

# Research on the Meaning Generation Mechanism of Chinese Rhetoric *Huwen* under the View of Conceptual Blending: the Case of Classic Poetry

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**Abstract:** Previous research on the rhetoric *huwen* in Chinese focused on the exploration of its origin and revelation of its application in Chinese classics, leaving the generation of its meaning barely touched. Taking classic poetry in Chinese, the study firstly analyzed the common types and basic features of *huwen*, based on which the meaning generation process was revealed under the guidance of the revised Conceptual Blending Theory. Results show that featuring the structural symmetry and semantic complementarity makes conceptual blending of the rhetorical device *huwen* happen on two levels, that is, inside the two units forming *huwen* and between them. In particular, conceptual blending happening between two units includes three orders: the blending of fragmented perceptual stimuli, the grammatical construction and the cognitive elaboration. The form and meaning have played both separate and interactive roles in the three orders. This research helps people understand the inherent pattern of *huwen* and use it appropriately.

**Keywords:** the rhetorical device *huwen*; conceptual blending; successive blending; three-order blends

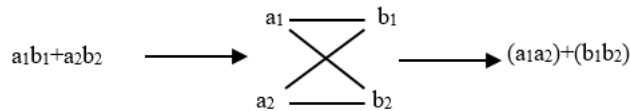
## 1. Introduction

*Huwen* in Chinese rhetoric refers to a linguistic phenomenon in which the anterior and posterior linguistic units are omitted in a crisscrossing way and complementary, and must be combined to completely express their meaning. Strictly speaking, the rhetoric *huwen* is a crisscrossing omission falling into the scope of interactions between meaning and form, which is one type of the interactive relations discovered in classic literature. Regularly found within sentences, *huwen* as a rhetorical device is different from intertextuality [1] in modern linguistics as well because in the latter case the meaning generation of a text depends heavily on other texts, which makes it closer to cross-textual *huwen* unearthed in Chinese handed-down literature. This research focuses on the rhetoric *huwen* abundant in classic poetry of China.

Previous research proposed that the rhetoric *huwen* features the structural symmetry and semantic complementarity. Take the verse of “the moon of Qin Dynasty and the frontier juncture of Han Dynasty” (qin shi ming yue han shi guan), its structural asymmetry lies in two aspects: first, the anterior unit “the moon of Qin Dynasty” and the posterior one of “the frontier juncture of Han Dynasty” present the same grammatical structure; second, Qin Dynasty and the moon in the anterior unit correspond with Han Dynasty and the frontier juncture respectively from the perspective of grammatical nature. Further, this instance manifests the semantic complementarity in this way: the frontier juncture is an additional remark of Qin Dynasty while the moon is that of Han Dynasty. The interpretation of this instance is thus that the moon in Qin Dynasty shines over the frontier juncture, and so does that in Han Dynasty. It should be noted that in terms of form, there are four parts in *huwen* and if they are presented as  $a_1$ ,  $b_1$ ,  $a_2$  and  $b_2$ , the following two requirements should be met on the semantic level: first,  $a_1$  is not taken as synonymous with  $a_2$ , and  $b_1$  does not have the same or nearly the same meaning as  $b_2$ ; second, both  $b_1$  and  $b_2$  are appropriate collocates of  $a_1$  as well as  $a_2$ .

The above analysis indicates that our understanding of the rhetoric *huwen* fits the following formula:  $(a_1 \rightarrow b_1) + (a_2 \rightarrow b_2) = (a_1 \rightarrow b_1 b_2) + (a_2 \rightarrow b_1 b_2)$ . But how we acquire the meaning on the right-hand side from the left-hand form remains unclear. Put another way, the meaning generation mechanism of the rhetoric *huwen* is unknown to us. Liu [2] depicted in the diagrammatic presentation the general process of meaning generation in *huwen* (see Figure 1). This diagram, however, cannot explain the overall picture because not all *huwen* expressions can be interpreted in the form of  $(a_1 a_2) + (b_1 b_2)$ . Take “my flowered

