

## BOOK REVIEW: RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION STUDIES

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**Abstract:** Essential rhetorical strategies help writers to enhance both the art of their language and the effectiveness of their communication in particular sociocultural contexts. In the Western world, Composition-Rhetoric has been considered as an independent discipline for decades, in which significant scholars exert tremendous influences upon this field. In China, however, few people clarify a clear definition of rhetoric, not to mention providing monographs that specifically contemplate the interconnections between rhetoric and writing. This is problematic, in that ignoring the humanistic factors and rhetorical strategies, which are rooted in thousands of years of tradition and behind the language, Chinese EFL learners make many mistakes in their writing, which perplexes native speakers and fail to achieve the intended communicative purpose. Fortunately, the monograph *Rhetoric and Composition Studies* edited by Donghong Liu and Keith Lloyd, fills the gap in this field in China. This article provides an evaluative review of this monograph, hoping to recommend it for Chinese EFL writing instructors and students, as well as researchers dedicated to composition studies.

**Keywords:** Rhetoric; Composition studies; Second language writing; EFL instruction; Audience awareness

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Rhetoric is universally perceived as the “parenting theory” of Western humanities[1], with a dramatically long history of over 2000 years from Aristotle’s era till today. Because of its indispensable role, rhetoric exerts great influences upon various realms in the world of liberal arts, such as political science, communications, journalism, and composition studies, etc. In particular, writing is inseparably interconnected with rhetoric. Through the long-term efforts of rhetoricians and writing researchers, Composition-Rhetoric has become an independent discipline, which utilizes rhetoric as a fundamental theory to conduct composition studies[2]. Studies have found that rhetorical knowledge assists student writers in situating themselves within intricate social, political, and cultural frameworks in their writing, constructing logical arguments with persuasive language, structuring these arguments in the most influential sequence, presenting them in a manner resonant with the intended audience, shaping the perceptions or beliefs of others, and ultimately directing actions to attain intended communicative purpose[3]. Therefore, preparing students with adequate knowledge of rhetoric and writing paves the path for generating well-rounded and responsible citizens with critical thinking and argumentative skills in society. However, although Composition-Rhetoric flourishes in Western countries led by America, and is widely known in academia, few scholars in China are acquainted with this very discipline as an independent one, and neither devote particular efforts to studying or developing it. One possible cause might be rooted in the Chinese traditional but narrow definition of rhetoric, which simplistically takes it as figures of speech used for amplifying the beauty of language[4]. This interpretation fails to delve into the social, cultural, and persuasive nature of rhetoric, so it is no wonder that Chinese researchers tend to ignore the interconnections between rhetoric and other fields. Another point is that English writing instruction and research in China put too much emphasis on basic language skills and mechanics, rather than cultivating students’ rhetorical and critical thinking capability through written representation. For these reasons, there exist approximately no courses or textbooks involving Composition-Rhetoric in Chinese college-level English majors for students and teachers to take advantage of. It appears that second language writing and rhetorical studies in China are sharply separated from each other. Consequently, English majors in China are frequently criticized for lack of critical thinking, creative awareness, and persuasive strategies in their academic writings[3]. Gratefully, an academic research-based textbook, *Rhetoric and Composition Studies* edited by professor Liu Donghong and Keith Lloyd, who are both significant scholars in rhetoric, second language writing, and cross-cultural studies, creatively and retrospectively fills the gap in China’s educational and research context[5]. This book makes an organic combination of core ideas in rhetoric with second language writing theories. Most importantly, it is the first academic monograph regarding Composition-Rhetoric in China, which provides academic resource support and constructive guidance for its intended audience, Chinese EFL instructors, researchers, and learners. Given the information above, this article justifies an evaluation on this monograph, which presents an outline summary in the first place, followed by an evaluation from two sides in detail. In the end, this article intends to reiterate the evaluative positions and provide final thoughts on this book.

