

Identification in Bai Juyi's "Song of a Pipa Player"

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Abstract:

In the context of globalization, Chinese literature has stepped into the world and is favored by a number of foreigners. "Song of a Pipa Player" [1] is a representative work of Tang poetry, a brilliant part of traditional Chinese literature. This study, applying the theory of identification, analyzes its elements of both content identification and formal identification in "Song of a Pipa Player." The results show that the poet uses identification by sympathy, identification by antithesis, and identification by inaccuracy to build identification with the pipa player with the assistance of repetition, repetitive form, and progressive form. This study demonstrates that these strategies not only convey his appreciation to the pipa player but also deepen the connection in their souls.

Keywords:

Identification by sympathy,
identification by antithesis, and
identification by inaccuracy
Formal identification
"Song of a Pipa Player"
Kenneth Burke

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research significance

Identification is a significant concept proposed by Kenneth Burke. This notion is regarded as the transition of old and new rhetoric and is widely used in various speeches. Identification by sympathy, identification by antithesis, and identification by inaccuracy can shorten the distance between the speaker and the audience, achieving the ultimate goal of persuasion and conviction. Formal identification, including tropes and figures, conventional form, repetitive form, and progressive form, facilitates content identification to persuade the listeners.

"Song of a Pipa Player" is a famous poem that

has been appreciated for thousands of years. This work is a perfect combination of the arts of both music and language and enjoys a high value in history. By choosing a narrative perspective and applying a unique description, Bai Juyi vividly represents a proficient but pitiful pipa player. This poem reveals the societal reality of the Tang dynasty and the bitterness and melancholy of gifted souls.

In recent years, an increasing number of scholars have applied Western rhetoric to this poem. Li *et al.* (2024) analyze the poem through the lens of body narratives^[2], and Chen (2024) elaborates on this work from the perspective of the changing perspectives and focuses^[3]. Zhang *et al.* (2024) interpret the contents

from a dual contextual perspective ^[4]. However, few scholars expatiate “Song of a Pipa Player” from the view of identification. This paper is of the utmost necessity to fulfill the vacancy and enrich the explanation of this poem.

1.2. Research questions

Therefore, following the framework of Burke, the current research is conducted to examine the content identification and formal identification applied in “Song of a Pipa Player.” This paper focuses on the following three questions:

- (1) What is the specific content identification in this poem?
- (2) What is the specific formal identification in the poem?
- (3) What special effects are achieved through the techniques of identification?

2. Literature review

2.1. Related studies on identification

Burke defines the essence of identification as “You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his... True, the rhetorician may have to change an audience’s opinion in one respect, but he can succeed only insofar as he yields to that audience’s opinions in other respects. Some of their opinions are needed to support the fulcrum by which he would move other opinions” ^[5] in his masterpiece “A Rhetoric of Motives” ^[6]. As a crucial element of Burke’s rhetorical concepts, identification has been explored extensively and applied in various kinds of texts.

Adamidis (2024) highlights its importance in courtroom speeches when establishing the identification of dikastai and strengthening the division between their opponents and the audience ^[7]. Hammond (2024) extends the notion of identification to refracted identification in the interaction between the exhibition of the Museum of Broken Relationships (MBR) and the visitors ^[8]. Whippo (2024) explains the functions of Canadian Heraldry and Indigenous Totem Poles in the process of cultural identification through the lens of the theory of identification ^[9].

Research on identification in China is also noteworthy. Liu (2023) analyzes the construction of multimodal metaphors through three kinds of content identification ^[10], revealing the reasons for the success of Home Series public welfare advertisements of CCTV. Wen *et al.* (2023) examine the translation of Chinese political documents and find three types of content identification that are all used to better build an inclusive and cross-cultural foreign discourse system ^[11]. Qiao (2022) discovers identification in the Chinese festival program series on Henan TV, emphasizing its importance in building cultural confidence and identity in the public ^[12].