path has never yet been swept on account of a guest (hua jing bu ceng yuan ke sao), my ramshackle gate for the first time today is open because of you (peng men jin shi wei jun kai)”, the proper interpretation should be that “my flowered path ( $a_1$ ) has never yet been swept on account of a guest ( $b_1$ ) but for the first time today is swept because of you ( $b_2$ ), and my ramshackle gate ( $a_2$ ) has never yet been open on account of a guest ( $b_1$ ) but for the first time today is open because of you ( $b_2$ )” instead of “my flowered path ( $a_1$ ) and my ramshackle gate ( $a_2$ ) has never yet been swept on account of a guest ( $b_1$ ) but for the first time today is open because of you ( $b_2$ )” because the ramshackle ( $a_2$ ) can be swept ( $b_1$ ) but the flowered path ( $a_1$ ) cannot be open( $b_2$ ). Therefore, the proper way of interpreting *huwen* should be ( $a_1 \rightarrow b_1 b_2$ ) + ( $a_2 \rightarrow b_1 b_2$ ), on the basis of which some *huwen* expressions like the instance of “the moon in Qin Dynasty and the frontier juncture in Han Dynasty” can be further understood in the form of ( $a_1 a_2$ ) + ( $b_1 b_2$ ). Besides, the general rule revealed in Figure 1 only explains the structural feature of “crisscrossing omission” in the rhetoric *huwen* and specifies little about the interaction between form and meaning.



*Figure 1: The meaning generation process in huwen depicted by Liu (1986)*

Chen [3] analyzed *huwen* in Chinese idioms from the perspective of construction grammar and pointed out that *huwen* itself as a means of expression is not a construction, but idioms formed by employing *huwen* are constructions, whose constructional meaning come from integrating the overt construction and covert construction. Significantly, the covert construction results from processing the cognitive blank in a gestalt way by applying the known overt construction. In contrast, poems that employ *huwen* but form no fixed expressions are not constructions; thus, they cannot be interpreted by taking the constructionist approach. Chen’s (2010) interpretation is not flawless because of the following doubts. First, the essence of the rhetoric *huwen* is an interaction between form and meaning, while the constructionist approach does not reveal this relation and focuses only on the result of gestalt processing. Second, the essence of the rhetoric *huwen* should be constant wherever it is used as a means of expression and the constructionist approach cannot interpret its meaning generation mechanism because the conclusions reached from analyzing *huwen* in Chinese idioms cannot be generalized to other genres where it is used.

Targeting the classic poetry of China, this research will firstly analyze the types and features of *huwen* used in this genre, which is followed by exploring the feasibility of interpreting its meaning generation mechanism by combing the conceptual blending theory. It will end with revealing the conceptual blending process of meaning generation in *huwen* by discussing specific instances in the classic poetry of China.

## 2. Types and features of huwen in Chinese classic poetry

### 2.1 Types of huwen in Chinese classic poetry

*Huwen* in Chinese classic poetry can be classified into four types based on the linguistic units, i.e. *huwen* in one line, *huwen* in two lines, *huwen* in multiple lines and *huwen* intervals. Among them the first two types are our research focus but the last two will also be considered if necessary. Seen from its form, *huwen* in Chinese classic poetry can fall into the following three types which are subject-predicate *huwen*, endocentric *huwen* and verb-object *huwen*. Subject-predicate *huwen* is composed of two identical subject-predicate structures. For subject-predicate *huwen* in one line, its form is “subject<sub>1</sub> predicate<sub>2</sub> subject<sub>2</sub> predicate<sub>2</sub>”; for those in two lines, the form is “subject<sub>1</sub> predicate<sub>1</sub>, subject<sub>2</sub> predicate<sub>2</sub>”. Literally speaking, the two predicates state their corresponding subjects in a direct way, but they imply a statement for the other subject as well. This means that the interpretation of subject-predicate *huwen* should be “subject<sub>1</sub> predicate<sub>1</sub> predicate<sub>2</sub>, subject<sub>2</sub> predicate<sub>1</sub> predicate<sub>2</sub>”, which can be further understood as “subject<sub>1</sub> subject<sub>2</sub> predicate<sub>1</sub> predicate<sub>2</sub>” when predicate<sub>2</sub> can qualify subject<sub>1</sub> and predicate<sub>1</sub> can qualify subject<sub>2</sub>. The same goes for endocentric *huwen* and verb-object *huwen*, which will not be given more detailed description.

### 2.2 Features of huwen in Chinese classic poetry

The above analysis of common types showcases that *huwen* in Chinese classic poetry presents its

