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WIT, POWER, AND OPPOSITIONAL GROUPS: A CASE STUDY OF "PURE TALK"

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WITTY conversation is often considered the pastime of a cultured elite, an essential part of the art of conversation, as in the *salons* of eighteenth-century France or the court circles of medieval Japan. Beyond this entertainment value wit also opened up to such cultural aristocracies an equally treasured aesthetic dimension: the artful recreation and refinement of one's social self through its presentation in conversation.

But wit may be cultivated just as intensively and skillfully by those further down the social ladder, and especially by groups standing in a problematic relationship to their dominant culture. For such oppositional or marginalized groups wit can provide more than entertainment and an outlet for creative urges. As a communicative strategy it helps build a community for the dispossessed, a world apart in which competitive displays of verbal agility and aplomb provide an alternative way to achieve status and also afford training for hostile encounters with the outside environment.

This essay contributes to the study of this second use of wit, its use by oppositional or peripheralized groups. The body of the essay concerns one such instance, the "Pure Talk" practiced in China from roughly 200–600 C.E. Though it was certainly the game of wit as played by a peripheralized out-group, Pure Talk was distinctive and perhaps even unique in several respects. Its practitioners were not inherently stigmatized nor were they socially oppressed as a class or cultural group. On the contrary, they overwhelmingly came from the literati class, and they were marginalized in part by historical circumstances, in part by their own choice. They themselves chose to frame their conflict with traditional Chinese culture as a philosophical clash and this led them to develop a rigorous form of dialectical debate of great intellectual promise.

Because of these atypical features, Pure Talk casts an unusual light on the dynamics and functions of the game of wit. What's more, since Pure Talk is a historical phenomenon, and a relatively well-documented one at that, its evolution and its disappearance can be linked to shifts in social and political conditions. These correlations allow some inferences about the relationship between wit and power for this group.

Thus, this essay will begin with an extended analysis of Pure Talk, an analysis which is methodologically inspired by the ethnography of communication.[1] This will be followed by a brief review and explication of the fate of Pure Talk. Finally, I will compare Pure Talk to the exercise of wit by certain contemporary oppositional groups. This comparison will be used to generate and support some hypotheses about the significance of wit and about the advantages and limitations of wit as a communicative strategy for achieving oppositional groups' goals.

Sources and Method

The central source for Pure Talk is the book *Shih-shuo hsin-yü [New Account of Tales of the World]* (c. 430 C.E.), which was produced under the aegis of Liu Hsiang.[2] This book is a collection of hundreds of anecdotes selected from one hundred and sixty-six contemporary sources and categorized into thirty-six chapters. The resulting compilation is, to put it mildly, a hodgepodge. It includes a range of genres: banter, moralistic admonitions, exegesis of classical texts, debates on metaphysical theses, aesthetic judgments, teasing, insults, poetry contests, compliments, and character sketches. There was no set form for the incidents which these anecdotes narrated or alluded to; they ranged from one-liners, or even a refusal to speak, to extended discussions lasting many hours. Individuals sometimes conveyed their meaning with a smile or laughter, a physical gesture, or even silence. The cast of characters included not only government officials, literati, and Buddhist monks, but also, on occasion, slaves, women, and even children.

Although scholars concur that this mélange is the central source for Pure Talk, they disagree over how much of it qualifies as such. Some scholars assert that only certain chapters consist of Pure Talk, although they do not agree on which these are.[3] A somewhat larger number maintain that the entire *SSHY* should be considered Pure Talk.[4] Predictably, these scholars also define Pure Talk differently.[5]

The *SSHY* itself contains no definition or explication of Pure Talk, presumably since those engaging in it knew what they were doing, and why. But the *SSHY* and other texts of its time do use the term to refer to particular communication phenomena. I began by collecting those instances where either the narrator or the participants called the activity Pure Talk (*ch'ing-t'an* or *ch'ing-yen*), assuming that these labelled examples are most likely to denote whatever is paradigmatic, unique, distinctive, or definitive of Pure Talk.[6] Next I turned to the individuals linked with Pure Talk (those described as "good at Pure Talk," "often joining in Pure Talk," and so on) and their speech activities, paying special attention to those which closely resembled the previously collected examples. Finally, as a supplementary source to be consulted more cautiously, I considered instances in the *SSHY* and other primary texts that were similar to the labelled examples.[7] The analysis of these examples was informed by the concepts and categories developed by ethnography of communication, *mutatis mutandis*.[8]

Pure Talk

In the primary texts the label "Pure Talk" is applied to one particular genre of discourse, philosophical expositions. Like Aristotelian dialectic, such exposition involved rigorous, systematic explication of general propositions.[9] These could take the form of monologues, as in the following instance:

> When Hsieh Shang was young he heard that Yin Hao was skilled in Pure Talk, and made a special trip to visit him. Yin, who had never before clarified anything for Hsieh, outlined several topics for him in a few hundred words. Since they had excellent content and at the same time the terminology was rich and complex, Hsieh found it quite enough to stir his imagination and tax his powers of listening. He was pouring out his spirit and overturning his mind, unaware that streaming sweat was crossing and recrossing his face.
>
> Yin calmly said to those in attendance, "Fetch a hand towel and give it to the young master Hsieh to wipe his face."[10]

The term "Pure Talk" more commonly referred to a discussion involving two or more people. These discussions were fairly structured debates. One person, usually the better-known, took the role of "host" (*chu;* often he was the actual host of the gathering) while the other took the role of "guest" (*k'o*).[11] Usually the host proposed a proposition or topic and then defended his position on it against the "guest."[12] The topics were drawn from the metaphysical and ethical controversies of the age and could range from a thesis such as "whether the sage has emotions" or a topic such as "The Empty and Transcendent" or "Natural Ability and Human Nature" to the interpretation of a passage or an entire book chapter. The argumentation was divided into "rounds" (*fan*) composed of "exchanges" (*chiao*) in which the "guest" raised his objections (*nan*). These disputations could last for hours or even days.[13]

Like Aristotelian dialectical disputation, these Pure Talk discussions occasionally involved a disinterested exploration of positions.[14] But more often they took the form of a competitive debate, a zero-sum game in which one speaker won at the expense of the other.

> Kuo Hsiang . . . challenged P'ei Hsia to a bout of conversation. Kuo's ability was extremely great, but for the first few exchanges he was not yet in stride. His marshaling of argument was also extremely vigorous, but P'ei calmly analyzed everything Kuo had said, and the effect of his reasoning was extremely subtle, so that everyone present sighed with admiration and delight.[15]

Indeed, military metaphors were frequently used to describe such agonistic debates.[16]

These expositions and debates were held either at private social gatherings at which the other guests constituted the audience or as formal public events at Buddhist lecture halls. Usually both debaters and audience members sat according to their status, the more prestigious nearer the host or the Buddhist teacher, the unknowns and onlookers further back. Audience members sometimes joined in the discussion, especially if the debaters seemed to be arguing at cross-purposes, and if his contributions were sufficiently insightful an audience member might be invited to move up front.

