

Jun Wang* and Chenghui Guan

The tenacity of culture as represented by the Chinese color term *Qing*

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Abstract: *qing* (青) is a very special and controversial color term in Chinese language and culture for the fact that it can refer to green, blue, or black depending on how it is used in collocation or context; it can be used as both a basic color term and mixed color term; in context it can be understood to refer to a certain color, but sometimes nobody can tell for sure what specific color it refers to; it can refer to color, but in more situations the understanding of it just goes beyond the perception of color, bringing about a vague but delightful feeling about the world in general. Basic as well as associative meanings of this term existed at the early stage of its creation, and these meanings can still be perceived in various situations in modern Chinese, used in much more extensive way. To a large extent, it has become a rather peculiar sign of Chinese culture, held so firmly, dearly and lastingly by the Chinese people. The case of *qing* serves as a typical example that reflects how the Chinese perceive the world.

Keywords: Chinese culture; color term; history; origin; *qing*

1 Introduction

Culture is an extremely big and elusive term in the vocabulary of social sciences. Countless books and papers have been devoted to defining it in various ways. Definitions of culture range from very complex to very simple, depending on what the researchers intend to focus on. For the current purpose of research of color terms, we find the definition of Kluckhohn (1951) most appropriate:

Culture consists in patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values. (p. 86)

***Corresponding author: Jun Wang**, Soochow University, Soochow, China,

E-mail: junwang@suda.edu.cn

Chenghui Guan, Soochow University, Soochow, China, E-mail: 743811179@qq.com.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1771-8671>

From the above definition of culture, we can extract some essential properties which can be transferred to the description of the Chinese color term *qing* (青 in Chinese). The key points are as follows:

- symbols
- patterned ways of thinking, feeling, and reacting
- distinctive group achievements
- traditional ideas and values

As what we are going to demonstrate in the following, *qing* shall be taken as a typical symbol or sign of Chinese culture that was created and used quite early in Chinese history and is still used extensively in modern times. With its widespread use in multiple color naming, character/word formation, varied associative meanings, it has become and can reflect some patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting of the Chinese people throughout history. The word *qing*, together with what it denotes, both literally and metaphorically, both definitely and vaguely, is a typical reflection of how the Chinese people think about color, conceptualize color, and understand the color-related world. Quite a lot of ideas and values attached to it by the Chinese ancestors are still perceivable and even more active in modern times. The case of *qing* can be used to demonstrate to a large extent the tenacity of Chinese culture.

There are two more specific reasons for using the case of *qing* to relate to Chinese culture. First, *qing* is a color term, and the perception, conceptualization, and lexicalization of color is highly subjective. More and more people have realized that “color vision is an illusion played on us by the nervous system and the brain” (Deutscher 2010, p. 242), and consequently “colour has no universal cross-linguistic currency” and “colour studies cannot be a global discipline” (Levisen 2019, p. 3). It is thus significant to study how the Chinese conceptualize this particular color. Second, *qing* is “one of the oldest, most frequently used colour terms in Mandarin and probably the most confounding” (Tao and Wong 2020, p. 95). Even the majority of Chinese native speakers have just “a rough understanding of the meanings of this word” (Fang 2009). This is quite interesting and puzzling: on one hand, people do not know what it actually and exactly means, but on the other hand people use it quite frequently in various situations. Why do people depend on something unclear or vague to organize their thoughts and attach much value to it? Is this just a phenomenon that appears in this particular color term? Does it have any relationship with some basic Chinese values and basic ways of thinking? To answer these questions, we need to set up a link between the study of *qing* and Chinese culture, to find out the features and facts about how the *qing*’s reference and associated meanings used in ancient times have been passed on to the modern times.

2 A brief review of *qing*'s research

Though people live in the same world, the perception of color is highly subjective. For one thing, it is the cells of the retina that absorb the light of a rather narrow band of wavelength that ranges from 0.4 to 0.7 μm . Behind the retina are thin plate of nerve cells with photoreceptors that turn visual light into neural signals which are eventually recognized by the brain as color (Deutscher 2010, p. 241). So the kind of thing we call color is actually a mental reflection of the outside physical stimulus. For another thing, “the same world” we live in does not simply mean that the physical surroundings of every culture or group of people are totally the same. For example, people living closer to the equator and those living closer to the poles are exposed to sunlight in very different manners. The qualities of sunlight are affected by a lot of factors, such as latitudes, altitude, climate and humidity, vegetation, and the amount and type of outdoor activity (Josserand et al. 2021), and the different qualities of exposure to sunlight would affect the physiology of the lens of the eye (Hammond 2012; Javitt and Taylor 1995; Remington 2012), making it more or less sensitive to some particular colors. This would eventually make it easier or more difficult for some particular languages or cultures to create or overlook some particular color terms. So, our perception of color is affected by quite a lot of physical, social and cultural factors, and there is no universal color perception and no universal ways of categorizing and lexicalizing colors. The fact that most languages or cultures in the world seem to have adopted a similar color system is to a large extent the result of Anglocentrism; people are forced to accept or adjust to the Anglo color system (Levisen 2019).