### 2 OUTLINE SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

This book includes ten chapters, which are logically and thematically interrelated with each other. The first chapter defines the concept of “rhetoric” from a generally acknowledged perspective, and specifically introduces the branching term “Composition-Rhetoric”, together with the discrepancy between rhetoric in ancient and modern times. It then mentions a series of distinguished ideas in Western rhetoric, and finally articulates how rhetoric benefits human beings

in real circumstances, varying from everyday life to academic contexts[1]. Chapter 2 is chronologically organized, and briefly reviews the history of rhetoric from the classical age to the contemporary era, demonstrating the evolution of people's comprehension of rhetoric, transitioning from a deliberate strategy for persuasion and eloquence to an indispensable mode of communicative thinking and a humanistic attribute that permeates all facets of individuals' lives[5]. Chapter 3 is arranged by a similar token to the previous chapter, while it poses particular attention to the spectrum of Composition-Rhetoric, which highlights its origin, crisis, and basic theories, and then elaborates on its extension and application to process-oriented writing pedagogy[5]. Chapter 4 discusses style and figures of speech, which are defined as "persuasive or extraordinary uses or arrangements of language" by ancient rhetoricians[6], with a plethora of illustrative examples in both English and Chinese to demonstrate the precise application of each rhetorical device to the audience. In Chapter 5, Aristotle's intrinsic rhetorical appeals are underscored, consisting of *logos* (logical appeal), *pathos* (emotional appeal), and *ethos* (ethical appeal). As extraordinary rhetorical strategies in Aristotle's Classical Rhetoric, the three appeals are artistic and powerful methods by which a speaker or writer can enhance the effectiveness of his or her speech or writing contents to persuade the audience[5-6]. They are widely resorted to in all fields, including whereas not limited to public orations, debates, government reports, writing, and even advertising. This makes sense since to make a convincing and effective argument, rhetors (speakers or writers) rely on clear logic (*logos*). This aside, they must prove themselves credible (*ethos*) to the audience, and even attempt to affect the emotions (*pathos*) of the audience. Considering their crucial role in rhetoric, the authors dedicate an entire chapter to the introduction, and also add common logical fallacies by presenting definitions and instances in English and Chinese. Chapter 6 fixes on the structure of argumentation or persuasive writing, analyzing predominant theories in relation to discourse structure[5]. This chapter first gives relatively a detailed introduction to Toulmin's argumentation model, which is a complicated extension of Aristotle's syllogistic reasoning[6]. Toulmin model evolves from the initial version that is merely comprised of ground, warrant, as well as claim to a revised version containing six components, with backing, rebuttal, and qualified added in Toulmin's process of reasoning. Subsequently, the authors provide comments on its strengths and weaknesses, demonstrating an objective picture of this theory. This chapter also mentions Van Eemeren's argumentation structure, which divides arguments into five types, Rhetoric Structure Theory, which is famous for text span and rhetorical relation, along with other structures of persuasive discourse. Chapters 7-9 cover three branches of rhetoric, which are contrastive rhetoric, intercultural rhetoric, and comparative rhetoric. Respectively, contrastive rhetoric draws on the use of L1 rhetorical strategies to address problems in L2 writing; intercultural rhetoric uncovers the accommodative nature of rhetoric among different cultures in actual use; comparative rhetoric is characterized by its discussion of the commonalities between different figures of speech while acknowledging linguistic and cultural diversity. The final chapter, Chapter 10, returns to the discussion of writing research and teaching, and introduces three basic frameworks of writing teaching and research. They are text-oriented, to writer-orientated approach, and then to reader-oriented approach, which "focus on text, writers, and readers respectively"[5], naturally accentuating the progression of composition studies from the text level, to transforming attention to the author, and eventually to consider the audience. This order also implies the cognitive, communicative, and sociocultural functions of Composition-Rhetoric in essence.

