

# A Cognitive Interpretation of the Notion of Self in Chinese Modern Poetry

Zhong Deng

School of Foreign Languages

Hunan University

Changsha, China

**Abstract**—This paper is intended to look at the notion of self in Chinese modern poetry from the perspective of cognition. By a meticulous analysis of the semantic characteristics of the first person pronoun as well as the process of the conceptualization of its collocations, this paper comes up with a comparatively unconventional interpretation of how the notion of self contributes to the significance of Chinese modern poetry, namely, the self is of the importance of duality and acts as the cognitive origin of the poetic endeavor to construct the overall framework of the aesthetic and philosophic concepts of Chinese modern poetry. This interpretation also helps to foster a paradigm that features an integration of literary studies and cognitive analysis for the explorations of poems as a genre.

**Keywords**—cognition; Chinese modern poetry; duality; cognitive origin

## I. INTRODUCTION

Chinese modern poetry, especially the so-called Misty Poetry created and published in the 1980s and 1990s, has been at the heart of Chinese literary studies for the recent thirty years. Thanks to the continuous efforts of researchers, many a question has been well discussed and answered including the literary styles, the aesthetic options, the emotional pursuits, the implications with regard to the tempo-special circumstances and so forth. [1] Besides, several studies deal with the remarkable differences between Chinese modern poetry and its ancient counterpart in order to explain how the tradition of the composition of poems has evolved over a rather lengthy time-span. [2] There have also been studies concerned with how European and American ideas of modernity have influenced China's poets since the 1950s, culminating in the boom of modern poems three decades later. [3] Surprisingly, though, almost all the studies mentioned paid little attention to the word and phrase level characteristics of Chinese modern poems, probably assuming that studies on such levels seemed to be less fruitful than on the level of stanzas or even the higher level of the poems as communicative discourses. However, it's reasonably skeptical about the choice the previous studies have made because poems, distinguished from dance, painting and music which do not straightforwardly base their charm and meaning on languages, are unavoidably inter-winded with the very languages they are written in. More specifically, "language" here in not a broad and intangible term, rather, it is a concrete and analyzable one knitted by various units or components within a hierarchical network. [4] Thus, the study

of the fundamental linguistic components of a language, say, words and phrases, is crucial to clarify the structural and semantic contents of poems. And it is because of the clarity on word and phrase levels that the language employed in a poem is to be understood, which serves as a premise for any further explanation and appreciation.

## II. THE FIRST PERSON PRONOUN AND THE NOTION OF SELF

### A. Current Explanatory Inadequacy

If the importance of the studies on the word and phrase levels is accepted, we must place emphasis on the very pronoun "I" (or "me" and "my" in some cases) in the hope to address the notion of self, a distinctive label of Chinese modern poetry. Here are two sub-questions to clarify. Firstly, why does the notion of Self matter? Secondly, how is the first person pronoun related to the notion of self?

Diachronically, the notion of self has not been an essential or a defining element for ancient Chinese poetry. The evidence is well available in myriads of poems passed down from dynasty to dynasty which, grammatically speaking, did not use any marker or structure to accentuate the self of the poets or the self of other people involved in their poems. In other words, few lines in ancient Chinese poems starts with a grammatically identifiable subject of "I", nor did them render an unusual or unexpected image of the self, let alone any elaboration of the importance or implications of the self. [5]

By contrast, in Chinese modern poems, the notion of "Self" began to emerge and prosper on an unprecedented scale. This can be seen in the wide use of the Subject ("I") + Verb structure, which, basically, is the kernel structure of a legitimate sentence in many languages. In addition, the first person pronoun started to be not only frequent but also flexible, which is embodied in the wide spectrum of grammatical collocations "I" or "me" Participated in. For example, "I" was followed by a verbal structure that was otherwise semantically incompatible such as "I calmed the sun", "I harmonized with a devil" and the alike. Previous explanations, sparse and intuitive to some degree, paid much attention to the astonishing poetic effects triggered by such strange or unconventional patterns of lyrics, but elaborated very little on how the poetic effects are realized by the strangeness pertaining to the language level. These explanations are not convincing because of the following reasons: first, they failed to illustrated why the incorporation of

"I" or "me" into such structures is of significant uniqueness in terms of associating the poems with the sense of being "modern" as many studies have claimed; second, they failed to shed a light on the connection between the first person pronoun and the notion of self, assuming there is an automatically workable linkage in between.

