



## The Realization of Figure and Background in Li Qingzhao's Poems

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### Abstract

The rapidly rising cognitive poetics at the late 20th century is the novel interdisciplinary scientific tool between cognitive linguistics and literary criticism to interpret literary works. Figure and background separation principle is one of its main researches. Initially using this principle to study literary works, Stockwell and Tsur focus on the readers' psychological cognitive mechanisms involved in comprehending literary discourse and conclude that figure and ground segregation principle are the fundamental characteristics of literary stylistic analysis. This paper mainly discusses its realization in Li Qingzhao's poems and Ci-poems and its effects on formation of artistic conception, in hope of providing a new model for studying Chinese classical poems.

**Key words:** Figure and ground theory; Cognitive poetics; Realization; Foregrounding

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### INTRODUCTION

Tang and Song poetry, the peak of the development of Chinese ancient poetry, intrigues lots of scholars, researchers and common people. Li Qingzhao's poems and Ci-poems were notable among her peers and comparable to many of the famous male poets in the

Song Dynasty. Her Ci-poems also prevailed in the Ming and Qing dynasties. Li Qingzhao's poems and Ci-poems are also popular with people even now. Her works have been spread into many countries and translated into many languages. Li Qingzhao's works are also studied from different aspects at home. Some scholars (e.g., Bingxin, Chu Dagao, Weng Xianliang, Xu Zhongjie, Xu Yuanchong) translate Li Qingzhao's works into English and stress the characteristics of her Ci-poems.

Most people study Li Qingzhao's poems and Ci-poems from traditional perspectives, such as literature, history, and aesthetics. However, only few related researches are conducted from cognitive poetics angle, particularly, using the principle of figure and ground, except for Kuang fangtao, Wen Xu, Linagli, Chen Lei, who make research on Tang poetry, and Li Zhengquan, Yang Li, Fu Jianhua, who attempt to study Li Qingzhao's poetry by way of cognition. In combination with analysis on the structure of literary works and readers' perception in cognitive poetics, this article tentatively explores the realization of figure and ground in Li Qingzhao's poetry and Ci-poems, as well as its role in formation of artistic conception.

### 1. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

As cognitive linguistics branched off general linguistics further and combined with literary criticism, a new branch of language research, cognitive poetics, emerges and comes to become a useful interpretation tool for literary works (Tsur, 1992, 2003; Stockwell, 2002; Gavins & Steen, 2003). Cognitive poetics is an outstanding achievement of interdisciplinary study. The principle of figure-ground segregation is one of its basic cognitive principles. "The notions of figure and ground were introduced by Danish psychologist Edgar Rubin almost a century ago and later integrated into the more comprehensive framework of perceptual organization by the gestalt psychologists" (Ungerer & Schmid, 2001).

Rubin was interested in the way that humans direct their attention to stimuli that appear to be more salient than others, and the way that we seem to consider the less salient stimuli to be a kind of background to the outstanding ones. Gestalt psychologists employ it to research perception especially vision and hearing as well as the description way of space organization. Gestalt psychologists think that the perception domain is composed of figure and ground. "Figure" refers to the prominent part of cognitive conception and perception, the function of ground is to stand out the figure. Figure and ground appear in the perception domain at the same time, however they can't be perceived meanwhile. Rubin's famous face/vase illusion confirms the perceptual prominence, but face and vase can't be perceived at one time. When the faces are perceived, the vase acts as the ground to foil the figure, vice versa. This phenomenon is called figure-ground segregation. From linguistics perspective, it is valuable to use the figure-ground relation to account for the expressions of spatial relations in natural language. Based on Tamly's identification of the definitional and associated characteristics of the figure and the ground, Kuang and Wen (2003) added two associated characteristics: time length and predictability (Ground lasts longer than figure and ground is more predictable than figure). According to these characteristics, we can interpret many figure-ground phenomena in languages.

## 2. REALIZATION OF FIGURE AND BACKGROUND IN TEMPORAL AND SPATIAL STRUCTURE

All objects described in art works exist in certain time and place. The images expressing poets' feeling in poetry integrate with time and space to form artistic conception. So it is said that time and space are the original power to intrigue writers' poetic inspiration. During the period of creation of artistic conception, space-time consciousness plays an active role.

