in the other party's words or deeds, we should pay more attention to how relevant the inconsistency of his words or deeds to the standpoint is. It means to examine the soundness of premise 2. So the critical question here is:

CQ: Does the inconsistency really reflect that he has a low credibility and his conclusion is not acceptable (Walton, 1998: 254)?

In most cases, such kind of premise is unreasonable, because what he or she said or did in the past cannot represent his or her stance at present except for those allegations with legal effect. And usually, the silence does not represent acquiescence too.

In Case 3, the author questions China's credibility by emphasizing the inconsistency of China's words. But here what we should pay more attention is the fact that although China did not claim the sovereignty of Diaoyu Islands before the 1970s, but the silence did not represent that China has admitted Japan's ownership or China has abandoned his rights in this maritime space. Therefore, China's claim cannot be rejected arbitrarily and the inconsistency cannot reflect that China's claim is unreasonable.

On the other hand, the author's attack on China's inconsistency aims to declare that China is untrustworthy, because he cannot preach what he says. It also obviously violates the freedom rule, because this declaration asserts that China is an unqualified arguer and prevents China from expressing his opinion or casting doubt on Japan's standpoint, which reflects the irrationality of the author. It blocks the resolution of the difference of opinion.

## 6. Conclusions

This thesis analyzes the personal attack in Letters to the Editor in *The New York Times* from the perspective of pragma-dialectics by constructing and evaluating the argumentative discourse within it, breaking through the traditional research framework of Letters to the Editor. The personal attacks in the Letters to the Editor, both reasonable and unreasonable, are

identified through the reconstruction of argumentative discourse, classified into three subtypes, and evaluated according to the “Ten Commandments”, and their potential argumentative functions are illustrated. The reasonable use of personal attack will enhance the persuasiveness and accelerate resolving the difference of opinion while the fallacious use of it, which hinders the resolution, decreases the acceptability of standpoint (to a rational reader) or even , either violates the Ten Commandments by preventing the opponent from casting doubts or advancing his or her standpoint, or has deficiency or even is invalid in logic, failing in the examination of critical questions provided by rational readers.

The Ten Commandments in pragma-dialectics provides us a referable standard to evaluate the reasonableness of arguments, however, as the case 2 we mentioned above, in our daily practice, it is possible that in some certain situation, some well-designed argument, though not totally reasonable or the fallacy is not easy to be detected, is still acceptable generally, and such arguments though sacrificing its reasonableness, can still enhance the persuasiveness. Therefore, a more precise context-dependent code of conduct based on the Ten Commandments should be found out in order to make a better evaluation of arguments, exploring their argumentative functions.

In addition, some heuristic suggestions can be extracted from this research to those related discourse subjects who are going to put forward arguments in such kind of discourse practice: (1) arguments should be designed reasonably according to the code of conduct of critical discussion (Ten Commandments); (2) while designing the arguments, the audience should be considered as an extremely rigor and rational one, making sure that the argument can pass any critical examination, and so the rational and responsible figure of the proponents can be guaranteed. Although some intentional or unintentional unreasonable arguments are acceptable to some audiences, at last they will still be criticized by rational readers, which is detrimental to the rationality of the proponents' figure and further, to the acceptability of his whole argumentation.

In the future research, more data will be collected, and the research will be perfected by a multi-angel analysis combing the theories of argumentation, communication and journalism, making a more comprehensive and scientific understanding of Letters to the Editor, especially how does it help to shape the public opinion. To sum up, in the future, with more data and more research perspectives, we can draw more

comprehensive conclusions, so as to find a better way for the communication of Sino-Western mass media.

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