### B. Cognitive Linguistics as a Desirable Approach

Cognitive linguistics, in this regard, is expected to offer desirable theoretical frameworks and practical mechanisms to address the inadequacy of explanations of the first person pronoun and its connections with the notion of self in Chinese modern poetry. A mature research paradigm based on the assumption that human language is invariably in line with human cognition, cognitive linguistics asserts that grammatical structures, far from abstract or factitious, are in themselves meaningful. [6] For example, in English the subjunctive mood is usually associated with manifest grammatical operations in the tense and aspect of the verbal structure in a sentence. This can be explained from a cognitive perspective that what happens grammatically to a sentence is nothing but a representation of what happens cognitively to the language users, as members of a speech community, in terms of how they see and process the concept of time and the sequence of events that happen within the domain of time. In this sense, the strong emotions elicited by the subjunctive mood is sensually and perceptively grounded onto the conceptualization of time and of the events defined and constrained by the concept of time.

On the basis of a cognitive elaboration, the frequent use of "I" and "me" in Chinese modern poetry should not be simplistically seen as a grammatical choice alone, but a meaning-bearing option intended to convey certain meanings that other grammatical choices are not able to convey. In other words, compared with the cases where the first person pronoun does not appear that frequently — in ancient Chinese poems, for example — the scenario characterized of "I" and "me" as well as the collocations involving them is to render some meanings, meanings that previous studies have not yet identified or clarified as well as meanings that do not arise from the poems as defaulted, but perceived through individual cognitive endeavors as a manifestation of how humans use language, especially the unusual grammatical patterns peculiar to poems, to construct and construe what matters to such poems.

What is worth mentioning is that the word "meaning" we use here in this paper is also a cognitive one. In cognitive linguistics, meaning is conceptualization. [7] This definition implies: first, meaning is not what is put in dictionaries or reference books, but what is coded as (part of) a concept or concepts that have been fostered and entrenched in human mind in response to humans' continuous embodied interactions with the natural and social environments. [8] Second, meaning can be to a large degree subjective as different people are inclined to see the same thing in objective and experiential worlds from different perspectives, thus resulting in different versions of understanding. Third, meaning is encyclopedic, that is, it is not about linguistic knowledge but about world knowledge. [9] For instance, when saying Huo Guo (Hotpot),

Chinese speakers do not really come up with the same concept with regard to the appearance, smell and taste of Huo Guo. Instead, people in the north tend to conceptualize it into a beef or mutton based dish with the sauce or paste of sesame; on the contrary, people in the south (especially in Sichuan, Chongqing and Hunan) are likely to process the concept of Huo Guo into a chilli-abundant spicy food that few northern Chinese may withstand. In this case, it is of linguistic interest to state that although Huo Guo is a combination of Huo (hot) and Guo (pot), the meaning of such a combination is not necessarily in accordance with the sum of the linguistic knowledge, but closely connected with world knowledge in relation to how people construe the thing they are talking about.

### III. "I" AS THE COGNITIVE ORIGIN

Based on the explanatory superiority of cognitive linguistics, we assume the notion of self of Chinese modern poems is to be addressed as fully as a theoretical model is obliged to. More specifically, we intend to concentrate on the use of the first person pronoun, not regarding it as a mere grammatical means to fulfill a sentence pattern, but a meaning-bearing concept featuring embodiment, subjectivity and complexity of knowledge on the part of both the poets and the readers. We take "Believe in the Future" (excerpts), one of the most famous poems in the 1980s by Shi Zhi as an example. [10] The English version is rendered by the author of this paper.

