

Top-down Interpretative Strategies in comprehending the Ornamented Zither:

Embodied Cognition and Cognitive Metaphor Theory

Selina Qian

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Dr. Greta Munger

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The Ornamented Zither (TOZ), written by Li Shangyin, is one of the most puzzling and ambiguous poems written during the Tang dynasty.¹ As famous critic Liang Sicheng remarked, “I cannot even explain the literal meaning line by line. Yet I feel they are beautiful, and when I read them, they give me a kind of pleasure in my mind.”² Modern readers like Liang are fond of the poem’s ambiguity. Like fascinated and frustrated generations of critics who have offered their interpretations of TOZ, I apply top-down processing theory and conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) to my analysis, with the goal to provide non-Chinese speakers or non-academic readers with a more emotionally connected perspective in interpreting the Ornamented Zither.

In the first part, the paper presents scholarly literature reviewed by critic Li Zeng in his article, *Ambiguous and Amiss: Li Shangyin’s Poetry and Its Interpretations*. The paper uses the literature review to develop its working definition for top-down processing, inspired by Eric R. Kandel’s book *Reductionism in Art and Brain Science: Bridging the Two Cultures*. Then, the paper applies this definition to the framework provided by T. Gendlin in his book *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning* and eventually integrates a complete definition of top-down processing to its interpretation of Li Shangyin’s poetry. In the second part, the paper combines the framework of top-down processing with the analytic procedures afforded by the cognitive metaphor theory, which was introduced by Stefan Larson in his paper

¹ Li, Zeng. “Ambiguous and Amiss: Li Shangyin’s Poetry and Its Interpretations.” *Southeast Review of Asian Studies* 30 (November 2008): 139.

² Liang, Qichao 梁启超. “Yinbing shi heji 饮冰室合集[The collected writings of Liang Qichao].” Shanghai: Zhonghua, 1937: 50.

Conceptions, Categories, and Embodiment: Why Metaphors are of Fundamental Importance for Understanding Norms and also explained by Karsten Senkbeil and Nicola Hoppe in the paper, ‘*The sickness stands at your shoulder...’*: *Embodiment and cognitive metaphor in Hornbacher’s Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia.*

Ultimately, I argue that a top-down processing approach, combined with cognitive metaphor theory, has the potential to improve our comprehension of the *Ornamented Zither* by amplifying the emotional connection between the poem and the reader.

锦瑟/无端/五十/弦 ¹ 一/弦/一/柱/思/华年 ² 庄生/晓/梦/迷/蝴蝶 ³ 望帝/春/心/托/杜鹃 ⁴ 沧海/月/明/珠/有/泪 ⁵ 蓝田/日/暖/玉/生/烟 ⁶ 此情/可待/成/追忆 ⁷ 只是/当时/已/惘然 ⁸	¹ The Ornamented Zither/ no reason/ fifty/ string. ² One/ string/ one/ goose column/ remember, think/ youth, beautiful times. ³ Zhuangzi/ morning/ dream/ lost, infatuation/ butterfly. ⁴ Emperor Wang/ spring/ heart/ entrust/ cuckoo. ⁵ Ocean/ moon/ bright/ pearl/ have(has)/ tear. ⁶ Indigo Mountain, Blue Mountain/ sun/ warm/ jade/ engender/ smoke. ⁷ This feeling/ can wait/ become/ in search of memory. ⁸ Only, but/ at that time/ already/ perplexed, dazed, frustrated, irresolute.
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¹ The ornamented zither, for no reason, has fifty strings; ² Each string, reach bridge, recalls a youthful year. ³ Master Zhuang was confused by his morning dream of the butterfly; ⁴ Emperor Wang’s amorous heart in spring is entrusted to the cuckoo. ⁵ In the vast sea, under a bright moon, pearls have tears; ⁶ On Indigo Mountain, in the warm sun, jade engenders smoke. ⁷ This feeling might have become a thing to be remembered, ⁸ Only, at that time you were (or I was) already bewildered and lost.

In *Ambiguous and Amiss: Li Shangyin’s Poetry and Its Interpretations*, Li Zeng systematically studies the ambiguity of Li Shangyin’s poems, including “the Ornamented Zither” (TOZ) and the poetic significance within the ambiguity, as well as a detailed presentation of traditional critics who consider mainly on socio-political circumstances of the poem. Aiming to explore Li Shangyin’s poetic ambiguity, Li

Zeng provides a comprehensive summary of these interpretations and their limitations. According to Li, the theme and appropriate interpretation of the poem “indicates Li Shangyin’s lucid comprehension of life: life takes place, so does love; and even at the time when it happens, it is obscure and confusing.”³ In other words, Li Shangyin constructs a fascinating version of a passionate life to address his own confusion, though he is cautious to emphasize flexibility in interpretations. As Li Zeng proposes, a common feature of the traditional treatment of the poem links ambiguous symbols with the sociopolitical situation and the poet’s personal experiences while failing to recognize the puzzling strength of TOZ and attempting to “twist and justify any discrepancies between a word, a line, or a whole poem and the ‘reality’ they have tried to see by hypothesizing upon the poet’s intentions.”⁴ This contrived approach detracts from the full meaning of TOZ and results in a biased interpretation may not reflect Li Shangyin’s intention. I call this traditional method of interpreting TOZ as bottom-up processing. Kandel points out that “bottom-up processing” processes the stimuli’s influence on our preconceived cognitive structures to extract key elements.⁵ Thus, the method that takes the symbolic elements and infer their meanings within the social context fits into the paradigm of bottom-up processing.

