

Rhetorical City-Portrait in *The Vermilion Gate**

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Lin Yutang's English novel, *The Vermilion Gate*, whose story mainly focus on the social turmoil in Xi'an under the rule of warlords and the family conflicts within the Dafudi, depicts how Chinese people solve the internal and external conflicts with wisdom and how fragile women grows in the war. Basing on the analysis of rhetorical portrait of Xi'an and heroic Chinese people in this novel, this paper explores Lin Yutang's rhetorical preference in constructing image of China and his unique cultural values behind the English writing.

Keywords: rhetorical city-portrait, *The Vermilion Gate*, image of China

Introduction

Sapir-Whorf's Hypothesis (Whorf, 1956) points out that different languages cannot represent the reality of the same society, and the image of the world varies with the linguistic system on which people think. However, Lin Yutang, a Chinese bilingual writer, is such an exception. For as we know, up till now, among the Chinese writers who write in English, nobody has been as successful as that of Lin Yutang. His English novel, *The Vermilion Gate* (Lin, 2009) which takes the love story of the main characters Du Rouan and Li Fei as the vertical line, and strings across some events as the Hui-Han War in Xinjiang, the social turmoil in Xi'an under the rule of warlords and the family conflicts within the Dafudi. Through impressive description, the author shapes some unique characters who can face their life troubles wisely in the war and further shapes the harmony between Hui-Han people in China. Basing on the city portrait of Xi'an in Lin Yutang's *The Vermilion Gate*, this paper, first, identifies the flexible use of some rhetorical devices imparts a unique flavor in his English novel by combing the writer's rhetorical preference and the concrete analysis of the related chapters. Second, it explores how do these rhetorical preferences affect the characterization of the city and people in Xi'an. Finally, it makes an in-depth discussion on how Lin Yutang constructs positive image of China and conveys his cultural values through his English writing.

Literature Review

Domestically, unfortunately, for a long time, the study of Lin Yutang is mainly concerned in the fields of his Chinese prose-writing and those concerning with his English writing is relatively few. As for his novel, nearly all the researches refer to his *Moment in Peking*. Among the few pioneers who show academic interest in his novel *The Vermilion Gate*, Xie Youxiang, et al. (1998) firstly explores Lin Yutang's cultural values and

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LIU Ru-fei, Ph.D. of Literature, Associate Professor of Wuhan University of Technology, shows interest in literature, art and Lin Yutang's study.

philosophy of life in *The Vermilion Gate* thus establishing a new angle for its research. Later, Ma Yu (2013) shows concern on the battle writing of *The Vermilion Gate*; Xiao Bairong (2014) explores the family and cultural narration style of *The Vermilion Gate* from the narrative angle of trace and points out that characters in Lin Yutang's novels are created from social model to cultural model, he thus combining the personal fate with the national fate; Some scholars with solid English background such as Feng Zhiqiang (2016) gives more studies from the perspective of linguistics, he thinks that multi-dimensional China English used in *The Vermilion Gate* is deliberately adopted by Lin Yutang who wants to convey special Chinese language flavour to the foreign readers; Also, Luan Xuemei (2020) deems that Ci of Xing Xiangzi in *The Vermilion Gate* can be treated as "regression of translation". Those positive attempts on Lin Yutang's English novel *The Vermilion Gate*, undoubtedly, are so encouraging.

Abroad, Song Weijie (2008) is the first American scholar who set foot on Lin Yutang's English novel *The Vermilion Gate*, his *Image of Xi'an in The Vermilion Gate* depicts an impressive picture between people and city. Apart from what he has done, seldom can we find any research related to *The Vermilion Gate* apart from China.

Wang Dewei (2016) once comments that novels are essentially geographical, the creation of hometown feeling is the deep geographical construction in the text, his "People and City" (Wang, 2016) theory is so significant that many scholars begin to explore the novel from city-portrait angle. Therefore, this paper will start from the perspective of "People and City" theory, and discuss the ways Lin Yutang constructing Chinese image through his rhetorical city-portrait.