typical features, i.e. the structural symmetry and semantic complementarity. Specifically, the two parts of *huwen* in Chinese classic poetry are symmetrical in their structures. According to the previous classification, if the subject-predicate structure, endocentric structure or verb-object structure is indicated by A whose main elements are a and b, the form of *huwen* in Chinese classic poetry is  $A_1A_2$  ( $a_1b_1a_2b_2$ ). It is clear that  $A_1$  and  $A_2$  are identical in their structures; besides,  $a_1$  and  $a_2$  share the same grammatical nature and so do  $b_1$  and  $b_2$ . On the semantic level, there are only two relations found between  $a_1$  and  $a_2/b_1$  and  $b_2$ : first,  $a_1$  and  $a_2/b_1$  and  $b_2$  are heterophonic heteronyms belonging to the same semantic group; second,  $a_1$  and  $a_2/b_1$  and  $b_2$  are antonyms combined to express a broader meaning. Further, these two relations are revealed in two types of *huwen* in Chinese classic poetry: first,  $a_1$  and  $a_2$  present the first relation and so do  $b_1$  and  $b_2$ ;  $a_1$  and  $a_2$  present the second relation but  $b_1$  and  $b_2$  have the first relation. Nonetheless, the relation between  $a_1$  and  $a_2/b_1$  and  $b_2$  does not change the final interpreting formula of *huwen* in Chinese classic poetry. In other words, “ $a_1b_1a_2b_2$ ” can only be understood as “ $a_1b_1b_2a_2b_1b_2$ ”. It merits our attention that the formula of “ $a_1a_2b_1b_2$ ” is the interpretation of some but not all *huwen* in Chinese classic poetry, which can be illustrated by the second example used in the Introduction section. This research, thus, explores the generalized interpreting formula, which is “ $a_1b_1b_2a_2b_1b_2$ ”.

The typical features of *huwen* in Chinese classic poetry show that though not conventionalized as *huwen* idioms, its genre can in some way contribute to the formation of a fixed schema. The spatial proximity can trigger the compression of mental distance between different concepts, then activating their blending. This means that there is an interaction between form and meaning in the conceptual blending of *huwen* in Chinese classic poetry. The following section will introduce the theoretical foundation of this research, i.e. the conceptual blending theory and its development.

### 3. The conceptual blending theory and its development

#### 3.1 The conceptual blending theory proposed by Fauconnier and Turner

Conceptual blending refers to the cognitive activity in which structures from input mental spaces are selectively projected into a separate, blended one so as to develop new structures not provided by the inputs. It happens in four spaces: one generic space (G), two input spaces ( $I_1$  and  $I_2$ ) and one blended space (B). G which maps onto  $I_1$  and  $I_2$  contains what  $I_1$  and  $I_2$  have in common in the blending process. When  $I_1$  and  $I_2$  are partly projected onto B, a new or emergent structure will appear in the interplay of three interrelated cognitive activities (composition, completion and cognitive elaboration), in which the meaning is generated. [4-5]

#### 3.2 Levels of blending proposed by Bache

The conceptual blending theory contributes to revealing the meaning generation process of certain grammatical structures,[4] but it does not elaborate different blending levels which vary with each other in complexity and sophistication. Bache hereto proposed three-order blends, a supplement to the theory. According to Bache [6], first-order blends refer to basic mental compression and integration of complex perceptual experience. Second-order blends describe the integration of basic abstract stories with abstract grammatical structures to produce actual grammatical constructions. Third-order blends reflect further conceptual elaboration and/or culturally sensitive redefinitions of projections. This new typology can guide us to explain the dynamic mechanism of meaning generation.

#### 3.3 Combined input hypothesis proposed by Ruiz de Mendoza and Díez

In the face of linguistic phenomena containing successive blends, the conceptual blending theory is powerless as well. Take “you could see the smoke coming out of his ears”, a classic instance used by Fauconnier and Turner [7] to explain the conceptual blending theory. According to Ruiz de Mendoza and Peña [8], there are two blends rather than one in this instance’s interpretation: two input spaces (a container schema and a burning object) are first blended into a new space, and then this new one produces projections with the target space, which further serve as the inputs for the second round of blending. This is Ruiz de Mendoza and Díez’s [9] amendment to the theory, which is called the combined input hypothesis: multiple inputs ( $a_1, a_2 \dots a_n$ ) that are simultaneously activated are blended into a new projection space ( $A_1$ ) which together with another input ( $A_2$ ) is used to form another new projection space (B).

Given the above discussion, we believe that in order to reveal the dynamic process of meaning

generation, the conceptual blending theory should be considered together with the account of three-order blends and the combined input hypothesis. This research, thus, will explore the meaning generation mechanism of *huwen* in Chinese classic poetry based on the developed conceptual blending theory.

