

An Analysis of the Descriptions of Natural Scenes in the Classical Chinese Poem “North Residence’s Secret Garden”

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ABSTRACT

Chuang Hsieh’s “North Residence’s Secret Garden” is an artistic and beautiful classical poem about the weather change from a rainy day to a sunny day. The writing skills applied were integrated with descriptions through the five senses, vision, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. His dynamic and specific writing techniques made the scene descriptions even more vivid. The integrated implicit emotions made the artistic conception of the poem more beautiful. This is why this poem is worth discussing. This study aimed to explore the creative ideas of this poem and analyze the descriptive skills in this poem using qualitative research methods, in the hope of helping readers to further appreciate the charm of the classical poem.

Key words: Chuang Hsieh, North Residence’s Secret Garden, classical poem

1. INTRODUCTION

This poem is a classical Chinese poem about beautiful moonlight scenes. The poem contains 10 5-character lines. Thus, there are 50 characters in total. Although there are only 50 characters, the descriptions of the scenes and artistic conception are diverse. Through the descriptions of the scenes, the true feelings of appreciating and enjoying the wonderful scenes are expressed. The author was accompanied by a partner thus he was in a joyful mood. The cold night in autumn is usually described in a dreary way. Yet the author wrote it in an aesthetic way instead. Therefore, literally, the poem is just about scenery. In fact, it reflects various moods through transference and is thus outstanding and vivid.

“Poems” and “paintings” are two sides of a coin and the important features of classical Chinese poems (Chang, 1993). This poem is a classical poem which describes scenery, as well as a piece of literature composed of several beautiful paintings, as the scenes are described so vividly that readers feel like they can see those scenes with their eyes. This is why this poem is highly artistic. Poets often paid special attention to the choice of subjects to be described in order to bring the aesthetics to another level.

For example, poets often increased the aesthetics of their poems by describing water surfaces and the moon (Wang, 1993). However, emotions are also an important artistic element in poems (Huang, 1993). Therefore, in poems, the authors' feelings and emotions are usually hidden behind their descriptions of scenery (Liao, 1990). In other words, poets often integrated their emotions into their descriptions of scenery (Lin, 2002) in ways that readers can barely notice. This feature is the so-called "being implicit" stressed by classical Chinese poems (Tseng, 1986; Du, 2015). The abovementioned concepts can all be discovered in this poem. Thus, this poem is worth discussing.

Moreover, there are several aspects of this poem that are worth studying: (1) It is not common to see the character "mi (secret)" in titles of classical Chinese poems; (2) The first 8 lines of this poem are descriptions of scenery with rhetorical skills related to the 5 senses: vision, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. It is not common to see rhetorical skills related to all 5 senses in one poem; and (3) the structure of the part of this poem describing the scenery changes is based on gradient lights. It is not common to see sunlight and moonlight being described in the same pattern. The gradation of the beautiful scenery is based on the changes of lighting. Thus, this poem is a poem with gradations of beauty. Also, the colors of the lights are associated with the emotions (Huang, 1984). The implication is that the author hid his emotions behind the changes of the colors of the sky from day to night.

2. METHODS

This study adopted the content analysis method and the concept analysis method, both qualitative research methods, to analyze the 50 characters from the 10 5-character lines of the poem. The analysis methods and steps are summarized below:

- (1) Confirm the phonetic symbol of each character;
- (2) Confirm the correct meaning of each character line by line;
- (3) Confirm the correct meaning of each word;
- (4) List the romanization and meaning of each character and word;
- (5) Translate the verses from classical Chinese into vernacular Chinese;
- (6) Think about the situational concept ("Types of Rhetorical Skills", 1970) of each character and word in each line;
- (7) Count the numbers of occurrences of the descriptions through the 5 senses respectively based on the "Imitation Rhetorical Skills" (Wu, 1987), rank them, and analyze the content elements of this poem in 3 aspects: dynamic, specific, and emotional; and
- (8) Analyze the artistic conception structure in forms and momentum for each line.

3. RESULTS

The research findings are summarized into the 5 parts below: Romanization and meaning; Translation from classical Chinese into vernacular Chinese; Analyses of the imitation rhetorical skills; Analyses of the artistic conception of the poem; and analyses of the aesthetics of the situation changes in the poem.