Portrait of Xi'an: Symbolism and Parallelism

Symbolism refers to the art or practice of using symbols especially by investing things with a symbolic meaning or by expressing the invisible or intangible by means of visible or sensuous representations (Yu, 2015).

In chapter 2 of *The Vermilion Gate*, the author describes a colorful Xi'an through Li Fei's eyes:

The city was full of bold colors like the dresses of the peasant girls in a village fair, bright reds and ducks egg greens and deep purples... (Lin, 2009, p. 3)

In this paragraph, by using the symbolic and contrasting colors as "bright reds" "ducks egg greens" "deep purples", Lin Yutang gave a vivid portrait of an energetic and promising Xi'an combining tradition and innovation before readers.

In the process of constructing "parallelism", people need to reflect the repetition and accumulation of multiple behaviors as psychologically authentic event patterns in their brains, and at the same time, assign some emotional significance to practice. Thus, parallelism can produce an "expanding" type of suggestion to the psychological impact of readers (Li, 2001). To better portrait an old city gradually immersing into the modern world, Lin Yutang uses parallelism with the "of..." to describe the conspicuous and dazzling Xi'an.

It was a city of strong contrasts, of ancient city walls and mule-carts and modern motor cars, of tall old northern merchants and young patriotic party men in Chungshan uniform, of illiterate warlords and ruffian soldiers, of cheats and prostitutes, of old restaurants with discolored fronts, the kitchens near the doorways, and a flashy modern hotel of the China Travel Bureau, of camel caravans competing with the big imposing Railroad Administration, of lama priests in

their purple robes, a few straggling Mongols looking lost when not on horseback, and some thousands of turbaned Mohammedans, particularly in the northwest section of the city. (Lin, 2009, p. 3)

Xi'an is like a city of immigrants, where people of all kinds come and go in a hurry, and where the old city is both ancient and modern. In the first half of the twentieth century, Xi'an's changes were characterized by hesitation and reluctance, but they were also gradual, and through Li Fei's eyes, Lin Yutang convey his views on the future of the old city transferring to the innovation.

Portrait of People in Xi'an: Onomatopoeia and Similes

Onomatopoeia, in the aspect of cognition, refers to the use or formation of words whose sound is intended to imitate the action or sound they mean. While as a rhetorical device, its function can be treated as the use of language that creates a literary effect, though often without regard for literal significance (Li, 2001).

The opening passage describes Li Fei's return to Xi'an after his experience in Shanghai.

He had seen the sedate ancient city, the famed capital of the Tang emperors, change hesitantly, unwillingly, but perceptibly. It was his hometown and he loved everything connected with it. Xi'an would not change gracefully. The changes in men and morals, government and costumes, meant chaos and confusion. He loved this big, buzzing confusion. (Lin, 2009, p. 197)

The author uses the words "sedate" "chaos and confusion" and "buzzing confusion" and a series of words describing sound to contrast ancient Xi'an with modern Xi'an. Li Fei is a spontaneous observer of the ancient city of Xi'an. As a "native", he does not believe in cultural conservatism, and he is certainly fond of the tombs, palaces, walls, monuments, and temples, but he is not interested in the modernization trend that has bred a new culture.

However, when Li Fei walks to a teahouse in the city, his thoughts are interrupted by the noisy anti-Japanese march in the street.

It was all somewhat topsy-turvy - like modern China itself - a confusing picture of the old and new..... He liked the noise, the band. the sun in the students' faces, the boy scouts, the kerosene can. (Lin, 2009, p. 202)

In the text, the author uses the onomatopoeia "topsy-turvy" meaning upside down and messy, which is an overlapping vowel shift in English to describe the chaotic anti-Japanese march in the streets of Xi'an. Although the students' protest march may only make a small difference to the current situation, yet their actions give hope to the Chinese people that a new China is moving forward.

Simile is a figure of speech in which two unlike things are explicitly compared. In terms of rhetorical function, simile can strengthen a certain characteristic of the tenor and depict the subjective emotions that the speaker wants to convey in a more vivid and specific way for achieving specific rhetorical intentions (Li, 2001).

