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Dissertation title:

English Review of Dissertation

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English Review of Dissertation

The title of my dissertation is "A Study on Alliteration in Du Fu's Poems". The dissertation is divided into three dimensions to analyze the alliteration phenomenon in Du Fu's poems. Three dimensions are individual lines, the upper and lower lines of a couplet, and anadiplosis. Returning to the phonological system of Middle Chinese, this study follows Dong Tonghe's reconstructed phonetic system as the standard. The criteria for determining alliteration are based on a comprehensive evaluation of both the "place of articulation" and the "manner of articulation." Since alliteration has a long history and a wealth of documented examples in Western literature, Chapter Two provides an overview of its concept, historical development, examples, and functions in Western literary traditions. This discussion highlights the significant role that alliteration plays in prosodic studies across both Chinese and Western cultures.

Research Motivation

There are four motivations for choosing this topic:

1. I like art and things with aesthetic. Professor Chu, my supervisor, talked about the application and role of phonology in literature in three of his classes, because that's not the main thing we study. Only then did I realize that the aesthetic of poetry can also be discovered from the perspective of phonology. In my opinion, poetry itself is a beautiful thing, and phonology can further highlight its beauty, or to be more precise, explain its beauty. Usually we can feel the aesthetic of poetry, but we can't say why poetry is beautiful? Where does this sense of aesthetic come from? By studying it from the perspective of phonology, we can get some answers. I am looking forward to this answer.

2. Du Fu was a poet who placed great emphasis on rhythm, making his poetry an excellent subject for scholarly research. Throughout history, numerous studies have been conducted on Du Fu's poetry, but most have focused on exploring his thought and ideology. However, focusing solely on this perspective results in an incomplete appreciation of poetic analysis.

Poetry can be examined through formal aspects of literary embellishment, analyzed through its content, and crucially requires analysis at the phonetic level. While some scholars have indeed studied the sonic dimensions of Du Fu's poetry, the majority have concentrated on vowel sounds (rhymes), with very few investigating the role of consonants (initials). In reality, ancient scholars established fixed rules for rhyme, the use of consonants remained open and unrestricted. Precisely because they were not constrained by regulations, poets could freely manipulate consonants to develop their personal styles. Therefore, the wonderful part of rhythm often lies in the initial consonants of the work. Despite their crucial importance in poetic expression, this aspect remains severely understudied. It is my hope that this preliminary exploration may serve to spark further academic investigation into this neglected dimension.

3. In the past few centuries, under the influence of Western phonetics, Chinese phonology has undergone another transformation, leading to the development of phonetic transcription systems and reconstructed pronunciations. In the past, people could not effectively appreciate Tang poetry from a phonetic perspective. One reason for this was the lack of phonetic transcription, which made it difficult to describe the pronunciation even if they were aware of its characteristics. We cannot describe what the pronunciation is like. It seems that it is difficult to say how music is performed without the musical notation. Phonetic symbols are to phonology as the musical notation is to music. Thanks to the advancement of phonology, modern scholars can now analyze ancient literary works through reconstructed Middle Chinese pronunciations and phonetic notations, uncovering their original rhythms. If we have the opportunity to study this now but fail to seize it, it would indeed be a regret.

4. Alliteration is not unique to Chinese literature; it has also been widely used throughout the history of Western literature. I hope to take this opportunity to explore alliteration in Western literary traditions as well, gaining deeper insights into both Eastern and Western cultures.

Challenges and Achievements

As I progressed in writing my dissertation, I gradually realized that the challenges I

encountered were far greater and more numerous than I had initially anticipated.

1. The biggest challenge I faced was my unfamiliarity with phonology, linguistic stylistics, and philology—three fundamental disciplines necessary for writing this dissertation. Regarding linguistic stylistics, our teacher only gave two lectures on the subject, leaving me with only a superficial understanding. Once I had finalized my thesis topic, I felt as if I were navigating through a dense fog; every step forward revealed new questions that I did not know how to answer. For example, at the beginning, I did not even understand the most basic concepts, such as what plosives and dental consonants were. As a result, I had to engage in extensive reading, search for information online, and frequently consult my supervisor and teaching assistant for clarification. One particularly challenging task was identifying lines in Du Fu's poetry that contained alliteration. Initially, I was unsure whether the examples I had found were correct, so I would ask my supervisor to verify them one by one. Since these examples formed the core of my analysis, accuracy was crucial. However, the number of instances I needed to check was overwhelming, and the questions I had were often very detailed and nuanced. Eventually, I began to feel embarrassed about troubling my supervisor so frequently, as I was taking up so much of his time. Yet, despite this, he remained incredibly patient, addressing each of my concerns with patience. I am deeply grateful for his unwavering guidance and support throughout this process.