In space perception, we can define eight fundamental spatial locations for a geometric figure: above/over, under/below, before/in (the) front of, after/behind, in/insides, out /outside, besides/nearby/by, attached (上, 下, 前, 后, 里, 外, 边, 附着). According to whether the spatial relations change along with the change of the observer's vantage point, they are classified into two general types: topological and projective. The figure-ground relation in topological orientation spaces is asymmetrical, that is to say, one of the two objects in topological spaces can only act as a figure, while the other as the ground but not vice versa. We call this absolute segregation. "In/inside, out/outside, attached" belong to topological orientation spaces, the rest belong to projective ones (Kuang & Wen, 2003).

Being observant of objective scenes which are going to be depicted is actually its cognitive process. During observation, various scenes work on poets in different ways, but the switch from these scenes to images cannot be conducted simultaneously and equally. Some salient ones will be perceived as figure, while others may be background.

如梦令

常记溪亭日暮，沉醉不知归路。兴尽晚回舟，  
误入藕花深处。争渡，争渡，惊起一滩鸥鹭！

Tune like a Dream  
Often times of old  
In the Brook Pavilion,  
When the sun was late  
I drank and lost my way.  
When my wild mood was o'er  
I homeward turned my boat.  
Confused I pushed it on  
Through a forest of lotus flowers.  
Struggling to go across  
I frightened every bird,  
Each gull and egret  
On the river bank.  
(By Bing Xin)

"常记溪亭日暮" the first couplet of this Ci-poem sets its overall background, the pavilion, lotus flower, boat, all bathe in this twilight. At first, the pavilion came into the poet's vision and became figure, but the figure changes when the poet's vision changes. I turned my boat through the forest of lotus by chance. Here the figures and backgrounds are movable and interchangeable, from the twilight, to the pavilion, boat, and then lotus flower. The poet and all beings are beset by this overall background. By selecting only a few pieces in life, the salience of figure and background in spatial and temporal structure has been obtained, which depicts out the youth's good mood when they enjoy the beauty of the nature by fusing the movable scenes with the mood of the poet. The impulse on canoeing in the forest of lotus flower with her, the unpolished beauty of the nature, and the spirit of lingering there came into the readers' minds vividly.

《凤凰台上忆吹箫·香冷金猊》

香冷金猊，被翻红浪，起来慵自梳头。任宝奁尘满，日上帘钩。生怕离怀别苦，多少事，欲说还休。新来瘦，非干病酒，不是悲秋。休休，这回去也，千万遍阳关，也则难留。念武陵人远，烟锁秦楼。惟有楼前流水，应念我，终日凝眸。凝眸处，从今又添，一段新愁。

Thoughts from the Women's Quarter to the Tune  
"Nostalgia of the Flute on the Phoenix Terrace"

The incense is cold in the gold lion  
My quilts are tumbled like red waves  
I get up lazily

Not yet myself, I comb my hair  
My toilet table is unopened  
I leave the curtains down till  
The sun shines over the curtain rings  
I am afraid of this idleness  
Which permits dark sorrow to overcome me  
There are so many things I would like to write  
But I let them go  
I have become thinner this year  
Not due to sickness, not to wine  
Not to the sorrows of autumn  
Finished. Finished  
This time he is gone for good  
If I sang The Sunlight in the Pass  
Ten thousand times  
I could not hold him  
I think of him far off at Wu-Ling Springs  
Alone in my Ch'in pavilion  
Locked in by fog  
Only the green flowing water  
In front of the pavilion  
Knows my eyes that stare and stare  
Where new layers of sorrows pile up  
(by Kenneth Rexroth & Ling Chung)

Dust to the toilet table, flowing water to the pavilion, they are figures and grounds segregation in spatial relation. Just by this contrast, we can understand her laziness to making up for missing her loved. The flowing water reflects her thin figure waiting for her loved and witnesses her infatuation in her eyes. Furthermore, the situation under which the poet suffers from separation from her loved refreshes.