The same is true for perceiving the color of *qing*. *qing*, as a color term in Chinese, is understood in three general ways: first, it is used as a color term referring to one specific color covering both green and blue. This corresponds roughly to the English color term “grue” (a blend of “green” and “blue”) or “bleen” (a blend of “blue” and “green”). Second, it is used to refer to one particular basic color, such as green, blue, black, etc. In this case, the way to specify what particular color it refers to depends totally on the context where it is used. For example, in *qingshan* (青山, green mountain), *qing* refers to green; in *qinghuaci* (青花瓷, blue-and-white porcelain), *qing* refers to blue; and in *qingsi* (青丝, black hair), *qing* refers to black. Third, *qing* is used as a “visual but non-colour term” (Tao and Wong 2020, p. 96), such as in *qingtian* (青天, in which 天 means “sky”) or *qingyun* (青云, in which 云 means “cloud”), *qing* can be understood to refer to “clear sky” (Gao and Shen 2013; Lin 2014) or “high in the sky” (Tao and Wong 2020, p. 110). One rather perplexing thing about *qing* is that even in very specific collocation or context *qing* can be interpreted in very different ways. In *qingtian* and *qingyun* once again, *qing* can be interpreted as meaning “sky”, “clear sky”, “high” or “blue”. In these cases no consensus about what it actually refers to can be reached, but this situation

does not affect the popularity of using these terms in communication. It seems that people totally do not care what these terms precisely refer to, and an inaccurate grasp of their meanings is enough for communicative purposes.

According to Berlin and Kay (1969), in English there are 11 basic color terms, which are: white, black, red, blue, green, yellow, brown, orange, grey, purple, and pink. These basic color terms originating from English (more specifically, Anglo) language and culture have been so influential or intrusive that so many languages, together with their perception and categorization of colors, have been transformed to be in line with the English basic color classification. So, it is no wonder that in postcolonial language studies the spread of English color concept has become a research topic in its own right (Levisen et al. 2016). Deeply affected by the so-called Anglocentrism in the field of color (Levisen 2019, p. 3), *qing*, which was far back in Chinese history a basic color term, is no longer used as an ordinary basic color term in modern Chinese. This does not simply happen in Chinese, but in many languages and cultures in the world the same story has been or is being repeated. For example, using a single color term to refer to green and blue, just like *qing*, is not uncommon in world languages. Japanese is a language that was formed on the basis of Chinese to a large extent. Before the 1960s, Japanese used the Chinese character 青 (pronounced as “ao”) to refer to both green and blue, the same usage as is used in Chinese, and this 青 was then one of the five basic color terms (the other four terms are black, white, orange, and yellow, respectively) in Japanese (Sampson 1980), but now although 青 can still be used to refer to green and blue in Japanese, it is no longer regarded as a basic color term. Similar terms referring to both green and blue can also be found in Korean, Russian, many North American and Mesoamerican Indian as well as African languages (Hardin 2013, p. 2; McWhorter 2014). Just because the above-mentioned languages have been profoundly and lastingly affected by English language and culture, the terms referring to both green and blue can hardly maintain their basic color status in their respective languages.

3 The cultural properties of *qing* in ancient Chinese

No single explanatory factor explains the emergence of color terms, but the most prominent and determinant factors are environment and culture, which shape both the color lexicon and the genetics of color perception (Josserand et al. 2021). Only when the environment contains certain colors and the colors are prominent

and important enough in their life, do people have the need to focus their attention on them and try to express them in words. Although we, all the people on the Earth, are able to see all kinds of colors, only a small number of colors are necessary for us to process in depth, and fewer to be separated from concrete entities and generalized as basic color terms. So, in every society or culture, the number of basic color terms is very small.