³ Li, *Ambiguous and Amiss*, 143.

⁴ Li, *Ambiguous and Amiss*, 148.

⁵ Kandel, Eric R. *Reductionism in Art and Brain Science: Bridging the Two Cultures*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018: 48.

A complementary concept, top-down processing uses “cognitive influences and higher-order mental functions such as attention, imagery, expectations, and learned visual associations.”⁶ In other words, top-down processes are informed by background information. Thus, a working definition of top-down processing in interpreting poems should include using previous experiences and contextual clues to comprehend a given poem. In order to assess the validity of this working definition of top-down processing, we need first to understand the nature of comprehension.

The philosophical nature of comprehension is explicitly described in the book *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning*, by Eugene T. Gendlin in 1962. According to Gendlin, the essence of comprehension is the application of the “functional relationship between unsymbolized felt meaning and symbols that usually mean something.”⁷ In other words, “symbols that usually means something” which refers to metaphors in his book, are the creative combination of intuition and the symbols we acquired through antecedent experiences; comprehension is the process through which we make sense of metaphors. According to Gendlin, comprehension “is to invent a metaphor to express a prior felt meaning.”⁸ In other words, comprehension is when one seeks to further symbolize the felt meaning created by the work of art to himself, that is, to make into metaphor his own felt meaning, since only when the felt meanings of the words are identical with the felt meaning one has had, does one

⁶ Kandel, *Bridging the Two Cultures*, 51.

⁷ Gendlin, Eugene T. *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning: a Philosophical and Psychological Approach to the Subjective* New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1962: 111.

⁸ Gendlin, *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning*: 117.

acquire comprehension. In a word, the process of comprehension is to symbolize the symbol.

The school of embodied cognition assumes that “all psychological processes are influenced by body morphology, sensory systems, motor systems, and emotions.”⁹ Thus, bodily experience, emotions and felt meanings largely influence the way we understand poems and other forms of literature containing metaphor. That is to say that the way we comprehend poems is partly constituted or constrained by our embodied experiences. Thus, comprehension of poems can be understood as a form of top-down processing, which I define as follows: with the help of bodily experiences and emotional readiness, we can comprehend TOZ as a matrix of symbolization possibilities that present us with tools for intensifying, explicating and carrying forward our own emotional lives.

One thing to note is that any interpretation of TOZ from a perspective other than the author’s, necessarily “includes or comprehends the original felt meaning, but is not any longer identical with it,”¹⁰ which ensures the multi-interpretative nature of poetry. In relation to the bottom-up processing of TOZ, given the various elements of the text, it would be unreasonable to demand a singular interpretation of Li Shangyin’s intentions. This further supports the usefulness of a top-down processing method towards TOZ. However, it must also be acknowledged that a “text cannot be read adequately without establishing the appropriate context.”¹¹ Therefore, it is still

⁹ Dove, Guy. “Thinking in Words: Language as an Embodied Medium of Thought.” *Topics in Cognitive Science* 6, no. 3 (July 2014): 372.

¹⁰ Gendlin, *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning*: 121.

¹¹ Yu, Pauline. *Ways with Words: Writing about Reading Texts from Early China*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2000: 5.

valuable to analyze TOZ within its social, cultural, and historical background. What is argued so far is that, for the reader to fully comprehend the TOZ, he or she would benefit from implementing their own personal embodied experiences as well as considering the historical context.

Next, in order to connect the reader's embodied experience with the metaphors in TOZ, it is necessary to show how the top-down processing of the poem triggers strong emotional response and results in a more powerful comprehension. Before looking into the conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) that embodies the literary technique employed by Li Shangyin who tries to express certain emotions and concepts through metaphors, we have to ask: What is a cognitive metaphor? Larsson generally defines it as the understanding of one idea in terms of another, which means that “analogies allow us to map one experience (often called the target domain) in terminology of another experience (the source domain).”¹² This means that metaphor is not only a form of language but also incorporates a form of thought formed by embodied experience. Under the premise that body and mind are inextricably intertwined, it is evident that comprehending the metaphor involves re-experiencing the embodiment of such a metaphor from the perspective of the individual reader.

Conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) holds as a core idea that metaphors function not as linguistic expressions, but in fact “represent, reflect, and shape deeply entrenched ways of thinking about abstract concepts such as time, life, and death, or

¹² Larsson, Stefan. “Conceptions, Categories, and Embodiment: Why Metaphors Are of Fundamental Importance for Understanding Norms.” *Social and Legal Norms: Towards a Socio-Legal Understanding of Normativity*, 2013, 123.

strong emotions such as love, and help us articulate otherwise inexpressible, elusive concepts.”¹³ In other words, the language of conceptual metaphor relies on bodily experiences as a frame of reference to represent the perfect medium to share complicated emotional experiences interpersonally. With respect to TOZ, first, it is important to understand the basic set-up of the poem through embodied experience so that we can distinguish the literary technique Li Shangyin employs. The first and second lines, mentioning the strings of the zither, depict “the atmospheric quality,” created while playing the instrument.¹⁴ In the first line, the writer seems to ponder why the ornamented zither has fifty strings, perhaps himself questioning the length of years in a human life. In line 2, though there aren’t apparent verbs, the symbolization of the zither’s strings and “bridge”, known as the goose column, or the supportive compartment of the string that is moved by the left hand to adjust the tone of the string, clearly refer to hand movements while playing the ornamented zither.¹⁵ As he questions life, recalling youth with a melodious zither, Li Shangyin begins to introduce juxtapositions of images, such as butterflies, cuckoos, the moon, and jade. The intention behind these multiple metaphors is explained in line 7: “This feeling might have become a thing to be remembered.” Li seems to connect feelings and the juxtapositions of images metaphorically.¹⁶

¹³ Senkbeil, Karsten, and Nicola Hoppe. “‘The Sickness Stands at Your Shoulder ...’: Embodiment and Cognitive Metaphor in Hornbacher’s *Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia*.” *Language and Literature* 25, no. 1 (February 1, 2016): 5.

¹⁴ Li, *Ambiguous and Amiss*: 140.

¹⁵ I searched on line to figure out the translation of 弦柱 how should I quote this. Or I don’t have to?

¹⁶ See the translation of the poem in page 2 above.

To connect TOZ with the CMT, we can interpret “this feeling” in line 7 to be the “target domain,” which is analogous to the source domain from line 3 to 6. If the emotions appear in the text of TOZ, it is easier to implement CMT by thinking of two comparable experiences that elicits similarly complex emotions or abstract concepts. For example, in line 3, Li evokes a feeling of loss or infatuation through the source domains of a man, in the morning, a dream, and a butterfly. These images may immediately remind the reader of the experience of being woken up in the middle of a dream. The morning sunlight may pull one to awake, yet the butterfly or some other thing in the dream blurs the line between reality and the dream world. By referring to shared human experience, Li Shangyin uses cognitive metaphor both to express his own feelings and call up the reader’s personal experiences and shares the complex uncertainty of life manifested in the coexistence of the real and unreal. This feeling changes in line 4: “Emperor Wang’s amorous heart in spring is entrusted to the cuckoo.” That the emperor entrusts his or her heart to a cuckoo bird in the spring is reminiscent of the experience of putting one’s heart and faith on a dream that seems fleeting like a bird, but stirs up passion, nonetheless. Whether it’s an English speaking or a Chinese reader the association between a cuckoo bird is a tragic one. Depending on the reader’s cultural context, we might conjure up adultery or unrequited love. As cognitive science suggests and this interpretation confirms, all comprehension “includes or comprehends the original felt meaning but is not any longer identical

with it.”¹⁷ As explained earlier, choice should be made by readers for an integrated comprehension of TOZ.

Even more interestingly, in the body of line 5 and 6 the target domain, perhaps a more complicated emotion or concept is hidden within multiple target domains, requiring embodied experiences all from the source domain to preserve a completeness of meaning. In line 5, in order to integrate the seemingly disparate symbolic categories of ocean, moon, pearl, and tears, comprehending TOZ requires our brain to come up with a new logic of top-down processing. The ocean tide rises and falls every night as the moon becomes full and turns half throughout the month; the pearls are always growing in a lifetime of the shell, just as tears emerge and fade away. Thus, these natural phenomena represent cycles of human experience and emotions, presumably, the fluctuation between passion and pain throughout life. In line 6, under the warm sunshine, deep within the mountains, smoke emerges from the jade, reminding the reader of a mirage in the middle of a desert, suggesting that life is ephemeral yet extremely desirable. Once again, applying the cognitive metaphors to the interpretation of TOZ, we can infer that Li Shangyin represents the complex feeling of a constant daze between reality and dream or between passion and pain towards life.

The above interpretation is one of many possibilities, of course. It relied on Li Shangyin’s personal and cultural embodied meaning of a text. However, the top-down processing strategy examines the nature of multi comprehension, because each

¹⁷ Gendlin, *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning*: 121.

individual has different sensitivity, language, and cultural background. Nonetheless, what's common for everyone is that all the figurative elements are rich resources that functions as a cognitive metaphor to symbolize personal felt meanings. The top-down processing of comprehending TOZ provides us a favorable opportunity to allow ourselves to feel and the creation of meanings renders a strong communicative power between symbols and the mysterious human consciousness. One can seek not only the beautiful figurative culture elements in TOZ, but also a heightening, a carrying forward of one conscious state into the next in such a way the vivid conscious mind remains alive and meaningful.

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