2. Second, due to my unfamiliarity with foundational knowledge, I often made errors. For instance, some of the examples I identified might not actually qualify as alliteration, so I had to spend a lot of time and energy trying and making mistakes again and again, and then correcting them. A particular problem lies in Chinese characters themselves, their initial consonants are not visually apparent. Since my research focused on Tang poetry, which belongs to Middle Chinese phonology, I needed to determine the Middle Chinese initial consonant of every character in each poem. This required manually searching for the reconstructed pronunciation of each character on specialized websites. A single poem might contain as few as 40 characters, an average of over 50, or even up to 100 or 200 characters. I had to look up, record, and cross-analyze the reconstructed pronunciation of every single character—a tedious

yet indispensable task. However, even after completing this laborious process, the results were not always usable. Some poems simply did not employ alliteration, leaving me with numerous fully annotated yet ultimately irrelevant texts. Consequently, my thesis outline underwent multiple revisions. This was not merely a test of patience; it primarily involved investing immense time and effort for minimal returns. For a period, I felt stuck in constant busyness with no visible progress in my paper. At one point, I even considered abandoning the topic altogether, plagued by self-doubt. The frustration intensified as many of the examples I painstakingly compiled proved incorrect, and my outline had to be rewritten twice. It felt like an unending cycle of setbacks, with no clear measure of how close I was to success. Adding to the pressure, many classmates had already completed major portions of their theses while I remained mired in data organization, fueling intense anxiety. These psychological burdens weighed heavily on me—stress mounted, and my mood grew somber. Yet, my supervisor consistently encouraged me, affirming my dedication and hard work. Even the supervisor's wife sent messages praising my efforts. My teaching assistant also offered guidance and practical strategies for me. Gradually, with their support, I recalibrated both my mindset and methodology. Through patience and persistent effort, I ultimately completed the thesis. This journey taught me resilience: academic research is rarely linear, but breakthroughs often emerge from enduring the grind of repeated failures and adjustments.

3. Furthermore, this thesis examines the use of alliteration in Du Fu's poetry through the lenses of phonology and linguistic stylistics, emphasizing the importance of evidence-based analysis. However, I often have imaginative and unconventional ideas, which may be well-suited for literary writing but are not appropriate for an academic paper that requires rigorous argumentation. In my initial draft, I wrote many passages that were rich in literary expression and aesthetically pleasing, but they lacked the necessary academic rigor and solid reasoning. Writing these sections consumed a significant amount of my mental energy and time. However, my supervisor later pointed out that such content needed revision. My supervisor emphasized that this was an academic thesis, which differs from literary writing. In academic research, one cannot simply write whatever comes to mind; every argument must be supported by empirical

evidence. I needed to clearly articulate my reasoning and explain why my conclusions followed logically from my arguments. Consequently, I went back to conduct further research and made substantial revisions. After making these revisions, I sometimes felt that my arguments were well-founded. However, in reality, they still lacked persuasive power and contained certain flaws and inconsistencies. My supervisor patiently pointed out these issues multiple times, which helped me refine my research methodology step by step, striving for greater accuracy and precision.

4. Additionally, there are many Western studies related to alliteration. I hope to summarize them comprehensively, but my ability to read Western literature is not very strong yet. It takes a lot of effort for me to read and understand the material. Moreover, I need to sift through a vast amount of information to find content that is useful for my research. This requires time and patience to carefully sort things out step by step. It is also a task that tests endurance and determination.

During the process of writing my thesis, I encountered many problems and challenges, but I also gained a lot from the experience.

1. My understanding of phonology, stylistics, and alliteration studies in both Eastern and Western poetry has deepened significantly. At the beginning, I had almost no prior knowledge of these fields—I was essentially starting from scratch. Through continuous reading and exploration during my research, I gradually became familiar with these subjects. By the time I completed my thesis, I had developed a much deeper understanding of these disciplines and the concept of alliteration.

2. Throughout the writing process, I faced various difficulties and had to tackle each of them one by one. Overcoming these challenges and successfully completing my thesis gave me a sense of courage and confidence. If I were to explore a new research field in the future, I believe I would approach it with greater confidence in my ability to succeed. Additionally, dealing with problems during my thesis writing has enhanced my problem-solving skills. I now have a better understanding of how to handle difficulties and the courage to face and resolve them. I believe

these are indispensable and universally critical skills that transcend time and place - competencies that prove essential in any circumstance and crucial for personal growth. Therefore, I want to express my deepest gratitude for this invaluable experience that has profoundly shaped my perspective. I'm particularly thankful to my supervisor and teaching assistants, whose expertise and patience were instrumental in my growth, generously sharing their knowledge while challenging me to reach new heights. Furthermore, I extend my heartfelt appreciation to everyone who has supported me along this journey - your encouragement during challenging moments, constructive feedback that pushed my boundaries, and unwavering belief in my potential have all been vital components of this transformative process. This experience has not only enhanced my technical capabilities but more importantly, taught me the profound value of perseverance, collaboration, and continuous learning - lessons I will carry forward throughout my life's journey.

3. During the writing process, my advisor pointed out that some of my expressions were not in line with academic writing standards. For example, in academic research, conclusions must be supported by rigorous reasoning and evidence, rather than personal interpretations—such as assuming that a particular initial consonant conveys a certain emotion without proper justification. This feedback helped me develop a clearer understanding of academic writing conventions and improved my research skills.