According to some research (e.g., Ma 2008), the earliest form of the Chinese character *qing* appeared in the oracle bone inscriptions (OBI) of the Shang dynasty (1600 BC–1046 BC), the earliest known dynasty in Chinese history. Unfortunately, it appeared only once in OBI, and seemingly referred to the color of plants (Tao and Wong 2020, p. 99). More evidence suggests that *qing* as a color term was first and frequently used with ores, referring to azurite and malachite (Chen 2015; Lu 2016). As azurite and malachite always co-exist in natural environment, the term *qing* referring to both of them naturally covers both blue and green, and people then did not seem to have any reason to differentiate the two colors. There is another explanation about *qing*'s reference: even early in Shang and Zhou dynasties (1600 BC–256 BC), people extracted blue pigment from azurite, and green pigment from malachite. As azurite and malachite are often mixed, the color extracted would be sometimes blue with some tint of green, or green with some tint of blue. What people cared about is the color extracted from the minerals, without much concern about whether the color is close to blue or green.

Besides referring to both blue and green, or either blue or green, *qing* can also be used to refer to black. It is easy to understand the use of a single word to refer to both blue and green, because, first, this phenomenon can be found in many languages in the world; second, this is the fundamental reason, blue and green are neighboring colors in color spectrum, so the two colors to be recognized as one is not at all uncommon. However, black is not a neighboring color of blue or green, so for visual perception black can hardly be mixed with either blue or green. Chinese might be a unique language to use a single color word to refer to blue, green, and black all at the same time. One explanation is helpful for understanding this phenomenon. Just like *qing* can be used to refer to both azurite and malachite, or the mixed color from them, *qing* can also be used to refer to colors that are used in one particular thing. For example, the color of ancient Chinese costume can be used to distinguish identity or status. Since Han dynasty (202 BC–220 AD), people of rather low social status, such as the populace, slaves, maid-servants, and low-level officials could only wear deep-blue or black costume, and these clothes are called *qingyi* (青衣, grue costume) (Xu 1988, pp. 38–39). Officials of higher ranks may wear purple, red, and green costumes, as in Tang Dynasty (618 AD–907 AD). In all dynasties in Chinese history, yellow costume is reserved solely for the emperor. Exactly speaking, black and white are very different from other colors in that

black and white are concerned with the degree of brightness that can apply to various colors.¹ That is to say, any color can become black or white when its brightness gets to the strongest extent, hence turning into white; or to the weakest extent, hence turning into black. So, in the case of *qingyi*, whose color covers deep-blue and black, deep-blue was traditionally addressed by *qing*, and this blue can be so deep that it has no much difference from black. Consequently, there seems no need to distinguish deep-blue and black, and both deep-blue and black costumes can be addressed by the same name *qingyi*. The connection between *qing* and black is thus established.

Similar to black and white which are not taken as colors but a reflection of brightness, *qing* can also be understood as being closely related to brightness instead of referring to particular colors. Simizu (清水茂) (2003), after comparing *qing* with green, posits that their difference does not lie in hue but saturation and lightness (brightness). In terms of hue, both *qing* and green refer to the same kind of color. The difference between *qing* and green is that for green its saturation is not as dense as *qing* does, but contains some tint of yellow; but for *qing* its saturation renders it to look close to black, and *qing*'s lightness is much lower. So different from some scholars (e.g., Zhao 2012) who think *qing* to be used to refer to black is an event that took place much later in history than *qing* was used to refer to green and/or blue, Sigeru Simizu believes that *qing*'s reference to black happened the same time when it was used as a color term. This interpretation is of great importance for the understanding of *qing* as a color term referring to several different colors, and as a non-color term used rather extensively in various social contexts of the Chinese people.

Though *qing* as a color term was often used to refer to particular colors in particular contexts or with particular entities, it was long ago definitely regarded as a basic color term detached from concrete things and contexts. According to Baxter (1983, p. 1), in the Eastern Zhou and Han dynasties (700 BC–220 AD), there were five basic color terms, and *qing* is one of them (the other four terms are used for white, yellow, red, and black). The five basic color terms correspond to five primary colors. This classification of five primary colors is much more reasonably grounded on science than the so-called universal 11 basic colors identified by Berlin and Kay (1969). The 11-colors classification is mainly based on the prominence and differentiation qualities of the color, while the 5-colors classification adopts another strategy. Among the five primary colors, white and black actually refer to the