### 3 EVALUATION

This book is an authoritative teaching and learning material for teachers, students, and researchers of second language writing in China thanks to its incomparable merits. Firstly, the language used in this book is audience-friendly, which in itself demonstrates sufficient audience awareness. This credit should be given to the appropriate language complexity and style that fit the cognitive development, knowledge, and comprehensive level of Chinese EFL learners. Thereby, the book's intended audience can read and grasp the contents fluidly, instead of impeded by abstruse word choice or sentence patterns. What's more, taking into account the social and cultural background of its audience, the selection of examples is also localized. Specifically, Chinese examples of literature, advertisement, and poems are widely provided for better understanding of Style (Chapter 4), Rhetorical Structure Theory (Chapter 6), and ideas in comparative rhetoric. These exemplifications can positively affect Chinese EFL learners to combine what they have in mind with rhetorical theories. Additionally, the whole book is coherently structured, which sets a wonderful example of good writing. Going through the arrangement, it is evident that chapters are thematically organized together, as is mentioned in the summary part of this article. To specify, the first two chapters give a macro picture of rhetoric and its history, and from Chapter 3 on, the authors dig into branches of composition-rhetoric, arranging the contents from general to specific. Also, looking at the arrangement of the content in each chapter in a micro way, it can be found that the content of each chapter also starts from an overview, and then goes to the description and interpretation of details. This organization pattern is very scientific and welcome, because it conforms to the deductive characteristics of English writing[5]. Most significantly, this book consciously cultivates its users' critical thinking and analytical capabilities. This purpose is achieved by designating ample questions and exercises that are relevant to what has been covered in each chapter, and by adding further readings ranging from extensions on the theories to empirical studies that implement the theories into practical research backgrounds. These reading and learning materials help the textbook users consolidate what they capture from the texts, and also potentially formulate academic literacy for their future research and teaching, and learning journey.

For all its undeniable advantages, admittedly, the book does not prevent itself from some issues. Take instance the five canons of rhetoric in classical rhetoric, including invention, disposition, style, memory, and delivery[5]. This part is

interpreted in detail in the fourth section “Great ideas in western rhetoric” of Chapter 1, Introduction. While in Chapter 2, History of Rhetoric, it is mentioned again briefly. This arrangement is slightly inappropriate. The reason is that the beginning chapter is more like a bird-eye’s view of the entire book, and therefore it is supposed to present a general overview of the book’s contents instead of detailed explanations. If any, the second chapter should spend more words on the five canons in rhetoric comprehensively. Therefore, this article believes that the arrangement here can be improved to reach a balance. Another limitation is that some of the connections and transitions between subsections can be expressed more naturally. A typical example occurs in Chapter 5. The authors introduce Aristotle’s three appeals of persuasion before enumerating logical fallacies. The problem is that before the explanation of this part, there is no natural and reasonable transition to lead the topic to the explanation of logical fallacies, which makes the lead-in here inadequate and slightly blunt. In addition, the previous three appeals are mentioned in the order of logos, pathos, and ethos. But obviously, logical fallacies occur whenever arguments do not prove a claim logically, which indicates that this section should be followed by logos (logical appeals), and therefore the order here should be adjusted to be logical. At the same time, it cannot be ignored that some small errors such as pronoun references should be edited to maintain language accuracy. However, these issues do not outweigh the merits of the book. As the first academic textbook on Composition-Rhetoric in China’s teaching context, its pioneering nature and its wonderful content are also worthy of careful reading by EFL learners, instructors, and scholars.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

Generally speaking, the book *Rhetoric and Composition Studies* not only covers the key contents and insightful ideas of Composition-Rhetoric, but also puts into practice the rhetorical strategies, humanistic literacy, and communicative purposes of writing itself. This book possesses its theoretical value and simultaneously offers resources for Chinese EFL students’ writing, instructors’ professional training, as well as their teaching philosophy’s updating. This article also advocates that more monographs like this will spring up in the future, which can enrich the domestic academic resources of rhetoric in China, but also contribute to generating well-rounded foreign language talents with rhetorical and critical thinking abilities as well as high foreign language levels.

#### COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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