Cui Ziyun, the other main character shows her appreciation for the life and her contempt for the powerful, whose performance can be seen as an artistic voice showcasing the cultural connotations of Xi'an.

Miss Cui made her appearance on the stage... The chorus of yow's burst like a string of firecrackers. The Xi'an audience was warm and enthusiastic...her name, O-yun, meant "piercing the clouds", but her voice was round, not sharp, like marbles rolling in a jade bowl. (Lin, 2009, p. 135)

With the above similes, Lin Yutang not only describes the audience's fascination with the traditional Chinese drum culture, but also suggests that even under the dark rule of the warlords, the people of Xi'an still hold on to their pursuit and aspiration for a poetic and beautiful life.

Portrait of China: Metaphor and Oxymoron

Metaphor is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them (Zhu, 2011). Lin Yutang is good at using novel metaphors in English, at the very beginning of the novel, Li Fei refers to the ancient capital of Xi'an as the "anchor of conservatism".

Xi'an was far inland, in the heart of China's northwest. He called it "The Anchor of China's Conservatism" (Lin, 2009, p. 3).

We can find two definitions of "Anchor" in dictionary: Anchor: (1). a mechanical device that prevents a vessel from moving (stopping appliances); (2). a central cohesive source of support and stability (someone or something that can be relied on in times of crisis), the text of "The Anchor of China's Conservatism" is clearly taken in a metaphorical sense. In the history of China, Xi'an has been the capital of 13 dynasties, when people think of Xi'an, they only think of its past history and the glory that history has bestowed on it. In the literary narratives of the writers, it has become a common practice to explore the city's ancient history and visit all the tombs, for the conservative soul that has been attached to the culture of Xi'an as the ancient capital of ancient China.

Oxymoron is the result of human creative thinking, from the aspect of its rhetoric function, the two opposing aspects contained in contradictory figures of speech often complement each other in literary works, conveying the complexity and diversity of character emotions, and narratives (Li, 2001).

Xi'an was Li Fei's hometown and he loved everything about it, but he had to take refuge in Xinjiang because his newspaper article offended the warlord, therefore, the author compares Xi'an as:

Xi'an had its little domestic tragicomedies, but in Sinkiang he expected to see real drama, the mass conflicts of races and religions. (Lin, 2009, p. 210)

The oxymoron "tragicomedies", which contains the rhetorical contradiction in English, accurately expresses Li Fei's complex feelings of love and hate for his hometown, yet it is hard to let go. Such situation seems like to iron in the old China where war the illegal power governed, people have to refuge to another place, still, they cherish their motherland.

However, later, in chapter 26, when Du Rouan finally reunites with Li Fei and they seem to touch the hope, the author depicts like this:

The oxymoron "Miserably happy" composed of adverbs and adjectives expresses a context where pain and joy are inherently contradictory, but in the eyes of Du Rouan, the pain at this moment is joy. Here, the author cleverly uses oxymoron to shape Du Rouan's independent and strong personality, thinking that as long as there is hope in her heart, China is always her blessed land.

Rhetorical Preference and Cultural Values in Lin's City-Portrait

The Vermilion Gate creates a hopeful, peaceful and unyielding China through the special portrait of Xi'an. Why does Lin Yutang show such rhetorical preference in this English novel? Besides the rhetorical preference, what kind of cultural values do the author have behind such molding?

First, as a Chinese writer who writes in English, Lin Yutang's language reflects his rhetorical preference which takes into account the psychological characteristics of different nationalities. He once said: "The way of thinking, concepts, images and the tone of each sentence are very different between English and Chinese..." (Lin, 2008, p. 76). Being a linguist and writer, Lin Yutang has always acknowledged that language is unequal in expression efficiency and different in cognition. From the perspective of language, the differences between English and Chinese languages and cultures will inevitably lead to great differences in the process of writing, and the differences between Chinese and Western modes of thinking will inevitably lead to the transformation and rewriting from the surface of language to the structure in the process of writing. Lin Yutang has a clear understanding of the differences between Chinese and Western ways of thinking, therefore, in the process of portraying and narrating the characters, he prefers to use the most distinctive similes, symbolism and metaphors with Chinese cultural colors, which can also be seen as his performance of giving consideration to the psychological characteristics of English and Chinese. And, moreover, conveys his determination to spread Chinese culture to foreign readers.