2.2. Related studies on “Song of a Pipa Player”

“Song of a Pipa Player” is illustrated through various perspectives in recent years, most of which have been conducted by Chinese scholars. He (2024) reveals the theme of beauty and tragedy in this poem, appealing to inspire profound contemplation about life ^[13]. Chen (2022) contrasts “Song of Eternal Sorrow” and “Song of a Pipa Player”, two representative works of Bai Juyi, reflecting the process of the poet transforming from a spirited youth to a weathered senior ^[14]. Zhao (2024) amplifies the rich connotations of “沦落”(misfortune translated by Xu ^[15]) to better understand the resonance of the pipa player and the poet ^[16].

Despite the analysis of theme and content, a group of scholars applies narratology and cultural geography to this poem. Xiao (2022) decodes narrative space in “Song of a Pipa Player”, which adds a unique charm to the verses of this poem ^[17]. Wang (2023) clarifies the multi-strand narratives in this poem ^[18], which deepen the emotional resonance of the poem. Huang (2024) exhibits the scenes in this poem, which are of typical regional characteristics, through the lens of geographic narrative ^[19].

Therefore, it is crucial to explore identification in Chinese classical poems. This paper aims to analyze both content identification and formal identification in “Song of a Pipa Player”. By combining Chinese poems and Western rhetorical theory, it is hoped that this analysis will offer a better understanding of classical poems.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1. Definition of identification

With more scholars devoted to the study of identification, the connotation has been enriched and interpreted from different angles. As the founder of identification, Burke defines that “Identification is affirmed with earnestness [as the first principle of rhetoric] precisely because there is division. Identification is compensatory to division.” According to *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students* (3rd Edition), identification is an ideal rhetorical situation in which an audience feels close to a rhetor^[20]. In *Introduction to Rhetorical Theory*, “Identification does not supersede our concerns with persuasive appeals; it incorporates them into a larger framework based on the unique uses made of language as the defining feature of our humanity”^[21]. Jasinski mentions that “some critics have drawn on Burke’s concept of identification as a defining feature of rhetoric”^[22].

In view of all the above definitions, it can be concluded that identification serves as a rhetoric technique to compensate for the division of opposite opinions and achieve better persuasion. In “Song of a Pipa Player,” there is a huge disparity between the two figures in social status. For this reason, this paper uses the definition of Burke to analyze the rhetorical skills applied to convey strong identification despite differences.

3.2. Components of identification

In “The Rhetorical Situation”^[23], Burke divides identification into two categories: one is content identification, and the other is formal identification. In common practices, content identification is achieved or strengthened by formal identification^[24].

“There is its use merely as a way to establish rapport with an audience by the stressing of sympathies held in common.” By the drive of the same attitude, interest, or value, individuals tend to build harmonious relationships with like-minded ones. Even if two people are not of the same interest, they could still become friends, because what is more important in this concept is the feeling of kindred spirits. This is identification by sympathy, and this skill is widely applied in persuasion.

The second one is identification by antithesis, “the most urgent form of congregation.” When facing the shared enemy, the hostile parties would set aside their

discord and join forces to confront a common adversary. This identification can also be achieved by fabricating a hypothetical common adversary.

The last element of content identification is identification by inaccuracy. This identification is achieved subconsciously or unconsciously by applying words like “we,” “all,” and “everyone” or nonverbal methods like gestures and tones.

Formal identification contains mainly four forms. The first is tropes and figures, like antithesis, climax, and repetition, to attract the attention of listeners. Conventional form refers to the expectation of a particular form before one encounters a work for the first time, ranging from the overall structure of literary genres to the specific features or distinctive markers of genres. Repetitive form is the use of various modes to repeatedly present a certain characteristic. The progressive form, however, is a structure that guides the expectations of the audience toward a specific conclusion or development of events^[24].

3.3. Functions of identification

Identification confers great advantages in argumentation and oratory, which can be reflected in three levels. It helps us draw closer to the audience, cultivate their heightened sense of engagement, and foster a deeper sense of resonance and identification among the listeners.

4. Analysis of “Song of a Pipa Player” from the perspective of identification

4.1. Description of “Song of a Pipa Player”

“Song of a Pipa Player” is a long narrative poem composed by the poet Bai Juyi of the Tang dynasty in the autumn of the eleventh year of the Yuanhe era (816 AD), bidding farewell to his friend at Penpu. When composing this poem, he was enduring a difficult period of political disillusionment, having been exiled to Jiang Zhou. His heart was heavy with solitude and inner turmoil. The plight of the pipa player and the music she performed became a catalyst through which he expressed his own emotional state. The poem’s success lies not only in the way it conveys complex emotions through the image of the pipa player and her music but also in how it reveals Bai Juyi’s sense of loss and helplessness in both the

political and personal spheres of his life.