#### 4. Meaning generation of *huwen* in Chinese classic poetry through conceptual blending

The complexity of the physical world and human perception produces various conceptual blends. Nevertheless, Fauconnier and Turner [4] believed that four types of networks dominate conceptual blending: simplex networks in which simply associate functions with values; mirror networks in which all spaces share an organizing frame; single-scope networks in which the input spaces have different organizing frames and one of the inputs is projected unchanged to the blend; double-scope networks in which the inputs have different organizing frames and each contributes to the organizing frame of the blend. The analysis in Section 2.2 of structural and semantic features of *huwen* in Chinese classic poetry shows that its anterior and posterior linguistic units have symmetrical structures with semantic integrity. Thus, the conceptual blending happens first inside of each unit, which is characterized by simplex networks, and then between the two units, which is characterized by both mirror and double-scope networks. The verse of “the moon of Qin Dynasty and the frontier juncture of Han Dynasty” is used in this section as an example to elaborate the meaning generation process through conceptual blending.

The conceptual blending first happens inside each of the two linguistic units respectively. In the first unit, “Qin Dynasty”, the input  $x$ , is a specific context in which there is no frame while “the moon of X” as the input  $y$  is an abstract frame. Projected into the blend space, the input  $x$  adds a value on the input  $y$ , and the specific role of “Qin Dynasty” is given to X in the frame of “the moon of X”, generating an emergent structure belonging to either of the inputs. Similarly, the simplex network serves to generate the emergent structure in the second unit. Figure 2 showcases the blending process inside each unit of the instance.

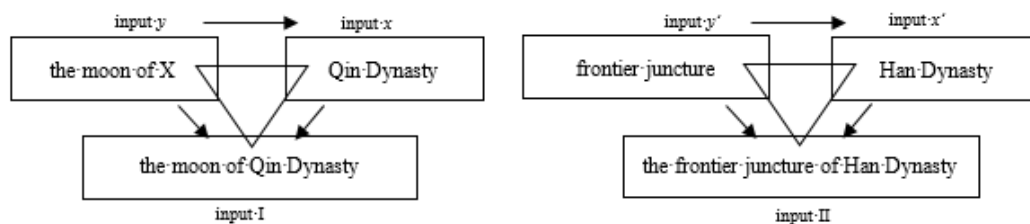


Figure 2: The inputs and blends of “the moon of Qin Dynasty” and “the frontier juncture of Han Dynasty”

Based on the blending happening inside each unit, there will be a second conceptual blending between them, which presents the features of both mirror and double-scope networks. According to the above analysis, “the moon of Qin Dynasty” and “the frontier juncture of Han Dynasty” have an identical modifier-head structure and are not in conflict with each other. Meanwhile, the frame of “the moon of Qin Dynasty” and that of “the frontier juncture of Han Dynasty” conflict with each other because they are very different objects. Mental spaces in human minds do not exist in isolation and among them there are many relations including cause-effect, space-time, part-whole, features, categories etc., which forms the foundation of the blended space. Figure 3 depicts the blending between “the moon of Qin Dynasty” and “the frontier juncture of Han Dynasty”. To be specific, the linguistic fragments inside the two units are classified according to their features after being projected into the blended space. The identical structure accelerates the cognitive blending, putting “Qin Dynasty” and “Han Dynasty” into one category and “the moon” and “the frontier juncture” into another. On the basis of fragment classification which is the first-order blend, the grammatical structures of both units will be blended in the second-order blend. According to Saussure’s [10] explanation of paradigms, “the moon of Qin Dynasty” and “the frontier juncture of Han Dynasty” are two independent elements in the paradigmatic axis of modifier-head structures; moreover, since the modifier and head in the modifier-head structure are two independent paradigms as well, “Qin Dynasty” and “Han Dynasty” are independent in the paradigmatic axis of modifiers, and so is “the moon” and “the frontier juncture” in that of heads. Further, elements in a paradigm have some grammatical features and functions in common, i.e. they are similar to each other in some way, which means they can be used in the same context. This explains why the semantic complementarity of *huwen* in Chinese classic poetry is possible. In our case, “the frontier juncture” can be qualified by “Han Dynasty” and “the moon” by “Qin Dynasty”. This cognitive elaboration (i.e. the

third-order blend) generates emergent structures, which are the moon in Qin Dynasty shines over the frontier juncture and the moon in Han Dynasty shines over the frontier juncture.

To sum up, the meaning generation of *huwen* in Chinese classic poetry relies on two rounds of conceptual blending, i.e. the conceptual blending inside each of the two linguistic units and between them. It should be noted that form and meaning play quite different roles in the second round of conceptual blending: the first-order blend is achieved in symmetrical structures through automatic classification of fragments, which is the blending between the structures; the grammatical construction is established in the second-order blend through an interaction between form and meaning; and the third-order blend happens mainly on the semantic level. The meaning generation process of *huwen* in Chinese classic poetry through conceptual blending is therefrom shown in Figure 4. Though drawn by targeting *huwen* in Chinese classic poetry, this diagram can be generalized to reveal the meaning generation of *huwen* in other genres. Moreover, the rhetoric *huwen* is pervasive in modern spoken Chinese, and conceptual blending is the underly mechanism of its meaning generation as well.