Second, behind such rhetorical preference, we can find that Lin Yutang firmly bases his city-portrait on Chinese Taoist culture. "From the perspective of Taoist philosophy, the world is influenced by Yin and Yang, strong and weak, positive and negative forces" (Sun, 2007, p. 34). Lin Yutang shows the foreign readers Chinese tragic-comic characters, which is a bit of Taoism through his novel. For him, if life is cruel, people should stay out of it and dispel it with poetic outlook. That is the reason why his novels are often permeated with some sad colors as well as filled with comic, harmonious and gentle peace. For example, Du Rouan might feel happy and sorrow in Xi'an with the change of the seasons, and the people of Xi'an might be fearful on hearing the buzzing of the bombs and yet finally totally ignored the bombs that may fall down at any time. In his writing, we can feel that although the whole social environment is covered by the shadow of war, the tragic color is often resolved with a positive attitude towards life, forming a unique comedy color. Furthermore, as mentioned in Taoism, "The result will be unified in Tao, and only the way of justice is eternal" (Sun, 2007, p. 59). In *The Vermilion Gate*, at the beginning, Lin Yutang highly praised the simple and contented life attitude of Taoist culture, whose intentions could be known from the people who had great nostalgia for the simple but beautiful life in Xi'an. Xi'an in *The Vermilion Gate* is the unity of nature and civilization, the unity of city and countryside, the unity of stimulation and tranquility. Although it has been invaded by foreign enemies for many times, it is still a unity of nature and civilization. Invasion and chaos are relatively instantaneous compared with the whole history of mankind, so are the whole nation, by grace of obeying the law of Taoism, China will fight to the end of the war until victory.

Conclusion

Edward W. Said (2007) firstly mentions conception of *Orientalism* in his book, which implying that when introducing Chinese culture to Western readers, writer as Lin Yutang actually obtain an “Orientalist” (Said, 2007) vision for he chooses to export the filtered and rearranged Chinese culture, by constructing the “image of China” to actively cater to the foreign readers. Actually, such assertion is lopsided.

From above analysis, we may see that in his city-portrait of Xi'an, Lin Yutang seems to be a master of painting, in which colorful pictures are displays between the lines. The interweaving of the city's warm and cold colors coincides with the change of seasons, with the war in the city and with the psychological changes of the common people of Xi'an. In the description, we can see the brave and unyielding spirit of Chinese people in the face of aggression and disaster. Moreover, water in the river is endowed with metaphorical color of Taoism, although Xi'an under the iron hoof is weak and small, the strength of the whole people's war of resistance against aggression is like a torrential flood, which will certainly devour the aggressors in this unjust war. Through the portrait of Xi'an, the author also depict an optimistic, firm, free and strong image of modern China.

In fact, Lin Yutang doesn't deliberately cater to the Western discourse hegemony in his writing. It can be said that the his rhetorical preference and culture value conveyed in *The Vermilion Gate* will not dispel the value of the whole novel, but set up a model for foreign writers to enter the Western society, enabling Western readers to touch the otherness of languages and cultures different from their native values. Behind the rhetorical preference and culture value he convey in *The Vermilion Gate*, we can see Lin Yutang's determination to promote Chinese culture to the West and establish a positive image of China, and furthermore, to spread Chinese wisdom around the world.

Therefore, we may safely draw a conclusion that Lin Yutang's *The Vermilion Gate* is a vivid city-portrait with its unique rhetorical and cultural color. Lin Yutang, is undoubtedly called as the culture master who has been wandering between China and the West all his life.

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