醉花阴  
薄雾浓云愁永昼，瑞脑销金兽。佳节又重阳，玉枕纱厨，半夜凉初透。  
东篱把酒黄昏后，有暗香盈袖。莫道不消魂，帘卷西风，人比黄花瘦。  
Ninth Day, Ninth Month  
To the tune-drunk with flower shadows  
Thin fog under thick clouds  
Sadness endures through the long day  
Auspicious dragon incense  
Rises from the gold animal  
Again it is the Ninth of the Ninth Month  
At midnight my jeweled pillow  
And gauze-curtained bed  
Were saturated with the chill  
Now in the yellow twilight  
I drink by the Eastern wall  
And a mysterious perfume fills my sleeves  
And carries away my soul  
The west wind blows the curtains  
And I am frailer than the yellow chrysanthemums  
(by Kenneth Rexroth & Ling Chung)

“东篱把酒黄昏后”，“帘卷西风” demonstrate the temporal relation of figure and ground, which better the depiction of the poet's missing and worry for her husband who travel afar but not return. The west wind blows the curtains and I am frailer than the yellow chrysanthemums. The theme of this Ci-poem stands out against this figure and ground segregation, thus creating the artistic conception of “strong miss, deep sorrow”.

### 3. REALIZATION OF FIGURE AND BACKGROUND BY VIRTUE OF FOREGROUNDING

Stockwell believes that “the obvious correspondence of figure and ground theory is foregrounding in concept of literary criticism. Foregrounding can be implemented in different ways, such as repetition, different naming, new description, original syntax structure, pun, alliteration, rhyme emphasis, metaphor and etc (Stockwell, 2003). Here two major ways of foregrounding introduced in Li Qingzhao's poems are: repetition and metaphor.

Repetitive words are also a feature of Li Qingzhao's early Ci poems. Sometimes she uses sentence repetition; sometimes she changes one or two words but the total words number unchanged. For instance, “知否？知否？” of 《如梦令·昨夜雨疏风骤》，the repetition here is the requirement of Tune Like a Dream (《如梦令》) and it's most difficult to set it in this Ci-poem. Surprisingly, Li Qingzhao uses it very wisely, showing euphemistic blame for the careless maid and the poet's anxious mood as to cherishing the spring time vividly. “争渡，争渡” (《如梦令·常记溪亭日暮》) “浮槎来，浮槎去” (《行香子·草际鸣蛩》) “阴满中庭，阴满中庭”，“点滴霖霖，点滴霖霖”，“有还秋色，有还寂寞” all have the feature of “neat pattern, fluid mood, and bright rhyme”.

A representative poem using repetition of her Ci-poems is Slow Slow Song (《声声慢》). Seven pairs of repetitive words are employed boldly but successfully at the beginning of the Ci-poem: “寻寻觅觅，冷冷清清，凄凄惨惨戚戚”. There are two rhyme schemes: level (平) and oblique (仄), and ten difficult-articulated dental sound “寻寻”、“清清”、“凄凄”、“惨惨”、“戚戚”. All the characteristics are rather unique even in Song poetry, encompassing and unifying three levels of meanings, among which “寻寻觅觅” aims at expressing human action, demeanor and the poet's psychological feeling of loneliness and emptiness, in hoping to search for the beauties in her past life but in vain; “冷冷清清” paints desolate environment to salient the coldness in heart; and “凄凄惨惨戚戚” further focuses on deep sorrow in her inner world.

Cognitive linguists claim that the conceptual metaphors we have in our language are based on our bodily and physical experience. “No metaphor can

ever be comprehended or even adequately represented independently of its experiential basis” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). As we all know, no concept is able to be objectively reflected in our mind. In fact, all concepts are structured on the basis of the experience, and the experience is a product of our body or interactions between us and physical environment or other people within our culture. Richards also emphasizes the functions of human mind in understanding metaphors and thus transfers traditional rhetoric studies on metaphor to the cognitive perspective. And with the research on metaphor into semantic level from linguistic level, the linguists realize the cognitive research value of metaphor. And Lakoff & Johnson found that metaphor as a concept, metaphor means conceptual metaphor; “metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action” (Lakoff, 1980). Moreover, they regarded metaphor as a basic way of thinking we live by. As a result, “metaphor is not only a matter of language, but also a perceptual and conceptualized tool for people comprehending the world in nature” (Shu, 2000).