The goal of such Pure Talk gatherings was to determine the truth about the topic under discussion. However, unlike Greek *eristic,* Pure Talk disputation demanded that the debater maintain a position he believed in and support it with his own arguments.[17] However, it did not harm the outcome if the winner flaunted his superiority by himself raising and refuting further objections to his position.[18]

A victor almost always emerged from these matches and, since the debate demonstrated the truth, those who lost were supposed to concede and, ideally, adopt and even praise their opponent's argumentation. Yin Chung-k'an was one such gracious loser. Although he had laughed when Yang Fu predicted victory over him after four bouts,

> when they had gotten as far as the last clarification of the fourth bout, Yin heaved a sigh and said, "Indeed, I have nothing with which to disagree," and he praised the novelty and uniqueness of Yang's interpretation for a long time.[19]

Of course, not everyone could be such a good sport at this point. The phrase "So-and-so was embarrassed and withdrew" concludes a number of encounters, and in a very few cases the match ended in anger.

In theory the ultimate standard which determined the winner was accordance with "reason" (*li*).[20] But in reality being right was not enough. Far better to unfold a line of argument that was not only defensible but also "new" (*hsin*), "unique" (*ch'i*), "exhilarating" (*ch'ang*), or "marvelous" (*miao*). Further, the argumentation had to be elaborated in language that was euphonious, elevated and elegant, with the phrases parallel and balanced and the classical allusions broad-ranging and rich.

Last, and perhaps most importantly, debaters were judged on how well they had preserved the appropriate demeanor through the match. This was the quality of *ya liang,* which could be translated as "cultivated tolerance," "refined equanimity," or "cultured imperturbability." It was conveyed through tone of voice, expression, posture, and gesture as well as through speech. Supposedly this equanimity was the result of having reached an understanding of reality so profound that nothing could disturb one's calm—lacking this, individuals faked it as best they could. Given this standard, the observation that a flash of anger seemed genuine and not just a pose was an implicit criticism.[21] An individual's behavior when drunk, drugged, or surprised was considered even more revealing of this ability to maintain the stance of "refined equanimity." The Hsieh Shang of the first example, who was so overcome as to be oblivious even to his own body, illustrates an extreme loss of composure—hence Yin Hao's cutting remark (insolent because he and Yin Hao were in fact very close in age).

In short, debaters were expected to play as if they cared and yet did not care, and this paradox echoes a fundamental tension between the goal of the debate and the participants' individual motives.[22] The debate itself was to determine the truth about the proposed thesis or textual interpretation. But each debater wished to display his prowess, to win, and thereby garner fame.[23] Should a Pure Talk adept excel he gained a reputation among the cognoscenti, who carefully ranked the competitors and publicized their ratings of them. There were sometimes more tangible rewards. A brilliant performance, especially by an unknown, could lead to his being taken under the wing of a powerful patron, with career opportunities dangled in front of him. Though some refused, others were all too eager to leave the game behind and play instead on the stage of Chinese politics.

I have referred to this speech event as a game, and clearly the Pure Talk adepts *were* playing a game in the sense of voluntarily engaging in a rule-governed activity, one which was competitive and which was seemingly not utilitarian, though it did have an intellectual goal. This is not to say that the debates were not serious—they could be as serious as duelling. This identification of Pure Talk as a game is the link between the narrower and the broader senses of the term. In the narrower sense it refers to the speech event which was most obviously a competitive, structured, rule-governed game—hence the labelled instances of Pure Talk are usually the debates. In its wider sense the same term also referred to a particular style of speaking, the style which encompasses much if not all of the miscellany of the *SSHY.*[24] In all cases the term Pure Talk refers to what Huizinga called the game of wits, playing with language both for the sheer pleasure of it and to exhibit one's virtuosity. What he said of Greek sophistry applies equally well to Pure Talk: "It is indeed the ancient game of wits which, starting in the remotest cultures, vacillates between solemn ritual and mere amusement, sometimes touching the heights of wisdom, sometimes sinking to playful rivalry."[25]

The chapters of anecdotes that make up the *SSHY* can be viewed as an encyclopedia of this game of wits. Some chapters illustrate the abilities needed to play well: "quick perception," "appearance and behavior," "cultivated tolerance," and "insight and judgment." In contrast, those chapters towards the end of the book catalog inept performances and violations of the rules: "stinginess and meanness," "crudities and slips of the tongue," and "hostility and alienation." Other chapters illustrate the use of wit in various genres: "classification according to excellence," "admonitions and warnings," "admiration and emulation," "grieving for the departed."

In all these different genres the participant's purpose was the same: to treat it as a game which could be won by a display of witty eloquence. The setting, topic, place, and specific rules varied according to the genre involved: only this game stance, with its corollary demand for "cultivated equilibrium," remained constant. In the case of "taunting and teasing," for instance, victory could be achieved by the offensive act of punning on the taboo names of the opponent's relatives, and the more moralistic the pun, the better. In contrast, in the case of exemplary politeness the winning strategy was to be one-down so as to be truly one-up. For instance, when Huan Wen was finally forced to go through the door first before Ssu-ma Yu, he attempted to reframe the action by quoting the lines from classical text *The Book of Songs:* "The earl grasps his spear/And goes ahead as the king's forerider." Ssu-ma Yu regained the coveted subordinate position (and thus the coveted superior position of "more polite") by replying with another cite from the same work: "Whether small or great / All follow the duke in his travels."[26]

As these instances suggest, the Pure Talk appropriation of a genre is signalled by conspicuous competitiveness and stylistic self-consciousness. The "rankings" of individuals or groups of people illustrate this especially well. Even Confucius evaluated his disciples, but he did so for pedagogical purposes, not to display his own rhetorical virtuosity and thereby score points.

> Tzu-kung asked, "Who is better, Shih or Shang?" Confucius said, "Shih goes too far; Shang doesn't go far enough." "Then Shih is better?" "Going too far is as bad as not going far enough."[27]

A good example of the Pure Talk version of this activity is the following:

> Ch'u P'ou remarked to Sun Sheng, "The erudition of the Northerners is profound and comprehensive, broad and all-embracing."
>
> Sun replied, "The erudition of the Southerners is clear and penetrating, concise and essential."
>
> Chih Tun, hearing of this, added, "Sages and worthies, of course, are those who 'forget speech' [a swipe at Northerners and Southerners and also Ch'u P'ou and Sun Sheng], but if we're talking about people from the middle range on down, the reading of the Northerners is like viewing the moon in a bright place, while the erudition of the Southerners is like peering at the sun through a window."[28]

Here the philosophical put-down and deliberate attention to ingenious metaphor are characteristic of Pure Talk. In general, for a Pure Talker, the more skillful the use of linguistic and literary resources such as metaphors, binomes, puns, parallelism, the apt citation or fitting historical allusion, the better.

