Rhetorical Interaction in *The Importance of Living*

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**Abstract:** Rhetorical interaction can play a role in cultural transmission as it connects the rhetorical expresser and the recipient, giving enormous respect to the recipient’s subjective initiative. With China’s economical prosperity, its cultural communication with the world becomes increasingly necessary. The study of rhetorical interaction in *The Importance of Living* helps to find a way to speed up the “going-out” process of Chinese culture.

**Introduction**

How Chinese culture goes out and occupies a leading position in the world’s multi-culture, corresponding to China’s prosperous and fast-growing economy, has been a responsibility for each Chinese citizen. It is obvious that cultural translation and book writing are effective channels to spread Chinese culture and a global view ought to be adopted. In this respect, Yutang Lin has set a good example for us, and his works, that have made their way to the Western readers, deserve our attention and careful study from different perspectives.

As a first prominent modern writer to introduce Chinese culture to the West, Yutang Lin satisfies the curiosity of the Western readers with mysterious Eastern culture. *My Country, My People*, one of his books about China, has been reprinted several times soon after its publication. *The Importance of Living*, the follow-up, becomes a book on the bedside for many Western readers. This positive effect is due to the rhetorical technique used by the writer, who successfully conveys ancient Chinese Mean philosophy for the readers to appreciate. While reducing their prejudice against the Chinese nation, Yutang Lin consequently made his contribution to the equal integration of the Chinese culture with the world’s multi-culture.

This paper takes *The Importance of Living* as an example to analyze, from the perspective of extended rhetoric, how rhetorical technique is used and rhetorical interaction is achieved, so as to give some hints to those who are devoted to cultural translation and writing to make Chinese culture going out more quickly.

**Rhetorical interaction in extended rhetoric**

In general, rhetoric is regarded as the art employed by the user to persuade people. In a classical sense, rhetoric refers to the use of language to persuade people to accept a view or to take actions. In a modern sense, it covers all symbolic and cultural activities and interpersonal relationships, including any actual verbal utterances \[1\]. Therefore, a rhetorical study of a text does not stay on the level of treating figurative use of a language as an objective tool with which the readers try to understand the text. Instead, an extended perspective is adopted with more focus on the relationship between the expresser and the recipient, who interact with each other with their subjective initiatives.

In the field of extended rhetoric, this kind of relationship between the expresser and the recipient is referred to as inter-subjectivity, which is achieved through interaction \[2\]. Theories about inter-subjectivity are developed, holding the view that the world, others, and I are equal subjects and that the dialogues between the world and I, as well as the dialogue between others and I, are based on equality and mutual respect.

When it comes to Yutang Lin, the author of *The Importance of Living*, it can be said that he has great difficulty in reaching equal relationship with the Western readers, as his motherland China
was far backward in those days. On the newly-settled foreign land, fully aware of the barriers between an author as such and the Western readers, Yutang Lin cleverly transforms himself into a person living in a modern era with knowledge about the mysterious ancient China. By employing rhetorical interaction, he achieves mutual respect emotionally and common knowledge cognitively with the Western readers, and consequently reaches equal inter-subjectivity.

The way to equal inter-subjectivity is rhetorical interaction, which involves three aspects according to the research of Xuechun Tan. First of all, it is the rhetorical writing or figurative use of language rendered in utterances. Unlike rhetorical activities viewed from the traditional perspective, it is not a one-way activity from the author or the expresser to the recipient, but a two-way interaction between the expresser and the recipient. Both of them are the subjects of the activity and the process is dynamic, which generally is confined by factors concerning some social and cultural backgrounds, although this activity may deviate from the confines of these factors for a short time to construct a new cognitive relationship between the expresser to the recipient. This rhetorical writing technique can produce a connection between the author and the readers so as to create a desirable inter-subjectivity.

Secondly, it is the role that the rhetorical writing plays in constructing the whole text. In his book, *Speeches on Extended Rhetoric*, Xuechun Tan makes his point clear by analyzing the role of “Yu lou” and “Wa she”. He explains that in our real life people may use either “Yu lou” or “Wa she” to refer to a porn site. When “Yu lou” is used, it implies women are as attractive as a jade, while when “Wa she” is used, the implication is that women are as shabby as a thatch. This figurative use of language defines how a traditional love story is developed. More often than not, a woman is portrayed as extraordinarily beautiful and thus becomes the love of a young man, but later on the woman is discovered to be an alien species or a fox disguised in a lady’s form and therefore is abandoned by the young man. This rhetorical writing about women, in the story of “a man vs a fox”, virtually helps to build the structure of the text.