The process during which the poet expresses poetic artistic conception is in fact to paint a picture using brief language. At the same time, common natural things or body experience is given deeper meaning. When readers read it repetitively, the previously-existing images will be activated through the poetic lyrics, promoting the formation of figure and ground in his mind so as to the produce endless and stunning images (Ma, 2010).

There are more than 30 images used as metaphors in her poetry according to data analysis: water, wind, letter, hair, mountain, shadow, rain, cloud, sun, moon, night, day, spring, autumn, evening, flower scent, plum, willow, dew, grass, greengage, lotus, geese, gulls, egrets boat, candle, building, grounds, courtyard, contain, letters, jades, wine, and etc.

点绛唇

蹴罢秋千，起来慵整纤纤手。露浓花瘦，薄汗轻衣透。

见客入来，袜划（chan）金钗溜。和羞走。倚门回首，却把青梅嗅。

Rouged Lips

The lass gets off the swing, too tired to clean her hands

So fair, she stands

Like slender flower under heavy dew;

With sweat her robe's wet through.

Seeing a guest come, she feels shy;

Her stockings coming down, away she tries to fly.

Her hairpin drops;

She never stops

But to look back. Leaning against the door,

She pretends to sniff at mume blossoms once more.

(translated by Xu Yuanhong)

In this Ci-poem, the happiness in her mind is like the greengage, actor but sweet. As a result, the smell and

taste of the source domain greengage are mapped on to the target domain love, and it seems that we can smell the poetess' happiness by the Ci-poem.

“征鸿过尽，万千心事难寄” (Returning swans not heard, clouds break in azure skies) is one couplet of 《念奴娇·春思》. In the classical work, there are allusions for pigeons for family letter, so as pigeons, geese, and other birds are endowed with the function family letters.

“雁 (Yan)”, also named “鸿雁 (Hong Yan)”, is a kind of migratory birds. When one dies, the bird alive will never find another spouse. Later it is often connected with loneliness, disappointment and misery in literary composition. Specifically, “雁” can refer to sadness of people away from home and their eagerness to go back home; it symbolizes deep love and letter agents for people. It has appeared eight times in Li Qingzhao's Ci poems. It is called “雁” five times and “鸿” three times. We can find more examples in her Ci-poems: “雁字回时，月满西楼” (When wild geese come, I'll wait); “一春鱼雁无消息” (At moonlit bower's gate); “暮天雁断，楼上远信谁传？” (Nor fish nor swan has brought his news all the spring long).

“梧桐 (Wu Tong)” is another image rich in cultural meanings, thus being given colorful metaphorical meanings, such as noble character, loyal love, and the feeling of lonely sorrow. As early as two thousand years ago, it was connected with the mysterious legendary bird—phoenix. It was said that the tree was the only tree a phoenix would choose to perch on. In the old legend, “梧” was the male and “桐” was the female. There grew and died together. They are tall, straight, and deeply-rooted, which becomes symbol of royal love in poet's pen. There is a saying that “one leaf falling down announces the coming of autumn”. The sorrow triggered by autumn is often seen in old poetry. The simple two Chinese characters embrace rich meanings. “梧桐应恨夜来霜” (The plane tree should have suffered from the frosty night); “西风催衬梧桐落” (To see the west wind hastens the fall of plane leaves); “梧桐更兼细雨” (On plane's broad leaves a fine rain drizzles).

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## CONCLUSION

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The figure-ground segregation theory is an interesting topic in cognitive language and has been discussed by many cognitive linguists. The paper intends to interpret Li Qingzhao's poems and Ci-poems from cognitive linguistics perspective by employing the figure-ground theory. We find that this theory also has explanatory power in Chinese classical poetry. It mainly discusses the realization of figure-ground in temporal, spatial structures and the ways of foregrounding such as repetition and metaphor. This theory offers a good way to interpret Chinese classical poems and Ci-poems, which vice versa can work as its historic study text.

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