In some cases the game of wits was played on someone else's behalf, to rescue that person from an embarrassing social situation. Here the speaker's goal was to win by completing the rescue as adroitly as possible. When Hsieh An asked Lu T'ui why Lu's father-in-law had written a memorial for his mother but not for his father, Lu T'ui saved his father-in-law from the implicit accusation of unfilial behavior by replying that "surely it must be because a man's virtue is displayed in his conduct of affairs, while a woman's excellence, unless it be the subject of an obituary, would never be made public."[29] Likewise, when Emperor Wu asked Hu Wei who was more incorruptible, Hu Wei or his father, Hu Wei skillfully avoided both unfilial criticism of his father and deprecation of himself by averring that his father was more incorruptible, because "he was afraid other people would know about it. In my case, I'm afraid other people *won't* know about it. In this respect mine falls far short of his."[30] Even the emperor occasionally needed to be rescued.

> When Emperor Wu (Ssu-ma Yen) first ascended the throne, he drew a divining straw and obtained the number "one" (*te-i*). The number of reigns in a dynasty depends upon whether the number drawn is large or small. Since the emperor was plainly dismayed, all his ministers turned pale, and there was no one who had anything to say. The personal attendant, P'ei K'ai, then stepped forward and said, "Your servant has heard that 'Heaven by attaining the One (*te-i*) is limpid; earth by attaining the One is calm . . . and nobles and kings by attaining the One become the standard for the realm.' "[31]
>
> The emperor was pleased, and all the ministers sighed with relief.[32]

Sometimes the competition was even more indirect; in the case of encomia or elegies, for instance, the product would be judged against the existing corpus. As a result, many of the speech acts or events in the *SSHY* are indistinguishable from those found in other contexts (hence the reluctance of some scholars, focusing on content rather than context, to consider them to be Pure Talk).

Although pleasurable, this game of wit must have been difficult to master and risky to play.[33] This applies especially to the disputations, which required a philosophical turn of mind and deep familiarity with the classical literature. The psychological challenge may have been even greater; debaters had to argue for their own beliefs and then be willing, should they lose, to concede and adopt gracefully the opponent's position, all in front of an audience. What's more, this game was not universally admired; as will be discussed below, Pure Talk was severely criticized. We might well wonder why some chose to pay such high prices to join in this game.

The mystery deepens when we turn to the serious *prima facie* inconsistencies between the practice of Pure Talk and the philosophical doctrines most Pure Talkers espoused and discussed, these being Profound Learning (*hsüan-hsüeh*) and Buddhism. Profound Learning rejected the privileging of the Confucian classics and turned instead to the Taoist philosophical texts *Chuang-tzu* and *Lao-tzu* and to the cryptic divinatory work *Yi-ching [Book of Changes]*. From these three rather different works it developed a metaphysics which regarded an ineffable, subtle, undifferentiated nothingness (*wu*) as primary. Like most Chinese schools of thought, Profound Learning assumed an "ontological imperative"—conforming to or imitating Nature was right in both senses of the terms. (The disagreements, of course, were over what Nature was.) In the case of Profound Learning this entailed a distrust of language, a devaluation of the social and constructed, and behavioral imperatives for "noninterference" or "not-contriving" (*wu-wei*), "naturalness" or

"spontaneity" (*tzu-jan*) and "self-possession" (*tzu-te*). Although some interpreted these concepts so that they were consistent with Confucianism, or at least with holding office, the more straightforward reading of them encouraged withdrawal, nonconformity, and rejection of societal standards of behavior and judgment.[34]

It is hard to imagine how these self-conscious, highly stylized games, and especially the structured debates, could be considered exemplars of "not-contriving," and they were not "natural" or "spontaneous" in the ordinary senses of the terms. The attitude of "cultivated equilibrium" itself is only natural in the way in which the performance of the highly trained athlete or experienced artisan can be called spontaneous, in the sense of having become second nature. But the Pure Talkers' strenuous attempts and frequent failures to maintain this posture evince its basic "unnaturalness," its art and artifice.[35]

More tellingly, the competitive spirit that permeates Pure Talk runs directly contrary to the spirit of the Pure Talkers' favored book *Lao-tzu,* in which the sage is praised as one who "does not compete [*cheng*], therefore no one in the world competes with him."[36] The oft-quoted line from this text that "those who know do not say; those who say do not know" would also seem to militate against the game of wit.[37] Similarly, in certain chapters of the *Chuang-tzu* Chuang-tzu delivers a devastating critique of the ability of language to determine truth, and he engages in disputation only in a "self-consuming" way, to demonstrate the uselessness of reason.[38]

The practice of Pure Talk also contravened the most basic tenets of Buddhism. Buddhism, like Profound Learning, posited a transcendental truth beyond our perceptions of mundane existence. This truth was that all beings and events are "empty," that they lack an enduring essence. Realizing the insubstantiality of reality allowed detachment from desires and thus led to enlightenment, *nirvana.* Language was seen as instantiating and reifing conceptions, which reinforced an incorrect view of reality and thereby encouraged attachment to it. On this point alone the game of wit, and the disputations in particular, would be inherently suspect. More damningly, the desire to win at the game of wit was as pernicious as any other desire, and in itself was a sign of ego-attachment, and thus of lack of spiritual advancement.[39]

Given these incongruities between the professed philosophies and the implied values of the actual practices, as well as the challenges and risks of the game of wit, we can infer that it must have met some very pressing needs and promised some extremely seductive rewards for those who engaged in it. The historical circumstances and the identities of the players suggest what these needs and rewards might have been. The period during which Pure Talk appeared and became popular coincided with a series of usurpations and invasions. This so-called "Period of Disunity" opened with the fall of the Han dynasty and the splintering of the empire in 220 C.E. In 311 C.E. the capitol fell to non-Chinese peoples and millions of Chinese, including most of the intelligentsia, fled to the south, where they were in the psychologically difficult position of a defeated exile community. China continued to be wracked by disastrous civil wars, usurpations, and massive social dislocation for almost three centuries more.

In this situation many literati despaired, not without justification, of acting on the world in the only way they knew how—as scholar-officials in government service. Judging political action to be both futile and dangerous, those men decided instead

to steer clear of the murderous and morally bankrupt political struggles of their time. Some sought ways to suspend or transcend their unhappy state and to redefine and reconstitute themselves as a community. Drinking and drugs were one well-trod avenue of escape.

I would suggest that a game stance, which allowed these men to distance themselves from a painful reality, was another. Pure Talk was preeminently a southern practice, and preeminently a practice of this disaffected elite. Profound Learning and Buddhism encouraged this game stance, since both philosophies take as a fundamental proposition the unreality of conventional distinctions in a way that most other Chinese schools of thought do not.[40] Pure Talk in the broadest sense thus became the means of creating an alternative lifestyle for many of its practitioners.

The very playing of this game as a mode of being in the world was often intended as an implicit criticism of the accepted system of institutions and behaviors which these men felt had so failed them and of those who persisted in supporting them. It was a way to *épater le bourgeoisie,* and it was perceived as such. Adding insult to injury, the players of the game of wits often ridiculed those who opposed or condemned them.