The structure of the poem is meticulously crafted with a harmonious alternation of order and chaos, and its narrative unfolds with intricate twists and turns. The seamless integration of narrative and lyrical elements creates a fully realized and striking character portrait. The language flows smoothly, balancing beauty and harmony; especially in the depiction of the pipa performance, the metaphors are precise, transforming the abstract into the concrete, and vividly presenting the musical imagery.

“Song of a Pipa Player” has earned its reputation as a timeless masterpiece of musical poetry owing to its diverse artistic techniques, the exactness and expressiveness of its language, and the harmonious unity of sound and inner emotion. It masterfully portrays the melodic charm of the pipa, the ebb and flow of the music, and the emotional depth of the performer. This poem not only captures the essence of music and emotion but also stands as a pinnacle in the evolution of narrative poetry.

4.2. Analysis based on content identification

4.2.1. Identification by sympathy

This kind of sympathy is used by the poet to express his appreciation for the pipa player. By expressing admiration for the sound of her pipa, he subtly conveys their shared interests and kindred spirits.

“大弦嘈嘈如急雨，小弦切切如私语。
嘈嘈切切错杂弹，大珠小珠落玉盘。
间关莺语花底滑，幽咽泉流冰下难。
冰泉冷涩弦凝绝，凝绝不通声暂歇。
别有幽愁暗恨生，此时无声胜有声。
银瓶乍破水浆迸，铁骑突出刀枪鸣。
曲终收拨当心画，四弦一声如裂帛。”

“The thick strings loudly thrummed like the pattering rain;

The fine strings softly tinkled in a murmuring strain.

When mingling loud and soft notes were together played,

You heard orioles warble in a flowery land,

Then a sobbing stream run along a beach of sand.

But the stream seemed so cold as to tighten the string;

From tightened strings no more song could be heard to sing.

Still we heard hidden grief and vague regret concealed;

Then music expressed far less than silence revealed.

Suddenly we heard water burst a silver jar,

And the clash of spears and sabers come from afar.

She made a central sweep when the music was ending;

The four strings made one sound, as if silk one was rending.”

(translated by Xu Yuanchong)

Through a series of vivid metaphors, the poet fully conveys his deep admiration and appreciation for the sound of the pipa. Such praises lead the pipa player to feel that they share the same level of musical sensibility. Her talent is recognized and understood by the poet. By the consistency in music, the poet establishes the identification by sympathy with the pipa player.

“今夜闻君琵琶语，如听仙乐耳暂明。”

*“Listening to you playing on pipa tonight,
With your music divine e’en my hearing seems bright.”*

(translated by Xu Yuanchong)

“仙乐 (divine)” is a high praise of her music. By connecting her pipa with the music in heaven, the poet again pays tribute to the proficiency of the pipa player. This also expresses the same interest in music between them, again achieving identification by sympathy.

4.2.2. Identification by antithesis

This type of identification is achieved by the same difficulty they face. The following stanza displays the hardship of the pipa player, who was once a favored celebrity but now has to struggle with life.

“弟走从军阿姨死，暮去朝来颜色故。

门前冷落鞍马稀，老大嫁作商人妇。

商人重利轻别离，前月浮梁买茶去。

去来江口守空船，绕船月明江水寒。

夜深忽梦少年事，梦啼妆泪红阑干。”

*“My younger brother left for war, and died my maid;
Days passed, nights came, and my beauty began to fade.*

*Fewer and fewer were cabs and steeds at my door;
I married a smug merchant when my prime was o'er.
The merchant cared for money much more than for
me;*

*One month ago he went away to purchase tea,
Leaving his lonely wife alone in empty boat;
Shrouded in moonlight, on the cold river I float.
Deep in the night I dreams of happy bygone years,
And woke to find my rouged face crisscrossed with
tears."*

(translated by Xu Yuanchong)

This stanza shows us her predicament. She enjoys fame in her youth but bends to life when she gets older. She has no choice but to marry a man to guarantee her life because women are not allowed to have independent jobs at that time. Her husband, who is only interested in business but has no appreciation of music at all, does not understand her sorrow. She is alone, forlorn, full of hopelessness.