Finally, it is the effect that rhetorical writing exerts on the readers. According to speech act theories proposed by Austin and Searle, whatever we say is not merely a statement of being false or being true, but also an implementation of an illocutionary act. We have the intention of implementing an illocutionary act and producing an effect on the recipient or producing an perlocutionary act. Applying these theories to literary criticism, we may safely say that when an author is creating a text, he or she uses the rhetorical writing with the intention of affecting the way of living of the readers. With a book in hand, a reader can understand the author’s intention of implementing an illocutionary act, and interact with the author unconsciously in a sincere manner. In this sense, a literary act turns into an effective illocutionary act. The working mechanism of an illocutionary act is ensured by social and cultural environment, such as the mainstream ideology.

**Rhetorical interaction in The Importance of Living**

With great respect for the recipients’ emotional and cultural backgrounds, the author never speaks loud directly what he wants to convey, but makes them joyfully appreciating the ancient Eastern philosophy of hedonism. From the perspective of extended rhetoric, we may attribute this magic effect to the author’s exquisite employment of rhetorical writing.

**The synecdoche of “one-afternoon’s leisure” is an emotional and cognitive connection**

Yutang Lin’s rhetorical writing technique is exhibited in the opening part of the book when he writes in the first chapter “Awakening” on how to spend a romantic life, “to lie on a plot of grass under tall beautiful trees of an idle afternoon and just with nothing to do”[6]. Here a synecdoche is formed, an idle afternoon standing for a leisure life. The author presents the readers with an appealing picture for the readers to dream about the whole life state of hedonism.

It is well-known that, a synecdoche is formed by substituting the whole with a part of the whole, so it has the function of “producing deep implications by saying a little, or revealing something significant by presenting something insignificant”. From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, like metaphor, synecdoche is a mode of human thinking, with the effect of creating a conventional
image. Their difference lies in that metaphor is to understand conceptual domain B by referring to conceptual domain A. Conceptual domain B is partly understood via conceptual domain A. However, synecdoche is “the projecting of a concept of the same domain” [6]. In other words, from the base of the same conceptual domain A, A₁ is selected and projected to highlight the implications, leaving some space for the recipient to add to personal contextual information. Given that Chinese people are good at looking at things from a philosophical view, “to lie on a plot of grass under tall beautiful trees of an idle afternoon and just with nothing to do”[6] derives abundant implications, serving as the representative of the whole of the Chinese life. Such a leisurely afternoon reflects the life system that the ancient Eastern philosophy advocates. Although this life system is not presented in a panorama, what is presented can activate the recipient’s thinking and imagination so as to analyze and generate the whole system with some personal characteristics. Due to different social and cultural backgrounds, different panoramas may be seen in their mind’s eyes respectively.

On the other hand, in terms of empathy, this synecdoche of “an idle afternoon” provides the recipient with sufficient humanistic love. Whether he is a Chinese or an American, he is the son of the Nature in essence. As for the American, living a hustling life style, they have the overwhelming need for interaction with the Nature but in the American culture, this need is covered unseen with their pursuit of working efficiency and career success. Such a synecdoche discloses the need, revealing the rational relationships between nature, society and human spirit. With the development of technology, part of this modern society is manipulated by techniques and robots, and human beings have become one-sided creatures merely pursuing material satisfaction. Faced with such dilemma, the Western readers find empathy in the synecdoche of “an idle afternoon”. Yutang Lin makes what is in the background into foreground, commending that “it is not when he is working in the office but when he is lying idly on the sand that his soul utters, ‘life is beautiful’” [6]. The foregrounding appeals to the recipient to focus on their needs that have been long ignored.

The role of the synecdoche of “an idle afternoon” in text construction

The synecdoche of “an idle afternoon” represents the whole life system of ancient China. Though this system is old and complex, integrating the thoughts of Confucianism and Daoism, Yutang Lin develops his book in a clear structure by going into detail from three respects, which are about the relationships between nature, society and human spirit interwoven in the synecdoche. The details provide clues for the Western readers to imagine and appreciate exoticness of ancient Eastern philosophy on hedonism.