*When the spider's webs mercilessly stopped my oven from functioning,*

*when the remaining ashes heaved a bitter sigh for poverty,*

*I, stubbornly enough, soothed the ashes that despair,*

*and wrote, with beautiful snow,*

*"believe in the future".*

*When my grapes turned into dew in deep autumn,*

*When my flowers were held in the arms of unknown men,*

*I, stubbornly enough, with a frozen grape branch,*

*and on the depleted land, wrote,*

*"believe in the future".*

*I would, using my finger, point at the tides soaring to the sky;*

*I would, using my palm, uphold the ocean that upholds the sun;*

*I would, using a warm and auroral pen,*

*and in the handwriting of children, wrote,*

*"believe in the future".*

This poem, grammatically, involved a host of instances where the first person pronoun (including "my") is used. In terms of how to deal with such a linguistic fact, we pay adequate heed to the semantic roles of the first person pronoun by focusing on the collocations where these pronouns are used, which is a common practice for a cognitive analysis of language use.

#### A. *The First Person Pronoun and Its Collocations*

It is obvious that the pronoun "I" is used in the cognitively reasonable contexts in which "I" stays with the verb "wrote" so as to construct a complete sentence structure which is also semantically justifiable. However, scattered amid this structure are quite many instances of weird or abnormal collocations of the first person pronouns such as "I soothed the ashes", "I uphold the ocean" and so forth. Here, by "weird" or "abnormal", we mean the alienation of such collocations from what is commonly used in non-poetic language such as official reports and daily conversations. Hence, we come up with a thought-provoking picture of the first person pronoun-related structures, which has three observable features: first, the overall structure is both grammatically and semantically normal; second, the sub-structures involved in the larger structure are often abnormal in terms of the collocations of "I" as well as its other grammatical forms; third, the two states (normal and abnormal) coexist and alternate within different stanzas.

#### B. *The Notion of Self from a Cognitive Perspective*

At this point, our cognitive investigation into the notion of self is to be activated. This is because the above-mentioned characteristics of the first person pronoun and its constructions suggest that the conceptualization of "I" in the given poem written by Shi Zhi can be well depicted and interpreted by taking its collocations into consideration as the cognitive approaches to phrase and sentence structures theoretically promise. Thus, our major findings are as follows.

Firstly, "I" is primarily construed as a non-distinguishable member of the human species. In this case, "I", as a poetically conceptualized linguistic symbol, is characterized of the shared biologically oriented abilities, inclinations, thinking patterns, emotional representations and so on with other human individuals. An appropriate example is the "I + wrote" collocation serving as an overall cognitive framework for the poem "Believe in the Future". Similar examples include "I + think", "I + cry", "I + miss", etc. that frequently appear in many other modern poems. In these examples, the subject "I" is followed by a verb which is biologically compatible as the behaviors, intentions, thoughts of a normally functioning person. This implies that the first person pronoun in Chinese modern poems does not refer to a being devoid of the essential features of humans; instead, it denotes a concept of a human being that is fundamentally comprehensible and accessible. This notion is profoundly important because the self in Chinese modern poems is no longer supposed to be perceived as an abstract, intangible and irrational being as many previous studies have suggested. In other words, the seemingly unconventional and elusive sense of self is indeed analyzable within a cognitive framework.

Secondly, if studied from a comparatively detailed point of view, the lower-level structures such as "I uphold the ocean" and "I use an auroral pen" are truly dubious to some extent. This is because the concept of "I", biologically speaking, is never able to perform such impossible tasks. Similarly, there are more than enough examples in Chinese modern poems demonstrating the semantic abnormality or impossibility of concept of "I" (sometimes "me" or "my" as required by grammatical rules) such as "I talk with the past", "the moonlight kills me", "my breath kindles the river", etc. All of such examples seem to contradict the construal of the first person pronoun as an everyday member of humans. But, is this really a clash? Our answer is negative. The most important reason is that these structures can be regarded as expressions shaped by certain rhetoric devices such metaphor, simile, hyperbole and personification. This explanation is valid and widely accepted by many researchers. If we penetrate deeper into the rhetoric devices from a cognitive perspective, not surprisingly, we are to discover a more convincing mechanism to account for what is happening. Namely, all these rhetoric efforts are associated with an alternative conceptualization of the self although they look eccentric. For example, in "I uphold the ocean", the first pronoun is used not to denote an every individual defined and constrained by biological laws, but an enhanced or empowered one who transcends what a human is biologically perceived. This distinctive conceptualization is made possible by the nature of cognition of humans, that is, cognition, as a complicated means for humans to know and interact with whatever that exists and occurs in the world, is in itself multidimensional, as is shown in the daily scenario where different people may view the same thing from different perspectives and come up with different understandings. [11] This suggests that the pronoun "I" is not an inseparable entity, i.e., "I" should be always the very entity to be viewed in a uniformed fashion; instead, the overall concept of "I" can be disintegrated into many a facet complying with certain linear or hierarchical orders. Therefore, "I" in "I uphold the ocean" can be explained as an instance which points to the possibility of the separation of the notion of self. As a result, many readers and critics in China who have been accustomed with the convention of seeing the notion of self from a sole point of view may be shocked by the novel perception of the first person pronoun in the modern poems, and it is the re-construal of the notion of the self that has made Chinese modern poems distinguished from many other literal works.

