

A Study of the Rhetorical Skills Used in the Classical Poem “Writing a Poem about YuQuan River”

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Abstract

The classical Chinese poem “Writing a Poem about the Yuquan River” is included in *The Complete Collection of Tang Poems (Quan Tangshi)*. The poem is written in five-character lines. Literally, the poem is about scenery. But the poem also expresses grief, resentment and lost happiness hidden behind the characters. The author cleverly applied some rhetorical skills to express her incomparable suffering. This study adopts a qualitative research method to analyse the rhetorical skills applied to explore the deep emotions implied in this poem.

Key words: classical poem, “Writing a Poem about the Yuquan River”, Lady Xiang Yi, rhetoric

1. Introduction

“Writing a Poem about the Yuquan River” is a poem written in five-character lines with only four lines. Thus, there are only twenty characters in the poem. Although the poem is short, it reveals the sorrow and grief of a lady who lost her happiness. This poem was first included in a book entitled *Shu Xuan Lu*, which classified it as a ghost poem and described it vividly as the putative author allegedly explains, “I encountered a woman who was reciting poetry in the middle of the night, and in a flash she was gone (Chang, 1989).” The description could be based on the character “ye (night)” and the content about the desolate night scene by the creek. The real name and birthday of the author of this poem are unknown. In *The Complete Collection of Tang Poems*, the poem is attributed to an author who bears the penname Lady Xiang Yi. The strange and mysterious description included above was removed when this poem was included in the anthology (Chang) so that this poem could be classified to the category of pure literature. To date, the poem has not been studied so this author could not review the related literature. The value of this study is to help readers to learn more about rhetorical skills from the perspective of a poem. The translation of this poem is included in Table 1 below:

Table 1 The Classical Poem “Writing a Poem about the Yuquan River” by Lady XiangYi

Line	Romanization of the Poem	Translation
First	hong shu zui qiu se	The red maple trees were intoxicated by the scenery in autumn
Second	bi xi tan ye xian	The sounds from the murmuring stream at night are like the sounds from a string instrument
Third	jia qi bu ke zai	Good old days would never come back again
Fourth	feng yu miao ru nian	Passing the dark day under the wind and the rain when I was in deep sorrow was like passing a long year

2. Methods

This study adopted the content analysis method, which is a qualitative research method, to analyse the meanings and rhetorical skills in this poem and explore its overtones, in order to find out the true messages hidden in the words of this poem. To make it easier for readers, the lines were analysed according to their original order in the poem. The purpose of this study was to teach the linguistic rhetoric that pertains to this classical poem and the research limitation was the textual research.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 A Rhetorical Analysis of the First Line

3.1.1 The Visual Description Focusing on the Character “Hong (Red)”

In the poem, the red trees are not actually red coloured trees. This is a way to describe that the maple leaves had turned red, indicating that autumn was near. It means that not only the maple leaves of one tree had turned red, but rather that the leaves of all maple trees over the mountains had turned red. It can be imagined that the autumn scenery the author witnessed resided in the red of the maple leaves. In other words, the colour of maple leaves represents the colour of autumn.

3.1.2 The Implied Meaning of the Personified Emotion

The rhetorical skill of personification was used in this sentence. “Zui (steeped)” means being intoxicated, which is often used to describe people’s feelings. The skill of describing the maple leaves with this character is the personification skill. We can see that the author thought of the maple leaves as people. This is an application of personification. Based on the author’s penname, “Lady XiangYi”, we can infer that the author compared herself to the maple red, with the implied meaning that she was intoxicated by happiness.

3.1.3 The Implied Meaning of Emotional Dependency

The season and time described by this sentence are autumn and daytime, respectively. No matter the colour of the sky was white when the sun rode high or gorgeous golden yellow at dusk, it is not difficult to see that the colour of the sky is the background colour used to make the colour of maple red stand out, showing the charming sweetness of the maple leaves. From the aspect of searching changes, autumn is the only season when maple leaves turn red. Thus, there is a dependency relation between “the colour maple red” and “the colour of autumn”. Also, according to the personification skill mentioned above, the colour of maple red symbolizes the author, while the colour of autumn symbolizes her lover. The dependency relation between them is obvious. And the warm scene formed with the maple red under the colour of autumn is a symbol of the happy and wonderful sentiment between these two people. The rhetorical skill applied here is the skill of symbol.

3.1.4 The Overtone

With the usage of the characters “hong (red)”, “zui (steeped)”, “qiu (autumn)”, and “se (colour)”, we can see that the colour of maple red in autumn described by the author was beautiful. From the aspect of the rhetorical skills of visualization, symbol, and conversion, the overtone of the deep love of a woman who was intoxicated by happiness was also integrated into this warm and aesthetic scene.