Pure Talk thus became a contested practice. Some joined in enthusiastically. Some were content to admire the wit, both for its elegance and its occasional utility, and this appreciation was surely one motive for the compilation and preservation of the *SSHY.* On the other hand, Pure Talk was repeatedly castigated, the most serious charge being that Pure Talk was solely responsible for the loss of Northern China to the barbarian invaders and the subsequent fall of dynasties. Even now most modern Chinese scholars writing on Pure Talk seem compelled to address these time-worn accusations, either absolving Pure Talk of the crime or denouncing it anew.[41]

What's more, many literati refused to "beat them at their own game" because they shared Confucius's aversion to competition as something vulgar and demeaning, the mark of a "petty person."[42] To this was added the Confucian disdain for games and play. Games were grudgingly tolerated only insofar as they fulfilled a didactic function, for children that of mastering practical skills and for adults that of becoming more of a gentleman. And games helped an adult become a better gentleman only insofar as they provided opportunities to practice ritual and correct behavior—which Pure Talk did not.

Further, the representatives of orthodoxy correctly perceived that the game of Pure Talk was often used as an escape from social responsibilities and as a mockery of those who did not retreat in this way. In the doctrines of Confucianism and Legalism there was no philosophical licensing of a move away from everyday reality. These thinkers started from the commonsensical assumption that, for the most part, our ordinary apprehensions of the world are real and conventional linguistic distinctions are reliable and valuable. Nor was there much of a place for despair, hopelessness, and renunciation of the political life in the face of failure. Confucius, who persevered although he never succeeded in his own lifetime, was the model.

From this standpoint, those of the intelligentsia who indulged themselves in the game of wit, especially when the world was falling apart around them, were guilty of a criminal abdication of their societal responsibilities. The Confucians felt an understandable outrage at the Pure Talkers' assumed superiority. They would never have agreed with Huizinga that "play lies outside the antithesis of wisdom and

folly, and equally outside those of truth and falsehood, good and evil. Although it is a non-material activity, it has no moral function. The valuations of vice and virtue do not apply here."[43] More likely they would have concurred in Roger Callois's judgment that "the destinies of cultures can be read in their games."[44] By censuring this game they hoped to control the destiny of their culture.

Despite such hostility Pure Talk was never the target of official suppression. I would argue that this is because it was (correctly) perceived as a withdrawal of energy rather than a mobilization towards significant cultural or political change, and thus not an immediate threat. This supposition is borne out by the Imperial Chinese government's often brutal persecution of secret religious societies, since they did offer such truly radical programs and did attempt armed insurrections.

Pure Talk, on the other hand, was not a revolutionary movement. For all their alienation from the status quo, the Pure Talkers replicated much of the society around them, not just by their appropriation of the established discursive genres and the criteria for creating and judging them, but at a deeper level, that of structures and values. Their ceaseless testing, ranking, and emphasis on status differences echoed that of the bureaucratic Chinese political mindset. Their insistence on "cultivated equanimity" was but a variation on the traditional Chinese assumption that the proponent of a doctrine must embody it in his life. Further, in actuality they tended to interpret the "natural" and the "spontaneous" as simple breaches or inversions of customary Chinese norms. Chapter twenty-three of the *SSHY,* which catalogues what was considered "free and unrestrained," records such willfully contrary behavior as: violating the rules of mourning by eating meat and drinking; going naked; drinking excessively; and sitting with legs sprawled out on the ground.[45]

After about 600 C.E. Pure Talk ceased to be.[46] This was not because the Chinese lost interest in literary production; they continued to make aesthetic judgments, evaluate other people, engage in scintillating repartee, moralize, and eulogize. But apparently there was a subtle change in the function and the meaning of such activities, so that they were no longer viewed as characteristic of a particular way of speaking. More tellingly, there were no more Pure Talk disputations, though similar kinds of dialectical debate did continue in a few restricted contexts.[47]

This is not because the Chinese lost interest in dialectical topics. When Neo-Confucianism (*li-hsüeh* or *tao-hsüeh*) developed during the Sung (960–1126) and Ming (1368–1628) dynasties, it devoted itself to meditations on topics as abstract and metaphysical as those of Pure Talk, a similarity which did not pass unnoticed by later Chinese scholars.[48] Although the content was the same as that of Pure Talk, the genres employed were essay, notes, lectures, remarks to students, or commentary rather than competitive debate, and the emotional key was no longer the serious playfulness or playful seriousness of Pure Talk debate.

I would argue that the abandonment of Pure Talk, and especially its debates, is understandable when seen in the light of the changed social and political circumstances. With the reunification of the empire in 587 there was a "return to normalcy" in the Chinese sense: one (ethnic Chinese) government, no civil wars, and a shift of power away from the powerful families which had monopolized the routes to upward mobility. All this meant that the literati could resume their traditional role of officials and advisors and once again shape and implement

government policy. The Pure Talkers of the previous age could now become the officials of the next, and they did. On this interpretation, as the psychological need for the rewards and consolations of Pure Talk lessened and then disappeared so did Pure Talk itself.

Comparison and Implications

Pure Talkers belonged to the cultural aristocracy of their time, dispossessed and displaced though they were. Despite their elite status, their use of wit conforms in many ways to that of other peripheralized groups. Pure Talkers, too, resorted to wit not just for pleasure but to construct a community, to create an alternative source of ego-reinforcement, and to sharpen a weapon to be wielded against the outside world.

The peculiar circumstances and fate of Pure Talk throw a somewhat different light on the employment of wit by oppositional groups. Of course, not all oppositional groups resort to wit as a communicative strategy,[49] nor do all uses of humor by oppositional groups correspond to the game of wit as delineated in this essay.[50] But there are at least two contemporary parallels to Pure Talk: the various and variously named species of the game of wit practiced in the African-American community and the exploitation of wit among gay men known as "camp."

The game of wit appears in the African-American community under a number of shifting and overlapping labels: "signifying," "woofing," "rapping," "styling," "cracking," "sounding," "talking shit," "jiving," and "playing the dozens," to mention but a few.[51] The particular speech acts and events these terms denote are, on the surface, quite disparate: artful indirect communication; theatrical monologue; self-aggrandizing narrative; verbal duelling and oneupsmanship; inverted communication of meaning; and, perhaps most studied, ritual insult contests ("the dozens"). What links them is that all are species of wit, varieties of a competitive verbal game in which agility, ingenuity, humor, and self-possession throughout the performance are applauded.[52]

Much the same applies to camp; "*camp* is essentially a conversational art" in which the same qualities are valued.[53] Camp, too, is a competitive stance from which one engages in social interaction and is aware of oneself as playing and playing at, as taking on roles and behaving "as-if."[54] This spirit of play typifies camp in every context: "The camp point of view is assertively expressed through exaggeration and inversion, stressing form over content, deflating pomposity, mocking pretension, and subverting values."[55] For camp as well this playfulness can be expressed aggressively and even hurtfully, in put-downs and ritualized insult contests.[56]

Like Pure Talk, both these contemporary uses of wit represent misdirected aggression. John Dollard noted that "the Dozens is an in-caste-pattern. It does not countenance jeering openly at white people, but it confines aggressive expression within Negro society."[57] Similarly, observers of the gay scene have remarked on the "bitchiness" and "the element of self-destructiveness" in camp.[58] We might surmise that just as Pure Talk was tolerated because it did not represent a serious challenge, so too camp and African-American games of wit channel hostile energy in a way that the dominant culture does not view as threatening.