Taking the two analyses into consideration, we find out that in Chinese modern poetry, there is, more often than not, an entrenched pattern of duality as to how the first person pronoun is used. This pattern has, first of all, a higher level of a semantically viable structure in which the first person pronoun is conceptualized as a biologically normal individual who tends to think and act the same way as other normal individuals. Cognitively, this level portrays a well understandable notion of the self by informing the readers and critics that modern poems are not meant to perplex or confuse people, nor to reside in the unspeakable impulse and pleasure exclusively for the poets; rather, modern poems are still about comprehensible humans living in the mass, who are essentially not distinguishable from the rest of the mass in terms of the way of life they are biologically determined. The lower level, on the other hand, is



not semantically or rationally well accepted which features a bold and systematic adoption of a wide range of rhetoric devices in association with keen and wild imagination. In a cognitive sense, this fact is attributed to a new paradigm of conceptualization of the sense of the self which is intended to dissect this notion into interrelated aspects. More noticeably, not all the aspects of the notion of the self are illustrated in the poems so as to construct the wholeness of the very notion; instead, only some of the aspects of the notion are selected and eventually put in the poems. This directly explains the stances and inclinations concerning aesthetics of the modern poets who, instead of using plain and straightforward language to depict what they thought mattered, skillfully resorted to poetically-molded patterns and structures of language, which, seemingly hard to understand, manifest their specific philosophical concerns of "who I am".

### *C. Cognitive Origin and Its Implications*

The analysis above leads us to another question: If it is true that many of the Chinese modern poets made such a duality-based construal of the notion of the self, then what were the underlying forces to draw them to do so? Previous studies, although not touching upon the two-facet concept of the self, have undoubtedly addressed the linguistic and stylistic unconventionality of the modern poems in China, most of which have ascribed it to the specific political, cultural and ideological circumstances of China in the 1970s and the 1980s. Compared with these studies, the cognitive approach we adopt here in this paper intends to shift our academic focus from what is external to what is internal, that is, the cognitive operations shared by many of the modern poets in China.

Simply stated, it is advisable to interpret the duality of the sense of the self in Chinese modern poems as a cognitive origin starting from which the overall aesthetic and philosophical framework of Chinese modern poems is to be constructed. For the purpose of clarity, we are first of all obliged to explain what an origin is in our cognitive scheme. "Origin" is not a vague concept to interpret because in almost all the dimensions of conceptualization and in almost all cultures, a starting point of time and space is indisputably somewhere in the cognitive system of humans. A great amount of evidence supports such a belief. For example, central to both western and eastern ancient myths and time-honored folk legends are stories about how the universe, the great varieties of life forms and human beings have begun to come into being. Cognitively, these stories are about origins, origins of all the things and events in relation to the history and reality of humans. Interestingly, these stories are frequently found in scripts concerning various religions aimed to inform the practitioner of particular world views. If we narrow the scope of "origins" down to the notion of self in Chinese modern poems, we can find out a similar picture, i.e., for all the thoughts, emotions and acts involved in these poems, there is an origin as well. The only difference is that in modern poems there is not an explicit clue to demonstrate a time line or a space structure as has been manifested in ancient stories. But essentially, the "origin" in the poems serves as an implicit clue to arrange the aesthetic and philosophical pursuits of the poets as a definable group.