3.1 Romanization and Meaning

In Table 1, the 10 rows represent the 10 lines from the poem respectively, with the 5 characters of each line listed in the 5 columns respectively. Row A shows the romanization and row B shows the meaning of the corresponding character.

Table 1: The romanization and meaning of each character from the poem
“North Residence’s Secret Garden”

Line		Characters in the original order				
		1	2	3	4	5
1	A	His	Tien	Chi	Wan	Chi
	B	Dusky	Weather	The sun appears after the rain stops	Evening	Smell
2	A	Ching	Hsia	Cheng	Mu	Yin
	B	A light color	Sunset glow	Clear	Dusk	dark
3	A	Wei	Feng	Ching	Yu	Huang
	B	Gentle	Breeze	Cool	Distant	Sway
4	A	Yu	Jih	Chao	Ching	Lin
	B	Weakening light	Sun	Shine	Cyan	Woods

5	A	Shou	Kuang	Chien	Chuang	Hsieh
	B	Collect	Light	Gradually	By the window	Disappear
6	A	Chiung	Yuan	Tzu	Huang	Shen
	B	Whole	Garden	Garden itself	Desolate	Deep and serene
7	A	Lu	Chih	Fan	Su	Ying
	B	Green	Pond water	Reflection	Black and white	Shadow
8	A	Chiu	Huai	Hsiang	Han	Yin
	B	Autumn	Pagoda tree leaves	Noise	Cold	Sound
9	A	I	Jen	Tang	Tung	Ai
	B	She	Person	If	Common	Preference
10	A	Hsien	Chiu	Kung	Chi	Hsun
	B	Playing stringed music	With wonderful wine	Together	Stay	Explore beautiful scenery

Note: A: Romanization; B: Meaning

甲、Translation from classical Chinese into vernacular Chinese;

The 10 lines of this poem were first translated into vernacular Chinese and then into English. The translated text is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Translation of the poem “North Residence’s Secret Garden”

Line	Translation
1	After the rain stopped, the sunset sky created a thick smell of dusk.
2	The sunset glow of a light color gradually watered down the originally thick haze of the evening.
3	The gentle breeze swayed in the distant scene.
4	The light from the setting sun shone on the cyan woods.
5	Slowly, the light from the setting sun disappeared by the window.
6	The garden seemed desolate at this moment.
7	The surface of the pond reflected the scene.
8	In the autumn night, the pagoda tree leaves moved with the cold wind and made some noises.
9	If the beauty also love this scene.
10	We could play stringed music and stayed here exploring the beautiful scenery.

3.3 Analysis of the imitation rhetorical skills;

3.3.1 Descriptions through the 5 senses

The most commonly applied rhetorical skills in this poem are the imitation rhetorical skills. Among the imitation rhetorical skills, description of vision was the most commonly applied one, followed by description of hearing, description of touching, description of smell, and description of taste. The visual description in this poem began with the sky and then moved downward. The vision moved from the glow of sunset to the cyan woods on the ground. Then the vision moved horizontally from the distant cyan woods to the nearby window. In the aspect of the description of hearing, three different sounds were described, including the sounds made by the gentle breeze at dusk, the rapid noises made by the pagoda tree leaves at night, and the stringed music played. The description of touching was about the breeze and intensity of the breeze felt through the skin. The skill of the description of smell was applied to the thick smell after the rain. And the part about drinking the wine was a description of taste. All these applied skills are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: The analysis of the descriptions related to the 5 senses

Line	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Description of vision	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	-	-
Description of hearing	-	-	✓	-	-	-	-	✓	-	✓
Description of smell	✓	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Description of touching	-	-	✓	-	-	✓	-	✓	-	-
Description of taste	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	✓

3.3.2 Analysis of the descriptions of the material for dynamic, specific, and emotional.

In this poem, there are three types of descriptions, including dynamic, specific, and emotional descriptions. There are 10 phenomena described dynamically, 5 objects described specifically, and 2 elements described emotionally, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4 Analysis of the descriptions of the material for dynamic, specific, and emotional

Concept Theory	Content	Line #	Content	Line #
Dynamic	The weather clearing up after the rain stopped	1	The sun shining continuously	4
	Emitted smell	1	The sunlight disappearing	5
	The haze being watered down	2	The surging water surface	7
	Gusts of gentle breeze	3	The swaying pagoda tree leaves	8
	Shaking vision	3	The disconnected noises	8
Specific	Cyan woods	4	Stringed musical instrument	10
	Window	5	Wine	10
	Pagoda trees	8	-	-
Emotional	The joy with the companion	9	Staying together to explore the beautiful scenery	10