There is a crucial difference, though, between the medieval Chinese practitioners of wit and the contemporary American players. Pure Talkers were stigmatized only

insofar and for so long as they chose to play the game of wit rather than discharge their political obligations. But African-Americans and gay men are inherently stigmatized. Because of this difference their use of wit might be compared to a two-edged sword.

On the one hand, as has been frequently noted, these verbal contests, especially the insult contests, have positive aspects. They prepare group members by accustoming them to attack and allowing them to rehearse the quick come-back. In addition, "the Dozens served as a mechanism for teaching and sharpening the ability to control emotions and anger."[59] Thurmon Garner observed that "the game recommends that a sense of power is obtained through information control and personal poise."[60] Much the same applies to camp for gay men.

More generally, the African-American games of wit are sometimes seen as reflections, and thus affirmations, of African culture.[61] Sometimes they are seen as a challenge to white culture insofar as they simply carve out a separate sphere for African-Americans only.[62] Camp has also been defended along political lines. According to some, camp is essentially a critique of heterosexual cultural mores.[63] "At its very core, camp is the art of the put-down, especially of one's self *and culture*. Behind the irony of camp, however, is the awareness of the roles played outside the culture as well. . . . Through camp, stereotyped behavior is revealed as nothing more than another form of playacting."[64]

On the other hand, the ritualized insults and spontaneous put-downs of both communities require rehearsing negative stereotypes about one's own group, and some members of the gay community have criticized camp because by its very nature it reproduces damaging stereotypes.[65] Insofar as these stereotypes, values, and behaviors are rehearsed they are, at the least, perpetuated, and they may well be reinforced as well. To these stereotypes from the dominant culture may be added in-group norms: being too black or not black enough, or being gay in the wrong ways or to the wrong degree all become points for attack.[66]

Furthermore, anyone reading through transcripts of these conversations cannot help but be struck by the extent to which these oppositional discourses instantiate the mores and values of mainstream American culture. True, a particular insult or retort must be literally false, or at least hyperbolic; if not, it is no longer play. But for the most part these games of wit still assume the standards of middle-class America: the desirability of money and power ("you're so poor that . . ."); conventional standards of beauty; and traditional sexual standards and behaviors (e.g., a gay man may be accused of promiscuity, an African-American of having a prostitute for a mother and a homosexual for a brother). Turner's remarks on satire apply to such wit as well: "Satire is a conservative genre. . . . Satire exposes, attacks, or derides what it considers to be vices, follies, stupidities, or abuses, but its criterion of judgement is usually the normative structural frame of officially promulgated values."[67]

I have proposed that Pure Talk, though played seriously and intensely for several hundred years, was fundamentally a secondary compensation. It developed and was valued by default, as a means of coping with an unhappy situation, not as a true alternative, and it was abandoned when individuals and, eventually, the entire group got what they truly wanted. To some extent this may be true for these contemporary games of wit as well. If so, to the degree that these two groups are able

to participate in the dominant culture as they wish to, the game of wit would become less attractive. This prediction is already borne out to some extent for camp. As there is some softening of the hostility to gay men and some greater legislative protection of them, as well as more direct political action on their part, to a corresponding degree camp seems to be less prevalent in the gay subculture.[68]

The African-American situation is more complex. To the extent that African-American uses of wit reflect cultural continuities rather than reactive formations other mechanisms may ensure their continuation. The continual co-option of African-American culture by the mass media and pop culture further complicates the picture. Nevertheless, there is some support for the hypothesis being developed here. For instance, there is evidence that during the first half of this century "the dozens" was played by adults as well as adolescents, whereas now it is mainly restricted to adolescents.[69] On this interpretation this shrinking of the pool of participants would be due to political and sociological changes in race relations during this century.

But the game of wit may be a two-edged sword in a way more profound than has been recognized. By its very nature, the game of wit presumes certain values: competition, aggression (usually displaced from its appropriate target onto fellow sufferers), personal display, and the zero-sum game. John Dollard's remark about African-American insult duels applies to the entire game of wit: "There is an aggrandizement of self involved in besting or humiliating the other person and a concurrent denial of weakness in the own self."[70] In operating from these values the game of wit mirrors the operating assumptions of the larger society it springs from, whether that society be medieval China or twentieth-century America. This underlying identity may persist despite a group's most strenuous efforts to make a radical break. This is especially so if it resorts to obsessive ridicule or simple reversal of the dominant culture. "A mirror inverts but also reflects an object. It does not break it down into constituents in order to remake it, far less does it annihilate and replace that object."[71] The game of wit may provide excellent training for those who wish to succeed in such a society on its own terms. But for those who play it unaware of what they are committing themselves to, it may harm them in ways they never realize.

NOTES

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[1]There have been relatively few ethnographic studies based on historical materials, no doubt because of ethnologists' emphasis on emic understanding and consequent turn to fieldwork and observer participation. Those I am aware of are: Richard Bauman's "Aspects of 17th Century Quaker Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech 56* (1970); 67–74 and his *Let Your Words be Few: Symbolism of Speaking and Silence among Seventeenth-Century Quakers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Robert St. George, " 'Heated Speech' and Literacy in Seventeenth-century New England," *Seventeenth-century New England* (1985): 275–322; Peter Burke, "Language and anti-language in early modern Italy," *History Workshop Journal* 11 (1981): 24–32; and Gerry Philipsen, "Navajo World View and Culture Patterns of Speech: A Case Study in Ethnorhetoric," *Communication Monographs* 39 (June 1972): 132–139.

In addition, Dell Hymes, the founder of the ethnography of communication, has done such analyses in his *"In Vain I Tried to Tell You": Essays in Native American Ethnopoetics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981). An anonymous reviewer of this essay informs me that in Dell Hymes' graduate seminars the initial assignment was an ethnography based on historical materials, so that Hymes himself saw historical materials as a legitimate subject for ethnographic method. Of course, such an enterprise must rely more heavily on inference and extrapolation and on sensitivity to the "resistance of the text."

[2]Liu I-ch'ing, *Shih-shuo hsin-yü chiao-chien,* ed. Yang Yung, with commentary by Liu Chun (Hong Kong: Hsiang-kang ta-chung shu-chü, 1969); hereafter *SSHY.* This notoriously difficult work has been superbly

translated by Richard B. Mather under the title *A New Account of Tales of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976). When citing this text I will first give the chapter and paragraph of this Chinese edition and then the page number of Mather's translation. When quoting Mather's translations I do so with only an occasional minor change.

[3]The most popular candidates are chapter four ("Letters and Scholarship"), chapter two ("Speech and Conversation"), and chapter nine ("Classification according to Excellence").