3.2 The Rhetorical Analysis for the Second Line

3.2.1 Pointing out Time and Location

The fourth character of this line, “ye (night)”, is associated with the autumn in the first line, meaning that this line is about a night in autumn. And the location is by the river. Readers can feel the desolation of the night in autumn indirectly through the artistic conceptions of “qiu (autumn)” and “ye (night)”. Thus, the mood in the second line is completely different from the first line.

3.2.2 The Descriptions of Vision and Hearing

The author described the color of the river with the character “bi (bluish green)”, implying that the moonlight was bright and beautiful. And only when under the illumination of the moonlight, the “bluish green” river could be identified. This is a description of vision. The author also made a description from the aspect of hearing. She used “playing the strings of a musical instrument” to describe the murmuring sound of the gurgling river, implying that the author was near the river so that she was able to hear the string sounds. She compared the river to a person, for musical instruments can only be played by humans. The rhetorical skill applied is personification, a transformation skill.

3.3 The Rhetorical Analysis for the Third Line

The structure of this line is meant to link the previous and the subsequent lines. There are two different internal feelings in this line. The first two characters “jia qi (great time)” are about a memory of a sweet time of happiness in the past, reflecting the meaning from the first line, “hong shu zui qiu se (the red maple trees were intoxicated by the scenery in autumn)”. The rhetorical skill applied is the manifestation skill about the past. The author also applied the exclamation skill with the “emotion of joy”. The last three characters “bu ke zai (no more)” reveal an emotion of depression and despair without any hope for the future. The mental state here is different from that in the first two characters “jia qi (great time)”. The manifestation skill about the future and the exclamation skill with the “deep expletive feeling” were applied to both the statement based on facts and that based on imagination.

3.4 The Rhetorical Analysis for the Fourth Line

With the first two characters “feng yu (wind and rain)”, the author set off the sorrow inside her through the raining and windy scene. The rhetorical skill applied here is the symbol skill. How were wind and rain used to describe the sorrow inside her? According to the following three characters “miao ru nian (as long as a year)”, it can be understood that the author saw wind and rain as deep and serene, symbolizing the sad emotion inside. The rhetorical skill applied is the symbol skill. Also the figure of speech skill was applied to describe her feeling that this moment was as long as a year. It can also be seen as a description of incomparable grief inside through the hyperbole skill.

3.5 The Overall Analysis

Besides the rhetorical skills used within each line as analysed above, there are also connections among the lines. The structure of the first and the second lines is an antithesis structure. For example, “long (red)” was compared to “bi (bluish green)” and “shu (trees)” was compared to “xi (river)”. In the aspect of emotions, the mental state in the first line was a joyful state, while it was a

sad state in the second line. The structure here is a contrast structure and the rhetorical skill applied is the antithesis skill. The author brought in her moods in the third line and the fourth line based on the scenery descriptions in the first line and the second line. To be more specific, the first line is about beautiful scenery, the second about sad scenery, the third about the feeling of loss, and the fourth about unbearable grief. The rhetorical skill applied here is the climax skill. The overall structure of this poem is shown in

Figure 1.

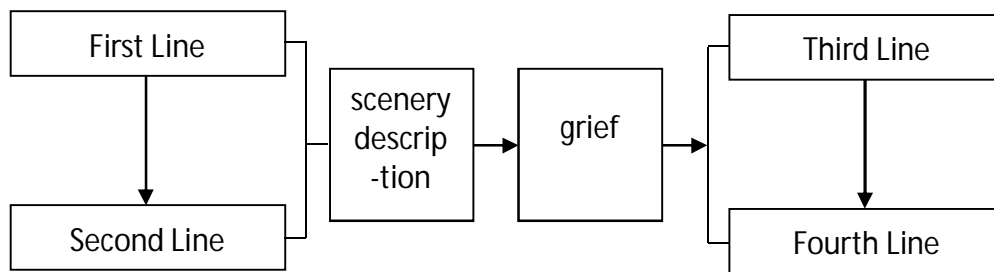


Figure 1 – The structure of the classic poem “Writing a Poem about YuQuan Rive”

4. Conclusion

The rhetorical skills applied in the poem “Writing a Poem about the Yuquan River” include symbolism, visualization, description of hearing, conversion, manifestation, exclamation, antithesis, climax, and figure of speech. The author’s deep feelings and emotions were described indirectly using these skills. Thus the poem can touch the chords of the readers’ heart. Without an analysis of the author’s rhetorical skills, it would be very difficult to comprehend the implications of this poem through the meanings of the characters and terms. The author was actually trying to express her extreme sadness while she lost her happiness through the description of the scenery. Therefore, interpreting a classical poem through a rhetorical analysis is an essential link in teaching.

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