The next stanza exhibits the quagmire of the poet. Due to the political infighting, his career in Chang'an is far from smooth. Amidst a turbulent political climate, his ideals are deeply shaken, and he experiences a profound sense of loss and frustration. He is demoted to the position of Governor of Jiang Zhou, which is a relatively minor exile.

“我从去年辞帝京，谪居卧病浔阳城。
浔阳地僻无音乐，终岁不闻丝竹声。
住近湓江地低湿，黄芦苦竹绕宅生。
其间旦暮闻何物？杜鹃啼血猿哀鸣。
春江花朝秋月夜，往往取酒还独倾。
岂无山歌与村笛，呕哑嘲哳难为听。”

*"I was banished from the capital last year
To live degraded and ill in this city here.
The city's too remote to know melodious song,
So I have never heard music all the year long.
I dwell by riverbank on a low and damp ground
In a house with wild reeds and stunted bamboos
around.
What is here to be heard from daybreak till nightfall
But gibbon's cry and cuckoo's homeward-going call?
By blooming riverside and under autumn moon
I've often taken wine up and drunk it alone.*

*Thought I have mountain songs and village pipes to
hear;
Yet they are crude and strident and grate on the ear."
(translated by Xu Yuanchong)*

In Jiang Zhou, his living conditions are far from ideal. Removed from the bustling imperial capital, he finds himself in a remote, desolate place. During this period, his mood is low, marked by discontent with his career and a sense of anxiety over his inability to fulfill his ambitions. The prolonged solitude and isolation lead him to reflect on the meaning of life and the hypocrisy of society. His heart is weighed down by loneliness and a sense of inner turmoil.

Bai Juyi is a governor and the pipa player is an ordinary citizen. In that hierarchical society, they have a huge gap in social status. By linking two types of plights together, the poet still builds identification by antithesis with the pipa player. They both need to struggle against life with little understanding of their family or friends.

4.2.3. Identification by inaccuracy

This type of identification is also used in this poem. By strengthening they are in the same statue, the poet forms identification by inaccuracy with the pipa player.

“同是天涯沦落人，相逢何必曾相识！”

"Both of us in misfortune go from shore to shore.

*Meeting now, need we have known each other
before?"*

(translated by Xu Yuanchong)

This stanza categorizes the poet and the pipa player as the same kind of people. They are both in misfortune, both in hardship. Through the usage of “both,” the poet shortens his distance from the player and expresses his empathy toward her. “We” delivers a sense of community to the player, thus the identification by inaccuracy between them is established.

4.3. Analysis based on formal identification

Content identification is always closely associated with the use of formal identification^[24]. In this poem, the formal identification contains repetition, repetitive form, and progressive form.

4.3.1. Repetition

In this poem, repetition is mainly used to resonate with the player. The poet uses repetition to simulate the sounds of pipa, which implies his appreciation and admiration for her skills.

“大弦嘈嘈如急雨，小弦切切如私语。
嘈嘈切切错杂弹，大珠小珠落玉盘。”

The repeated use of words brings vitality to the expression, rendering it more vivid and impactful. In this case, the poet compares the sound of pipa to pattering rain, murmuring strain, and oriole warble, making the beauty of the music tangible. These metaphors express his deep enchantment with the sound. He conveys a strong sense of identification with the player, thus fostering identification between the two individuals.

“我闻琵琶已叹息，又闻此语重唧唧。”

“唧唧” describes the melancholy within his heart. At first, he is touched by the fantastic sounds of pipa, but now he feels the same sorrow between them. This line indicates the transformation of his attitude from simply adoration to deep mutual understanding. This transition is natural and leads to a higher level of mutual identification.

4.3.2. Repetitive form

The repetitive form is most prominently reflected in the metaphors of the sounds of the pipa. Though the poet compares different things to the sounds of the pipa, the only purpose is to praise the resonance of the pipa.