[4]Donald Holzman called the *SSHY* the "archives" of Pure Talk ("Les Sept Sages de forêt des bambous et la société de leur temps," *T'oung Pao* 44 [1956]: 327). Ch'en Yin-k'o said that the *SSHY* "has every kind of pure conversation" ("Hsiao-yao-yu Hsiang-Kuo yi chi Chih-tun yi t'an-yüan," *Ch'ing-hua hsüeh-pao* 12.2 [1937]: 309). Etienne Balazs referred to the entire book as Pure Talk ("Nihilistic Revolt or Mystical Escapism," in his *Chinese Civilization and Bureaucracy*, trans. H.M. Wright [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964] 231).

[5]Chinese scholars tend to define Pure Talk through a combination of philology and historical narrative. The most plausible such account is that of T'ang Ch'ang-ju ("Ch'ing-t'an yü ch'ing-yi," in his *Wei-Chin Nan-pei-ch'ao shih lun ts'ung* [1955; Peking: San-lien shu-tien, 1962] 289–297). Although both Chinese and Western scholars refer to the phenomenon as *ch'ing-t'an*, "pure conversation," the primary sources often call it *ch'ing-yen*. *Yen*, which means "speech, discourse, talk, doctrine," has a broader semantic range than *t'an*. T'ang demonstrates that the earliest uses of the term *ch'ing-yen*, which date from the Han, simply referred to elegant language. According to Okazaki Fumio, the term *ch'ing-t'an* first appeared later, in the *Chin-shu* biography of Wang Yen, whose dates are 256–311 (*Gi-Shin Namboku chō tsūshi* [1932; rpt. Tokyo: Kōbundō Shobō, 1936] 523). At some point "Pure Talk" (*ch'ing-yen* and *ch'ing-t'an*) began to be used as a synonym for "Pure Critique" (*ch'ing-yi*). Pure Critique was a late Han dynasty practice which consisted of pithy summations of a man's strengths and weaknesses pronounced by persons of great integrity (the "pure"). These pronouncements were used to evaluate a candidate's fitness for a particular government office. It evolved into a minor verbal art form practiced more indiscriminately, a sophisticated form of gossip. According to T'ang, Pure Talk never lost this meaning of what we might euphemistically call character evaluation but eventually broadened to refer most frequently to abstract, philosophical discussions. This view is shared by, among others, Miyazaki Ichisada ("Jodan," *Shirin* 31.1 [1946]: 1–15) and Ch'en Yin-k'o ("Hsiao-yao-yu," 309–314). Ch'en argues that a search for the principles underlying the judgments about particular individuals led to increasingly abstract reflections on human nature. Further supporting this hypothesis, T'ang Yung-t'ung noted that Liu Shao's *The Study of Human Abilities* [*Jen-wu chih*], a handbook of character types, was listed in the "logicians" (*ming-chia*) section of the *Sui-shu* bibliography (T'ang Yung-t'ung, *Wei-Chin hsüan-hsüeh lun-kao* [Peking: Jen-min ch'u-pan she, 1957] 11–12).

Such evolutionary accounts are valuable for tracing the ancestry of the term. However, they fall far short of explaining the wide range of practices subsumed under the term Pure Talk, their functions, or their meanings to the participants.

[6]These include: *SSHY;* the relevant biographies (*lieh-chuan*) from the dynastic histories for the Six Dynasties period, including those from the *San-kuo chih; Kao-seng chuan [Biographies of Eminent Monks]; Pi-ch'iu-ni chuan [Biographies of Nuns];* and *Ch'u san-tsang chi-chi [Collected Records from the Three Treasuries].*

[7]Although this might seem the logical way to proceed in any event, I have yet to come across any inquiry into Pure Talk by a sinologist, Chinese or Western, which approaches it in this way.

[8]For ethnographic method I have consulted Joel Sherzer and Regna Darnell, "Outline Guide for the Ethnographic Study of Speech Use," in *Directions in Sociolinguistics*, ed. John Gumperz and Dell Hymes (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972) 548–554 as well as Muriel Saville-Troike, *The Ethnography of Communication: An Introduction* 2nd ed. (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989) ch. 4, "The Analysis of Communicative Events." The analysis has also benefitted from Donal Carbaugh's "Fifty Terms for Talk: A Cross-Cultural Study," *Language, Communication, and Culture: Current Directions, International and Intercultural Communication Annual* 13 (1989): 93–120.

[9]One source for these debates would have been the works of the "logicians" (*ming chia*) of the fourth and third centuries B.C.E and there is evidence that some Pure Talkers joined in the third and fourth century C.E. revival of interest in their works. Pure Talkers are described as debating "the hard and the white" (essential and accidental properties) and explicating the paradoxical theses that "a white horse is not a horse" and "meanings do not reach"; all these were favored topics of the earlier "logicians." Along the same lines, Yuan Yu, a man described as "skilled in discourse," was said to have "cited phrases from Kung-sun Lung-tzu [an early logician] in order to discuss subtle principles" (*Hsin-chiao-pen san-kuo chih fu so-yin* vol. 2 [Taipei: Ting-wen shu-chü, 1977] 781; my translation).

Another source would have been the Buddhism that gradually penetrated China from the first century C.E. on. Eric Zürcher makes a convincing case that the rise during the fourth century of a Buddhist clerical intelligentsia which was detached from practical, political concerns and which propagated the abstruse tenets of Mahayana Buddhism was responsible for an increasingly metaphysical turn in Pure Talk (*The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China* 2 vols. [Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1959] 1: 126–127). However, so far as I am aware the question of a possible relationship between the disputations characteristic of Pure Talk and Indian Buddhist debate has not been systematically investigated.

[10]*SSHY* 4.28; Mather 106–107.

[11]In the Buddhist debates these roles were called *fa-shih*, "Dharma master," and *tu-chiang*, "discussant," respectively.

[12]Because few women received an education and because it was precisely these higher-class women who would be most constrained by codes of propriety from being present at the private gatherings, one would not expect to find records of women joining in those debates. However, laywomen and nuns could attend the public Buddhist debates. Nuns had the leisure to study, and a few became teachers of some renown. The monk Pao-ch'ang's *Pi-ch'iu-ni chuan* [*Biographies of Nuns*], written in 516, refers to nuns "explicating" (*chiang*) sutras to audiences. The first one to do so, Chu Tao-hsing, is also praised as being sophisticated at Pure Talk (*ch'ing-t'an*) (*Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, ed. and comp. Takakusu Junjirō et al. [Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–1932], vol. 50, 2063.936b). There are also allusions to nuns engaging in what appear to be Pure Talk disputations. For instance, on one occasion when the nun T'an-hui was on the lecture stage "all the famous Buddhist teachers exerted themselves to the utmost in questioning and objecting, but none was able to defeat her" (*Taishō* vol. 50, 2063.946a). However, since these female debators were a tiny minority I use the male pronoun in this essay to avoid giving a misleading impression of equal participation.