4. Analysis of the artistic conception of the poem

The scenes in this poem describing the natural environment and scenery changes are summarized below:

4.1 First line

The description in the first line was from the angle of nature. The time point was evening. This information is inferred from the characters “Chi (the sun appears after the rain stops)” and “Yin (dark)”. It was rainy and covered with haze. Then the rain stopped and the sun came out. This is a visual description of the shining setting sun. It can be seen from the character “Chi (smell)” that

when the sun came out, the rain evaporated and the smell was gone. The garden was then filled with a fresh smell after the rain was over. This is a description of smell. The author described the natural weather changes with a fresh and clear atmosphere.

4.2 Second line

The second line is based on the first line. The author compared the clouds under the evening glow with the clouds under the haze, and of course the former would become outstanding. On the aspect of colors, the colors of the clouds changed from darker to brighter. Moreover, the lighting from the sun changed gradually instead of suddenly. It can be inferred from word “Cheng (clear)”, the colors of the sky and the clouds turned brighter slowly. And relatively, the haze was disappearing slowly. All these descriptions are visual.

4.3 Third line

The third line is the descriptions of the touches on the skin. The line began with the gentle breeze. Then the author saw the place where the breeze caressed and found that the trees in the distant garden were swaying with the wind. The character “Yu (distant)” means being vast in this context. Because the scene stretched beyond his eyes ability to see. This character also implies being mysterious. Thus, the third line often gives readers the feeling of a cool and nice evening, not sultry. The artistic conception of aesthetics is presented through the description of the vast garden.

4.4 Fourth line

The first and second lines are about the sky, and the third one is about the land. From the sky to the land, the focus moved downward, showing the overall space arrangement. The fourth line shows that one of the important elements of nature is the sun. This line is like drawing a sun on an oil painting, making the whole painting brighter. In the fourth line, the character “yu (weakening light)” was used to describe the sun, so that readers can see the sunlight wasn’t harsh to the eye. It was more like the golden twilight at sunset which is warm and relaxing, with an artistic conception of aesthetics.

4.5 Fifth line

In the fifth line, the 4D space description is unique and outstanding. The time of the beautiful scenery wasn’t static. The golden light from the setting sun weakened gradually and slowly. The character “shou (collect)” was used vividly. The rhetorical skill applied here is the conversion skill. There are two types of conversion skills, personification and objectification, which were both used in the fifth line. First, nature was considered as a person; this is where the personification skill was applied. Then, sunlight was considered as an object. Light is an abstract concept. It was written as something physical that could be collected. Thus, this is where the objectification skill was applied. These skills were applied to express the sunlight weakening gradually.

4.6 Sixth line

The description in the fifth line is connected to that in the sixth line, as the former can be considered as the cause and the latter the effect. The author looked at the garden after the sunlight disappeared. And what he saw was desolate. The character “tzu (garden itself)” used here is the personification skill. In the ten lines of this poem, the momentum in the sixth line was the lowest. This is a preparation for the rise of the momentum in the next line.

4.7 Seventh line

The seventh line is an extension of the sixth line. The description here shows the momentum rising again from the lowest point in the sixth line. The first character in the seventh line, “lu (green)”, is a color. The author looked at the green water surface and saw clearly the reflection of the scenery. Since the sunlight was already gone as described in the sixth line, how could the author tell the color of the water? There had to be sufficient light for him to do so. Thus, the description of the moonlight is hidden in the seventh line. The sunlight was replaced by the moonlight. Of course, the moonlight was no match for the sunlight. The moonlight had to shine brightly so that the author could tell the water surface was green. In poems, green was usually used to represent passionate feelings (Huang, 1984). Thus, in the seventh line, another artistic conception of aesthetics in the garden was achieved.

4.8 Eighth line

The first character of the eighth line, “chiu (autumn)”, shows the season was autumn. The fourth character, “han (cold)” shows that the temperature was slightly lower at night in autumn. The noises of the pagoda tree leaves rustling as the wind blew added some amorous feelings to the evening. This wonderful artistic conception made the autumn night different from the one generally described as dreary. This poem is not dreary at all. It can be inferred that the author wrote this poem when he was in a happy mood.