“大弦嘈嘈如急雨，小弦切切如私语。
嘈嘈切切错杂弹，大珠小珠落玉盘。
间关莺语花底滑，幽咽泉流冰下难。
冰泉冷涩弦凝绝，凝绝不通声暂歇。
别有幽愁暗恨生，此时无声胜有声。
银瓶乍破水浆迸，铁骑突出刀枪鸣。
曲终收拨当心画，四弦一声如裂帛。”

*“The thick strings loudly thrummed like the pattering rain;
The fine strings softly tinkled in a murmuring strain.
When mingling loud and soft notes were together played,*

*You heard orioles warble in a flowery land,
Then a sobbing stream run along a beach of sand.
But the stream seemed so cold as to tighten the string;
From tightened strings no more song could be heard to sing.
Still we heard hidden grief and vague regret concealed;
Then music expressed far less than silence revealed.
Suddenly we heard water burst a silver jar;
And the clash of spears and sabers come from afar.
She made a central sweep when the music was ending;
The four strings made one sound, as if silk one was rending.”*

(translated by Xu Yuanchong)

The poet uses eight metaphors to describe the sound, as it resonates with beauty and depth. All of these descriptions revolve around a singular theme: the extraordinary skills of the player. Through repetition, the poet conveys deep admiration and respect for her mastery. He also subtly suggests a shared level of musical appreciation between them, which creates a sense of mutual identification.

4.3.3. Progressive form

This form is exemplified in the changes in attitudes. The following lines display his different attitudes toward the pipa player.

“移船相近邀相见，添酒回灯重开宴。”
*“We moved our boat towards the one whence came the strain,
Brought back the lamp, asked for more wine and drank again.”*

(translated by Xu Yuanchong)

“同是天涯沦落人，相逢何必曾相识！”
*“Both of us in misfortune go from shore to shore.
Meeting now, need we have known each other before?”*

(translated by Xu Yuanchong)

“莫辞更坐弹一曲，为君翻作《琵琶行》。”
*“Will you sit down and play for us a tune once more?
I’ll write for you an ode to the pipa I adore.”*

(translated by Xu Yuanchong)

“座中泣下谁最多？江州司马青衫湿。”

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plays another composition for him, with less sadness but more happiness.

“Of all the company at table who wept most?”

It was none other than the exiled blue-robed host.”

(translated by Xu Yuanchong)

On one hand, the poet starts with appreciation, then feels mutual understanding after knowing the situations of the player. He decides to compose this poem for her as a gift, and the player gives him another song. This tune brings the poet to tears for the kindred spirits they share.

“千呼万唤始出来，犹抱琵琶半遮面。”

“Repeatedly we called for the fair player still.

She came, her face half hidden behind a pipa still.”

(translated by Xu Yuanchong)

“自言本是京城女，家在虾蟆陵下住。”

*“I spent,” she said, “in the capital my early springs,
Where at the foot of Mount of Toads my home had been.”*

(translated by Xu Yuanchong)

“感我此言良久立，却坐促弦弦转急。”

*“Touched by what I said, the player stood for long,
Then sat down, tore at strings and played another song.”*

(translated by Xu Yuanchong)

On the other hand, the player also begins with unwillingness to play the pipa for the poet. After the performance, she tells the poet her life stories, and finally

5. Conclusion

5.1. Major findings

Through the analysis of “Song of a Pipa Player” through the lens of identification, it can be concluded that the poet uses identification by sympathy, identification by antithesis, and identification by inaccuracy to build his identification with the pipa player. To better achieve mutual recognition, he uses repetition, repetitive form, and progressive form to convey his high praises to the player. All these methods build deeper mutual understandings and strengthen their identification, convincing the player that she is the same as the poet: though they are in totally different social statuses, they are both in misfortune; they share kindred spirits.

5.2. Limitations

There are still limitations in this paper. Firstly, the structure of the theoretical framework is based on existing theories and lacks innovation. Secondly, since “Song of a Pipa Player” is a poem from the Tang dynasty (618–907 AD), the interpretation may not be very precise. Besides, this paper does not cover all the branches of identification, so it lacks an analysis of other elements. Everyone can appreciate this famous poem in different lights. We look forward to more studies on “Song of a Pipa Player” from other profound perspectives.

Disclosure statement

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