[13]There are no word-for-word records of the disputations, but other sources give some sense of the argumentation. In the works of the well-known Pure Talker Hsi K'ang essays of defense and refutation alternate. Though the kinds of arguments he used were those commonly found in Chinese discourse, such as analogy, example, historical example, citation of textual authorities, deduction, and argument by consequences, they were developed with rigor and in detail. For an English translation, see Robert Henricks, *Philosophy and Argumentation in Third-century China: The Essays of Hsi K'ang* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983). For an analysis of Hsi K'ang's methods of argumentation, see Henricks, "Hsi K'ang and Argumentation in the Wei, and a Refutation of the Essay 'Residence is Unrelated to Good and Bad Fortune: Nourish Life'," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 8 (1981): 176–190.

The debate between Ho Yan, Hsia-hou Hsüan and Chiang Chi over mourning ceremonies and that between Hsia-hou Hsüan and Li Sheng on mutilations as punishments are also believed to reflect Pure Talk disputation. Though brief, these exchanges are interesting for their exclusive reliance on deductive argumentation (for textual citations, see Henricks, "Hsi K'ang," notes 24 and 25).

[14]It was sometimes suggested that merely covering the range of arguments comprehensively was a sufficient reward (*SSHY* 4.62; Mather 124).

[15]*SSHY* 4.19; Mather 101–102.

[16]For other uses of this metaphor in *SSHY*, see *SSHY* 4.34; Mather 110; *SSHY* 4.51; Mather 118; and *SSHY* 4.96; Mather 140–141. For two extraordinarily lengthy and detailed applications of this martial metaphor see the biography of Kuan Lu by Kuan Ch'en ("Kuan Lu pieh-chuan," *San-kuo-chih*, comp. Ch'en Shou, with commentary by P'ei Sung-chih [Beijing; Chung-hua shu-chü, 1959] 812, 817–818; trans. Kenneth DeWoskin, *Doctors, Diviners, and Magicians of Ancient China: Biographies of Fang-shih* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983) 93–94, 105–106.

[17]See, for instance, *SSHY* 4.45; Mather 115, and *SSHY* 4.38; Mather 112–113.

[18]See *SSHY* 4.6; Mather 95. Hsi K'ang's "Essay on Wisdom and Courage" ("Ming tan lun") also uses this form (*Hsi K'ang chi chiao chu* [Beijing: Jen-min wen-hsüeh ch'u-pan she, 1962] 248–255; trans. Henricks, *Philosophy* 126–134).

[19]*SSHY* 4.62; Mather 124.

[20]This precept was sometimes appealed to explicitly. Thus Hsi K'ang reprimanded an opponent by declaring that "when drawing inferences and discriminating among things, one should first search among the principles (*li*) of naturalness. Only after the principles have been already fixed can one cite appropriate instances from antiquity to clarify them. In the present case, you have not yet gotten to them in your mind, but rely for the most part on former sayings as evidence for your discussion and proceed from them; I fear that even someone clever at calculating would not be able to pull out the leading thread" (Hsi K'ang, *Hsi K'ang chi* 204; my translation).

[21]*SSHY* 26.14; Mather 434.

[22]In ethnographic terms this would be the distinction between what Dell Hymes called the "purposes-outcomes" and the "purposes-goals" ("Models of the Interaction of Language and Social Life," in Gumperz and Hymes, *Directions in Sociolinguistics* 61).

[23]This motive was openly acknowledged even by the Buddhist Pure Talk adepts, whom one might expect to be above such worldly motivations. See, for instance, SSHY 4.43; Mather 114–115.

[24]That one term may refer to speech act, event, and style of speaking is, apparently, unusual but not unique: Carbaugh lists the Israeli *dugri* under all three headings also ("Fifty Terms," 116, ns. 3, 4, and 6).

[25]Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1950; New York: Harper and Row, 1970) 171.

[26]*SSHY* 2.56; Mather 57.

[27]*Lun-yü* 11.16; my translation.

[28]*SSHY* 4.25; Mather 105.

[29]*SSHY* 4.82; Mather 135.

[30]*SSHY* 1.27; Mather 15.

[31]P'ei K'ai quotes from chapter thirty-nine of the well-known Taoist classic *Lao-tzu*.

[32]*SSHY* 2.19; Mather 40.

[33]The primary sources do not indicate how individuals learned Pure Talk. Some of the necessary knowledge and skills would be included in a traditional Chinese education, but debate and wittiness would not. Such communicative competencies could only have been acquired through observation of Pure Talk gatherings augmented by practice and by study of written examples. There is a mention of children rehearsing a dialogue word for word after listening to it (*SSHY* 12.4; Mather 298–299). Examples of rhetorical gems for such genres as the apposite reply, the effective remonstration, wise advice to the throne, and the successful persuasion were available in compilations which are now unfortunately almost all lost.

[34]For further discussion of Profound Learning, see Feng Yu-lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, 2 vols., trans. Derk Bodde (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953) 2:168–236.

[35]For instance, the grand warden Ku Yung was playing chess when he realized that his son had been killed in battle. "Although he showed no change in his spirit and manner. . . . with his fingernails he dug into the palm of his hand until the blood flowed, soaking the mat" (*SSHY* 6.1; Mather 179).

[36]*Lao-tzu* ch. 66; my translation. For repetition of this sentiment, see chs. 8, 40, 73, and 81. Interestingly enough, Wang Pi, a renowned Pure Talker who wrote a commentary on *Lao-tzu*, did not write a commentary on this chapter, nor did he comment on this same line when it appeared in ch. 22. His comments on similar passages in the book are uncharacteristically brief.

[37]*Lao-tzu* ch. 56; my translation.

[38]This applies primarily to the so-called "inner chapters" (chapters one through seven), those most likely to have come from the historical Chuang-tzu himself. See especially chapter two of *Chuang-tzu* as translated and interpreted by Angus C. Graham in his "Chuang-tzu's Essay on Seeing Things as Equal," *History of Religions* 9.2-3 (Nov. 1969): 137–159.

[39]This incompatibility was even more marked in Indian Buddhism. Though certain Buddhist scriptures proscribe argumentation and debate, by the third century C.E. Indian Buddhists excelled in its practice and were writing the definitive handbooks on disputation.

[40]Among the rare exceptions to this generalization were P'ei Wei, who attempted to out-argue the Pure Talkers, and Kuan Lu, who was an "adept" (*fang-shih*), a term applied to those who were "adept" at the esoteric arts of divination, magic, and medicine. For Kuan Lu see Kuan Ch'en, "Kuan Lu pieh-chuan," 811–831; trans. DeWoskin, *Doctors* 91–134. Of those men living 200–600 C.E. whom Kenneth DeWoskin identified as *fang-shih* ("A Source Guide to the Lives and Techniques of Han and Six Dynasties *Fang-shih*," *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Chinese Religions* 9 [Fall 1981]: 79–105) only Kuan Lu is explicitly said to have engaged in Pure Talk. Some *fang-shih* biographies describe what sound like Pure Talk disputations, but their subjects are Indian or Central Asian Buddhist monks such as Kumarajiva who would have learned debate in the course of their Buddhist education, not native Chinese.

