

## Arguments From Silence

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Arguments from silence have sometimes been thought to be invalid in principle. That is not the case: nonexistence is the correct inference to draw from silence. But the evidence must be read with understanding, and complications must be considered.<sup>1</sup>

### Cultural and Textual Factors

Every occupational or other in-group has its own ways of talking, including its own ways of not *having* to talk; its list of things that need not be said, or are “just not said.” Thus, a thing might not be mentioned in a text (or included in a tomb) because:

- the text is too short, or the sites too few or too geographically limited, to provide a statistically valid sample
- the thing is not relevant to the immediate discourse
- it is too familiar to require explicit mention
- it is not known to persons at the writer’s social level
- it is esoteric, and is thus mentioned only within some inner circle
- it is socially embarrassing, and is thus not commonly mentioned
- it is politically dangerous, and is thus mentioned only obliquely
- it is actually present, but has been misunderstood by modern readers<sup>2</sup>
- the culture does not emphasize it (as, carnage in Chinese battle accounts)
- it is contrary to the ethos of the text (as, victory 勝 in the Chūn/Chyōu)<sup>3</sup>
- it is not part of relevant ritual practice (the lack of tiger bones in elite Chinese graves does not prove that tigers were then unknown in China)
- it is taboo, and mention is avoided for ritual reasons (as, the personal name of a current or previous Chinese ruler)<sup>4</sup>

Despite its complications in practice, the analytical utility of Chinese taboo avoidance is too well known to require elaborate statement here.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>One statement of the modern position is Langlois **Introduction** 254f; compare the more positive estimate in Vincent **Historical** 253 and 254, and comment in Lange **Argument** 289.

<sup>2</sup>A thing may be mentioned allusively, or by a name we do not recognize, or by a familiar name in an unfamiliar calligraphic form. We lack the easy virtuosity of the people of that time.

<sup>3</sup>For the contrasting ethos of the warrior and the ruler, see Brooks **Defeat** 189-190 and 198. The warrior wants to have his prowess noticed; the ruler only wants to get the job done.

<sup>4</sup>This is the basic Chinese rule, in families and especially toward rulers, but see n5 below.

<sup>5</sup>But taboo avoidance or nonavoidance can be difficult to interpret. It may not apply equally to all persons, like the contributors to the Lǚ-shì Chūn/Chyōu, only some of whom observe it; the others may have come from different states, or they may have held lower rank within Chín. For the erroneous later restoration of supposedly tabooed words, see Dubs **History** 2/266-270.

An absence which can be sharply delimited is interpretively stronger, as when a certain idea or cluster of ideas appears in texts only after a certain date.<sup>6</sup> The case for absence is also stronger when something else replaces the missing element.<sup>7</sup>

### Political and Institutional Factors

Information flow is resisted by autocratic states. The difficulty of getting a fact into the record is illustrated in the story of the Four Scribes in DJ 9/25:2 (04c). For the state's hatred of low-level information flow, see SJS 2:8 and 2:14 (c0214). For the effectiveness of state suppression, consider the Diatessaron, condemned as heretical by Theodoret of Syria (c423); only one scrap of the Greek text has ever been found. The subculture of dissent has its own opaque literary conventions, and it needs them.<sup>8</sup> Resistance to government necessarily has secrecy as its guiding principle.<sup>9</sup> Those who work in more comfortable circumstances need to be aware of these difficulties.<sup>10</sup>

Of all institutions, the military would seem to have the greatest need for accurate reporting, but the implied expectation is often violated. Misses are recorded as hits; routs as victories. The rule of loyalty prevents criticism of superiors, let alone its inclusion in reports.<sup>11</sup> Government announcements serve government purposes.<sup>12</sup> The more "official" a text, the more compromised it may be as an information source.<sup>13</sup>

### Artificial Silence

Where we possess both primary and secondary documents, or early and late ones in the same series, we can sometimes observe both the early suppression and the later elimination of information. The former creates an exception to the rule that earlier evidence is better; the latter confirms the rule.<sup>14</sup> Traditions grow and elaborate, and they may also suppress and discard. I give two examples.

<sup>6</sup>For one set of examples, see Brooks **Alexandrian** 7-10.

<sup>7</sup>The early Analects chapters might be thought too small for the nonmention of the Classics to be significant. What *is* significant is that in those chapters, Confucius is shown as teaching *on a different basis*, making no reference to antiquity at all, but arguing direct from principle.

<sup>8</sup>For a glimpse at the process from the secret police viewpoint, see Vatulescu **Arresting**.

<sup>9</sup>Compare the passwords and countersigns of Mark 11:1-6. The French Resistance official Marc Bloch was arrested and executed through a failure of secrecy among his colleagues (Febvre, in Bloch xviii; itself a cryptic remark, opaque to those who do not know the situation).

<sup>10</sup>As one extreme example, see Slyomovics **Argument**.

<sup>11</sup>See for example O'Kane **Wahoo** 32, 60, 71, 79, 81, 86.

<sup>12</sup>For calculations of when, and how much, to lie to the public, see the staff discussions of Joseph Goebbels, in Boelcke **Secret**. Note the occasional – but only occasional – conclusion that truth is the best propaganda.

<sup>13</sup>I may instance one PhD oral exam, in a year and a place which will remain unspecified. The subject was the Marco Polo Bridge incident of 7 July 1937, when Japanese soldiers fired on Chinese soldiers, the event that touched off WW2 in Asia. The candidate had been asked what her sources were. She replied that she had used official Japanese government documents. The questioner remarked simply: "I was there. It isn't true."

<sup>14</sup>A growth process often supersedes previous growth; see Brooks **Four**.

**The Scandal of Shelley.** Mary Shelley at first published only the milder of her late husband's poems, to protect his reputation from the socially troublesome content of his other work. The first edition of his letters also avoided reference to his extramarital affairs. As time passed, the more scandalous poems and letters were finally printed. If not for these later editions, we would not be aware of Shelley's less Victorian self. In this case, the later texts more adequately represent the historical figure.

**The Atonement.** The Gospel of Luke never mentions the Atonement doctrine, and Luke's Acts of the Apostles never shows Paul preaching that doctrine. Comparison with Mark, the basis for Luke's own Gospel, shows that the passages in Mark which refer to that doctrine (Mk 10:45, 14:24) are *omitted by Luke*.<sup>15</sup> Comparison with Paul's letters, of which Luke was aware,<sup>16</sup> shows that Paul insisted on that doctrine. Then Luke in Acts knowingly misrepresents Paul's theology. He clearly did not wish the Atonement to be part of the tradition which he was defining for the Christian future. If we had only Luke, we would not know that the Atonement doctrine had existed. This is a more normal case, where the earlier evidence is better.

### Summary

There are many reasons why documents may imperfectly represent an author or incompletely report a historical situation. But be it remembered by the critical historian that if something does not exist, in a certain time and place, *the silence of the record* is the only evidence which that fact is capable of *leaving* in the record.

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<sup>15</sup>For a direct argument between the two theological positions, see Brooks **Jacob** 59f.

<sup>16</sup>See Elbert **Links** 229, with further references.