ABSTRACT

As an important statesman, a Confucianist, a great historian, a prose master and a poet of the Sung dynasty, Ouyang Xiu (欧阳修) was an outstanding man. However, his rhyme-prose (賦, or rhapsody) was seldom studied in depth. This academic exercise aims to resolve this situation by analysing nine pieces of the rhyme-prose by Ouyang Xiu.

Scholars over the years studied many of his poems and agreed he was the founder of one of the sub-genres of rhyme-prose — wen fu (文賦, unregulated rhyme-prose). In spite of this, few had done him justice by analysing his rhyme-prose passages in depth. This may be due to the fact Ouyang Xiu has left us only twenty-two pieces of rhyme-prose and included merely five in his literary anthology Ju Shi Ji (居士集).

A close study of the nine pieces of works shows that they display literary innovations. Most of the nine pieces of rhyme-prose are yong wu fu (咏物賦). Ouyang Xiu employed the central object of these works as either an allegorical reference or imagery in which deeper meanings are to be read between the lines. His rhyme-prose contains many arguments, uncommon in earlier works. I compare Ouyang Xiu’s works with those of his predecessors on similar topics and found his approach novel too.

The most significant contribution of Ouyang Xiu to rhyme-prose writing is the two strikingly unconventional pieces, which were later classified by scholars as wen fu. This essay also analyses the structure of the nine rhyme-prose pieces. I conclude the two unconventional compositions generally retain rhyme but incorporate some parts in which rhyme and regular meter, both a distinctive trait of rhyme prose, disappear altogether. This spurs other rhyme-prose writers, such as Su Shi (苏轼), to write unregulated rhyme-prose and, in a way, revives and sustains the genre for another few hundred years.