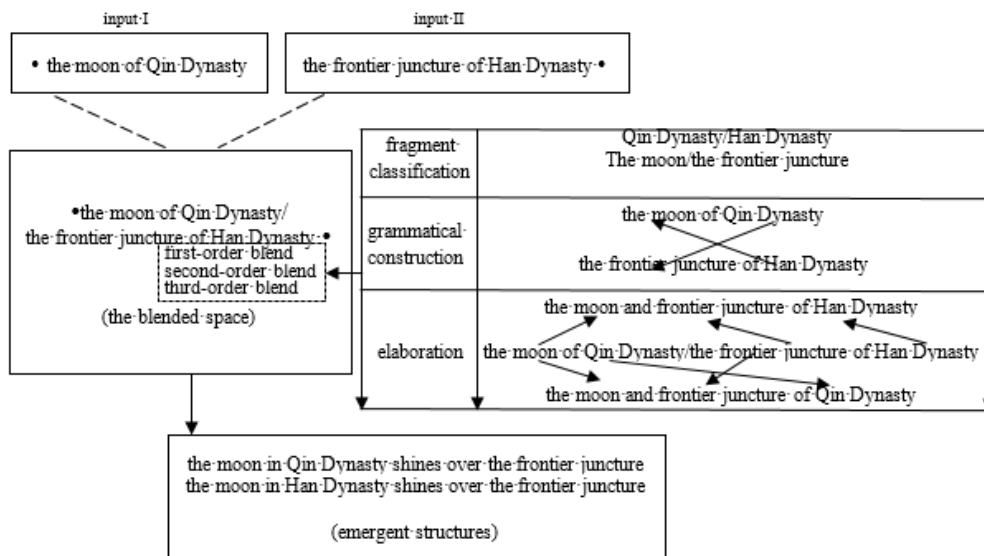


Figure 3: The blending between “the moon of Qin Dynasty” and “the frontier juncture of Han Dynasty”

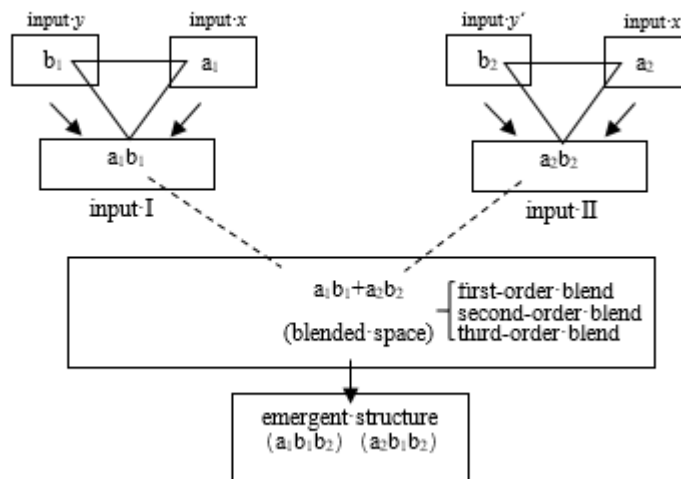


Figure 4: Meaning generation of *huwen* in Chinese classic poetry through conceptual blending

**5. Conclusion**

The conceptual blending theory is instrumental in revealing the dynamic meaning generation process of language, but it does not elaborate the different levels of blends or the successive blends. Integrating Bache’s account of three-order blends and Ruiz de Mendoza and Díez’s combined input hypothesis, this

research explored the meaning generation of *huwen* in Chinese classic poetry through conceptual blending. Results show that there are two rounds of conceptual blending, the first of which happens inside the two linguistic units and the second between them. For the conceptual blending between the two units, it comprises three-order blends which are fragment classification, grammatical construction and cognitive elaboration because of the structural asymmetry and semantic complementarity of *huwen*. Still in this conceptual blending, form and meaning play diverse roles in different levels of blends and in particular, an interaction is observed in the second-order blend.

The rhetoric *huwen* is widely used in both ancient and modern Chinese, and *huwen* in Chinese classic poetry targeted by this research is part of its landscape. Nevertheless, this research explores a new avenue to analyze the meaning generation mechanism of the rhetoric *huwen*, deepening our understanding of Chinese rhetoric and giving new directions of future research in rhetoric at the same time.

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