Aesthetically, the cognitive origin embodied in the sense of the self contributes to the unquenchable release of emotions and unbridled representations of imagination. This is because the grounding of the self as the cognitive origin onto many of the Chinese modern poems means that the connotation of the self is primarily a well-functioning human capable of presenting and appreciating beauty. In other words, Chinese modern poems do not preach on any species of beauty or beautiful things inaccessible to humans, nor did they deliberately assert that there is a supreme sense of beauty that dwarfs other types of beauty familiar to people. The point is, as the concept of origin may indicate, the beauty perceived in a poem is by no means different from the beauty people interact with in the real life as both of them stem from the commonality in the starting point as a member of the human community. But there is another question that needs discussed: Why do the emotions and imaginations originated from Chinese modern poems appear strange and confusing in the eyes of ordinary readers? This question can be well answered if we move onto the level of a philosophical consideration.

Philosophically, our elaboration of the cognitive origin assists us in discovering the how Chinese modern poems have endeavored to figure out the nature of the self. As mentioned above, the notion of the self is concerned with the duality of conceptualizing who "I" am. According to this belief, it is clear that the poems are not meant to render a standard answer to the nature of the self. In other words, in the cognitive systems of the poets, there is on earth not a standardized, unchanged, easily defined self that is to be examined and explored. In other words, the assertion of a cognitive origin of the self does not necessarily imply a standardization of the features of the self. It is true that "I" do, think and imagine as a normal human does, but this does not necessarily mean that "I" do, think and imagine the same thing and in the equal depth and profundity. Therefore, starting from the same origin, poets and other people have actually embarked on a long journey of dealing with the notion of self in different ways. For Chinese modern poets, this journey teems with novel explorations and insights into the multi-dimensions of who they are which are transformed into poetic languages as a tangible representation; for other people, on the other hand, this journey is about a self with less possibilities in finding and understanding what is there for a deepened level of the self. That is why many Chinese modern poems are deemed as confusing or chaotic in both aesthetic and realistic considerations, but, indeed, such criticisms are to some extent appraisals because, first, these criticisms implied that Chinese modern poems were highly creative in breaking what is old-fashioned, and second, such criticisms essentially pointed to a novel and more inspiring philosophical construal of the self and the relations between the self and others, which is what Chinese poetry has so far not well illustrated.

## IV. CONCLUSION

After the discussions on the first person pronoun and its relations with the notion of self in Chinese modern poetry, we discover that the notion of self can be well conceptualized as a cognitive origin accounting for the linguistic, aesthetic and philosophical characteristics and pursuits of Chinese modern poems. Our analysis from the cognitive perspective is of

certain importance for two reasons. Firstly, we conclude that the notion of self is by nature a concept of duality, both of the two levels being implicitly functional in molding the style of Chinese modern poetry. Such a view point has seldom been mentioned and discussed in previous studies, thus deserving more attention and debating. Secondly, the paradigm of linking language analysis with the interpenetration of Chinese modern poetry is worth practicing based on the acceptance of human cognition as an innate tie to integrate linguistic concerns and poetic studies. This paradigm is of great applicability for further studies of Chinese modern poems and in this sense, this paper may serve as a workable sample on a comparatively small scale.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] M. Yeh, "Light a lamp in a rock: Experimental poetry in contemporary China," *Modern China*, 1992 (18), pp.379-409.
- [2] C. M. Van, "Underground poetry in the 1960s and 1970s," *Modern Chinese Literature*, 1996 (2), pp.169-219.
- [3] M. Yeh, "A new orientation to poetry: The transition from traditional to modern," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews*, 1990 (12): pp. 83-105.
- [4] F.D. Saussure, *Course of General Linguistics*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1959.
- [5] J. Y. Ye, *Jialing's Comments on Ancient Chinese Poetry*. Shijiazhuang: Hebei Education Press, 1998.
- [6] V. Evans and M. Green, *Cognitive Linguistics: An Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005.
- [7] R. Langacker, *Cognitive Linguistics: A Basic Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- [8] F. L. Aldama, *Toward a Cognitive Theory of Narrative Acts*. Texas: University of Texas Press, 2010.
- [9] R. Langacker, *Concept, Image and Symbol: The Cognitive Base of Grammar*. Berlin/ New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1990.
- [10] K. Yang and L. Chen, *A Collection of the Misty Poems*. Beijing: Chinese Youth Press, 2009.
- [11] C. Harrison, *Cognitive Grammar in Literature*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2014.