To begin with, Yutang Lin writes about the nature of human beings. In Chapter Two, Chapter Three, and Chapter Four, human nature in Chinese culture is presented in a light-hearted mood with human emotions highlighted. Yutang Lin points out in his comparison that Christians hope to be perfect like the God, and Greeks would like to have gods enjoy rich emotional life as a human being in the real world, while Chinese people are in a conviction that we must be reasonable, living peacefully in harmony with Nature. In addition, as we have inherited some animal attributes, we Chinese use our stomach to think, thus ranking emotions unique importance in Chinese thoughts and culture. When emotions are considered an instinct, they should never be restrained. Rather, it is those great idlers, such as Walt Whitman, who promote human dignity. Interestingly, Yutang Lin labels emotions as the essential attribute of us human beings, dispensing the idle philosophy with glamour.

Next, Yutang Lin writes about the relationship between human spirit and society. Restrained by social realities, individuals have to possess wisdom to live a happy life; hence modern people in this fast-paced era are in need of a philosophy to see through the surface. Yutang Lin selects Zhuangtse’ nonchalance and modified it into “selfness”, Laotze’ accommodation into “being folly”, and Mencius’ kindness into being reasonable. After his modification, ancient Chinese philosophy serves as lubricating oil, although it can not solve social problems, it can broaden the Western readers’ horizon while deriving fun and joy from their reading. Chinese lifestyle, such as the family’s ideal, growing old gracefully and wine games, is the practice of the Eastern philosophy.

Finally, Yutang Lin writes about the relationship between humanities and Nature. An idle afternoon on the grass represents harmony between humanities and Nature, which is universal.
However, in Chinese culture, harmony reaches more than this general level. In the eyes of us Chinese, a flower or a stone has a spirit in it. Therefore, enjoying Nature is also a process of selecting a spirit and integrating it with our own. The best traveler is a vagabond. The relationship between humanities and Nature in Yutang Lin’s book is far away from material civilization, leaving emotions and spirit in immense glory and strength.

**The influence of “an idle afternoon” on the readers’ lifestyle**

On the surface level, the synecdoche of “an idle afternoon” provides the Western readers with great sympathy as it cares about human nature very much. In deep, it brings the charm of Eastern culture to modern Western readers who are interestingly surprised with that. When employing the rhetorical technique, Yutang Lin not only takes into consideration the emotional needs of the recipient, but also makes use of the cognitive initiatives of the recipient, so as to go deep under the Eastern and Western cultural differences and reach a consensus about the longing for a leisurely life in Nature. It is good proof that Eastern philosophy is admired and the cultural going-out is successful when this book becomes a bestseller in the USA.

In the book, Yutang Lin says “the question is very much more problematical as to Occidental life ever being invaded by Oriental philosophy, although no none would dare to prophesy” \(^{(6)}\). Indeed, without such a Chinese philosophy, Westerners still can put aside their work and go out for a leisurely afternoon. Nonetheless, it is good that our exotic philosophy offers “some theoretical support” \(^{(9)}\) for this sort of emotional need. From a global perspective, the writer can find in our Chinese culture some original value for the Westerners. He extracts and beautifies the thoughts of Confucianism and Daoism, creating an appealing value system of his own. According to this system, it seems to be bad that Americans focus on efficiency, punctuality and success, but on reflection, it may as well be seen as a compliment \(^{(9)}\). When the value of traditional Chinese culture is confined only to the sphere of entertainment, the philosophy on a leisure life goes into the public and consumed by them promptly, exerting its influence on their lifestyle.

**Conclusion**

In recent years, the field of rhetorical study has been widened with the emergence of extended rhetoric. Rhetorical interaction, as a term in extended rhetoric, provides us a new perspective for us to interpret *The Importance of Living*. Having a good understanding of Western culture, Yutang Lin employs the rhetorical technique to interact with the recipient emotionally and cognitively, without affecting the whole Western value system. Consequently, he has been thought of as a brilliant writer to introduce traditional Chinese culture to the world.

At present, with the growth of China’s economy, Chinese culture is going out to occupy a desirable position in the world stage. During this process, to find more productive techniques to promote Chinese culture, it is of realistic significance to study the rhetorical interaction in Yutang Lin’s writing.

**References**