[41]See, for instance, Chou Shao-hsien, "Ch'ing-t'an wang Chin wen-t'i chih shang-ch'üeh [A Consideration of whether Pure Talk Destroyed the Chin Dynasty]," *Ta-lu tsa-chih shih-hsüeh ts'ung-shu* series 1, vol. 4 (1966): 137–142. The charge is also made—and, of course, refuted—in an anecdote recorded in the *SSHY* itself (*SSHY* 2.70; Mather 64).

[42]The Master declared quite emphatically that "gentleman do not compete in anything. Is competition necessary in archery? Then they bow and yield as they go up and they drink together upon coming down. When they compete they still behave as gentlemen" (*Lun-yü* [*Analects*] 3.7; my translation).

[43]Huizinga 25.

[44]Roger Callois, *Man, Play, and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1961) 34.

[45]The outstanding exception to this generalization is the disputations, which rested on at least three potentially revolutionary intellectual assumptions: 1) that a process of agonistic argument could eventually reach the truth; 2) that it was a preferred method for doing so; and 3) that arguments should not be judged by the pragmatic standards usually applied to them (e.g., their consequences) but primarily by the standards appropriate to deductive reasoning, such as logical rigor, simplicity, and elegance. The complete abandonment of this most radical genre underlines the essentially conservative nature of Pure Talk.

[46]The judgment of the Ch'ing dynasty historian Chao Yi that it did not begin to be "eliminated" until the Sui dynasty (589–618) is generally accepted ("Liu-ch'ao ch'ing-t'an chih hsi," *Erh-shih-erh shih cha-chi* [1799; rpt. *Ssu-pu pei-yao* vol. 115 (Shanghai: Chung-hua shu-chü, 1927–35)] *ch.* 8; 11b).

[47]Competitive disputation continued in Buddhist monasteries for some two hundred years more, but under the rubric "explication" (*chiang*) rather than Pure Talk. The subjects were confined to Buddhist doctrine, and the debates themselves eventually devolved into a lecture followed by questions.

[48]Ch'ien Ta-hsin, for instance, observed that "when the men of the Wei-Chin period [the period after the fall of the Han] talked about Chuang and Lao [the Taoist writers Chuang-tzu and Lao-tzu], that was Pure Talk. When the people of the Sung and Ming period talked about mind and nature [the favorite topics of Neo-Confucianism] that was also Pure Talk" (quoted by T'ang Ch'ang-ju 289; my translation).

[49]For analysis of an extreme example see Tamar Katriel's *Talking Straight: Dugri Speech in Israeli Sabra Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986). According to Katriel the sabras deliberately set out to create a new Israeli Jewish image in opposition to that of the Diaspora Jew. "In communicative terms, this implied the rejection of ways of speaking associated with European genteel culture and Jewish Diaspora life in particular"

(17). To this end they developed the *dugri* style of speaking which valorized assertiveness, sincerity, naturalness, the spirit of *communitas*, and an attitude of "antistyle"—a devaluation of speech as compared to action (10).

[50]For example, occasionally Western Apaches "play at being Whiteman," parodying Whites' behaviors toward Apaches, as described in Keith H. Basso's *Portraits of 'the Whiteman': Linguistic play and cultural symbols among the Western Apache* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979). These performances differ structurally from the game of wit; the "butt" of the skit simply endures it, rather than jumping in to make it a competitive, dialogic game, and the episode often ends when the butt makes a straightforwardly dismissive criticism about Whitemen, such as "whitemen are arrogant" (57–60). These episodes also differ functionally from the game of wit. The Apaches need not create an alternative to White culture, but instead must neutralize and defuse the effects of contact with it on them. Thus, as Basso put it, these speech act and events are "first and foremost expressive vehicles for constructing images of 'the Whitemen' and, by means of these images, for ridiculing the behavior and attitudes of Whiteman towards Apaches" (60–61).

[51]William Labov notes in this regard that "it seems to be the case everywhere that the superordinate terms which describe a verbal activity are quite variable and take on a wide range of meanings, while the verbal behavior itself does not change much from place to place" ("Rules for Ritual Insults," in *Rappin' and stylin' out: Communication in urban black America*, ed. Thomas Kochman [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972] 274).

[52]In his study of ritual insulting among lower-class African-American adolescents Roger Abrahams remarked that "[i]n fact, almost all communication among this group is basically agonistic, from the fictive experience of the narratives to the ploying of proverbs" (" 'Playing the Dozens'," *Journal of American Folklore* 75 [1962]: 215). Michael Bell reached the same conclusion about the varieties of conversation among the African-American adults he observed (*The World From Brown's Lounge: An Ethnography of Black Middle-class Play* [Urbana: University of Illinois, 1983] esp. 24, 25).

[53]Leonard Ashley, " 'Lovely, Blooming, Fresh and Gay': The Onomastics of Camp," *Maledicta* 4 (1980): 247. Ashley italicizes the word "camp" here and throughout his article.

[54]Esther Newton stresses this element of camp in her *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (1972; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) 106–109 *passim*.

[55]Joseph Goodwin, *More Man than You'll ever be: Gay Folklore and Acculturation in Middle America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) 38–39.

[56]In addition to Ashley and Goodwin, see also Stephen Murray, "The Art of Gay Insulting," *Anthropological Linguistics* 21.5 (May 1979): 211–223.

[57]John Dollard, "The Dozens: Dialectic of Insult," *The American Imago* 1 (1939): 21.

[58]Ashley 231.

[59]Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977) 358.

[60]Thurmon Garner, "Playing the Dozens: Folklore as Strategies for Living," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 69 (1983): 57.

[61]For instance, Levine notes of the ritualized insults called "the dozens" that all its elements were present in the slave environment, though no evidence survives of the practice (*Black Culture* 352).

[62]Thus Bell reports that "[b]eing in Brown's was known as *nigger business*" because "[p]atrons knew that the outside world, black and white, saw nigger business as the classic stereotype of the 'lazy black,' but they believed that it was an affirmation of their right to take time out from the gravities of the real world" (*The World* 20).

[63]Susan Sontag's pronouncement that it "goes without saying that the camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical" has increasingly become a minority position ("Notes on Camp," in *Against Interpretation* [New York: Dell, 1969] 279) 49; italics added.

[64]Joseph Hayes, "Gayspeak," in *Gayspeak: Gay Male and Lesbian Communication*, ed. James Cheseboro (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1981).

[65]See, for instance, Hayes 51–54 and James Darsey, " 'Gayspeak': A Response," in *Gayspeak* 61–62.

[66]Murray, "The Art," 213–215.

[67]Turner, *From Ritual* 40.

[68]Ashley, "Lovely," 225–226. For some qualifying of this generalization, see Stephen Murray, "Ritual and Personal Insults in Stigmatized Subcultures" (*Maledicta* 7 [1983]; reprinted in *The Best of Maledicta*, ed. Reinhold Aman [Philadelphia: Running Press, 1987] 125).

[69]Levine, *Black Culture* 354.

[70]Dollard, "The Dozens," 24.

[71]Turner, *From Ritual* 40–41.