4. Because I had to sift through and read a large number of Western academic sources during the early research phase, my ability to comprehend and analyze Western literature improved significantly. One particularly challenging task was identifying examples of alliteration in Ancient Greek texts. Since I could not understand the language, the difficulty level was extremely high. Although I ultimately did not use the findings in my final research, the process broadened my horizons, expanded my knowledge, and enhanced my ability to search for academic materials. Through reading Western literature, I also noticed a fundamental difference between Western languages and Chinese. Western languages are based on polysyllabic systems, whereas Chinese consists of monosyllabic characters without visible phonetic markers. This structural difference explains why alliteration research is relatively less

common in Chinese studies, whereas in the West, alliteration is more frequently used and studied in greater depth. Western scholars approach alliteration from multiple perspectives, employing various analytical frameworks. These research methods and perspectives provide valuable insights that can be applied to further studies on alliteration in different linguistic and literary contexts.

5. Under my supervisor's guidance, I learned to adopt a rigorous methodology by conducting phonetic analysis based on Dong Tonghe's Middle Chinese reconstructions. This approach ensured scientific accuracy at the phonological level and minimized interference from modern pronunciations. By strictly adhering to the Middle Chinese phonetic system, the study established the reliability of phonetic analysis and provided an empirical foundation for further linguistic research in related fields. Additionally, this thesis systematically examined the use of alliteration from multiple perspectives, including individual lines, the upper and lower lines of a couplet, and anadiplosis. This structured approach contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of alliteration in Chinese poetry. The combination of rigorous methodology and systematic academic analysis has further advanced research on alliteration in Chinese poetic traditions.

6. This thesis not only describes the use of alliteration in Du Fu's poetry but also explores its artistic effects, including musicality, rhythm, and emotional expression. For example, the repeated use of identical or similar initial consonants in alliteration not only helps convey different emotions but also enhances the rhythmic and musical qualities of the verse through sound repetition and circular resonance. The recurrence and echoing of consonants create a sense of unity, while variations such as spaced occurrences and phonetic similarity with different characters introduce diversity. This balance aligns with the aesthetic principle of "Unity in Variety," which enhances the artistic tension and expressive power of poetry, enabling poets to craft verses with stronger rhythmic and musical appeal. The findings of this study also fulfill my initial expectation of uncovering the aesthetic qualities of alliteration. Additionally, this research extends its scope by examining alliteration in Western poetry, including works by Shakespeare, Beowulf and so on. This approach broadens and deepens the study, providing a more comprehensive perspective on alliteration as a literary and phonological phenomenon across different poetic traditions. I believe these are both my gains and part of the contributions

made in this study.

7. This research topic offers a relatively novel perspective, as it has been explored by relatively few scholars, thus filling a certain academic gap. Previous studies on Du Fu's poetry have primarily focused on rhyme, meter, parallelism, and allusions, with little dedicated research on alliteration. By introducing a new analytical approach, this study expands the scope of phonological research in Chinese poetry and holds a certain degree of academic value.

Reflection and Areas for Growth

During the process of writing my thesis, I identified several limitations in my research as well as areas for future refinement and expansion. Due to constraints in time and length, I regret that my study was relatively narrow in scope, focusing only on a selection of around forty Du Fu poems. As a result, I was unable to uncover a broader range of characteristics in his poetry. Given that Du Fu composed over 1,400 poems in total, future research could extend the analysis to a more representative selection from different creative periods. By expanding the sample size, the study could enhance the generalizability of its conclusions and more comprehensively reveal the overall patterns and evolutionary trends in Du Fu's use of alliteration. This would allow for a more in-depth and holistic examination of the topic.

Additionally, a multi-dimensional comparative framework could be constructed for further research. A longitudinal perspective could compare Du Fu's poetic works across different creative periods, while a cross-sectional approach could contrast his poetry with that of his contemporaries or poets from different historical periods. This comparison could help uncover their unique stylistic preferences and distinctions. There is even potential for a cross-cultural comparative study—systematically analyzing Chinese poetry alongside Western poetry to identify similarities and differences. This approach would not only deepen the understanding of Chinese prosody but also contribute empirical case studies to the field of comparative poetics.

Furthermore, research could be extended to explore practical applications, such as examining the impact of alliteration on poetry recitation and classical poetry education. There is another possible avenue could be designing pedagogical experiments based on the cognitive

mechanisms of alliteration, quantitatively assessing how prosodic features influence memory retention and aesthetic perception in poetry learning.

Another intriguing direction involves technological integration. While phonology has advanced with the development of reconstructed pronunciation systems and phonetic transcriptions, these reconstructions currently exist only in written form and cannot yet be aurally experienced. If it were possible to synthesize the sounds of Middle Chinese, researchers and readers could more intuitively perceive how Tang poetry would have sounded when read in its original phonology. This would provide a more vivid and direct appreciation of the beauty and musicality of Tang poetry. Ideally, by leveraging speech synthesis technology and collaborating with the field of digital humanities, it might be possible to develop a historical phonetic reconstruction model for Tang poetry recitation.

The above points are the directions I believe could be explored and expanded further in the future, should the opportunity arise.