4.9 Ninth line

The first eight lines are all about the scenery. And the ninth is about an expression of emotions. The author expressed his love for this scenery through the ninth line. He used the character “tang (if)” to ask if the beauty also enjoyed this beautiful scenery under the moonlight. This question does not mean the author was doubtful. It is an indirect expression of the feeling hidden inside the author’s heart. The term “i-jen” originally means someone, with no specific gender. However, in classical Chinese poems, it usually meant a female person. Thus, the person accompanying the author should be female.

4.10 Tenth line

With wonderful music played by the stringed instrument and great wine, they stayed and appreciated the scenery together. “Hsien” is a noun, meaning strings on an ancient music instrument. Here it was used a verb, meaning playing stringed music. “Kung (together)” symbolizes strong feelings, in other words, the happy and joyful feelings when spending a wonderful time appreciating the scenery with a beautiful person under the moonlight.

5. Analysis of the aesthetics of the situation changes in the poem

The momentum dropped to the lowest point with the character “chi”. This character had two meanings here. It describes that the rain stopped and that the sun showed up. The weather changed from a rainy day to a sunny day. When the sun showed up again, the momentum started to rise. The beautiful and warm scenery was formed with the breeze and the sunset glow. The momentum reached the highest point here. Then the sunlight was weakening gradually, and the momentum was dropping. Then, once again, it reached another high point with the moonlight, the sounds caused by the breeze, the beauty, and the great wine, as shown in Figure 1.

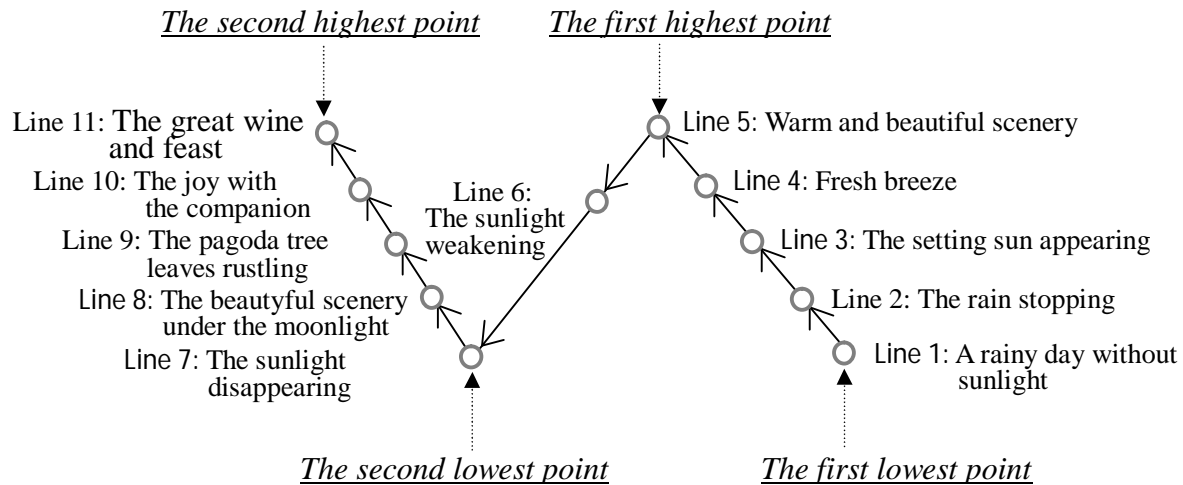


Figure 1 the aesthetics of the situation changes in the poem

CONCLUSION

The character “mi” in the title means garden. There is no significant link between the content of the poem and “mi”. Yet, the character “ai” at the end of the second line implies that the author was very fond of the scenery in the garden. The character “kung” in the last line shows the feeling of appreciating the scenery with a beauty. Based on “ai” and “kung”, we can infer that the author was not just appreciating the scenery. The poem also implies his emotions. From this angle, the character “mi” and the emotions show the graceful but restrained characteristic of classical Chinese poems.

The description of the lighting changes in the poem forms the outstanding structure of this poem with some great skills to describe the scenery, creating the uniqueness of this poem. First there was no sunlight. Then the sun appeared. There was no moonlight at first, and then the moon appeared. The sun and the moon showed up by turns and in contrast, forming a structure with double climaxes in the artistic conception of aesthetics.

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