¹ It is nothing strange for brightness to be taken as colors. According to Warburton (2014, p. 1), “the earliest color lexicons from languages of the Middle East and the eastern Mediterranean (protocuneiform, Sumerian, Akkadian, Egyptian, and early Greek) have words signifying ‘dark’ and ‘light’ as well as terms denoting something closer to ‘black’ and ‘white’.”

degree of brightness instead of color in the strict sense, with white meaning the highest brightness and black the lowest brightness. Brightness is an attribute any color may exhibit in certain circumstances, so white and black are quite different color types from other colors. The remaining colors among the five primaries, i.e., *qing*, red and yellow, are in fact the well-known three primary colors, by mixing which any color in the world can be obtained. Following the above explanation, we may conclude that the particular color of *qing* in the five primary colors must refer to blue. But this claim is not totally true, because, though *qing* may often refer to blue, it can also refer to green, black or a mixed color range from green to blue. Anyway, one thing is for sure, i.e., *qing* is a rather important basic or primary color term in ancient China and it is different from any other basic color term fully acknowledged by the Westerners. Besides Baxter, Yao (1988) and Lu (2016) also support the view that *qing* was a basic color term in ancient China. To relate to specific entities and in the meanwhile be used as a general or basic color term is one of the amazing extraordinary features of *qing*. Normally, a basic color term, e.g., green or red, refers to one type of color detached from any concrete things. This is what makes it “basic”, denoting a certain general feature that can apply to any specific thing. But for some non-basic color terms, such as the color term *bay*, which refers to the reddish brown of a horse, they might be associated with particular entities. *qing*, however, has a mixed quality, or takes two diverse functions.

The mixed quality of *qing* is also represented in its capacity of evoking images. On one hand, *qing* is capable of evoking particular images. Goddard (1998, p. 127) proposed the concept of ‘visual prototype’, referring to the prototypical image that appears in one’s mind. For instance, the visual prototype for the English word “blue” might be “the sky at many times during the day when people can see the sun” (Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014, p. 5; Tao et al. 2020, p. 97). For *qing*, when a certain context is provided, such as the natural environment or the workplace for producing porcelain, *qing* as a color term can immediately bring forth a certain prototypical image, that is, the green leaves or grass in nature, or the deep-blue porcelain carved with Chinese traditional drawings. However, there is some difference between the *bay*-like color terms and *qing* for evoking visual prototypes, in that the former does not need any specific context to help activate the visual image, but the latter must do the thing in a certain context, most likely due to the fact that *qing* contains multiple referents relating to diverse contexts. Just because of this special feature of *qing*, people often feel confused about what *qing* as a color term actually refers to, let alone evoking any visual prototype. This is “the other hand” of *qing*. In this case, *qing* is understood as a rather general term, which can refer to any color of green, blue, and black; or does not refer to color at all, with a rather vague reference to something that can make people feel calm, happy, or relaxed; it

is like a feeling of relief or relaxation that is not caused by any obvious reason, but it is understood there must be some reason for that to happen. The ancient Chinese enjoyed such vague or obscure experience and feeling, and they expressed their liking for this term by using it extensively in, e.g., naming or word-formation. *qing* standing for beauty, loftiness and nobility was rather long time ago in Chinese history recognized by the public, and it was taken to be a rather important and representative sign of Chinese culture and has penetrated every aspect of the Chinese society (Lin 2016).

Now we can summarize the major features of *qing* used in ancient Chinese as follows:

1. It could be used to refer to green, blue or black respectively, or green and blue, or green, blue and black as a whole.
2. It was often used with particular things or in particular contexts.
3. It could be used as a basic color term.
4. It contained mixed features, to be used with or without specific context, to be capable of evoking visual images or relating to delighted, noble feelings.
5. As an important sign of culture, it was used rather extensively in many aspects of society.

The list of features mentioned above reflects how *qing* was used in ancient China, and these features will be used in what follows to show how this cultural heritage or sign of culture is exhibited in modern Chinese society. We intend to see what features have been preserved, what strengthened, and what lost.

4 The cultural heritage of *qing* in modern times

qing in modern Chinese is still a term and concept with quite a lot of uncertainties, similar to those in ancient Chinese.

As a color term, *qing* can be used as a basic color term, or a term referring to green, blue or black. In China, most people are very familiar with a fixed sequence of basic color words, i.e., “赤橙黄绿青蓝紫” (red, orange, yellow, green, *qing*, blue, purple). The Chinese children were told or taught very early about this color sequence to help them recognize the most basic colors in the world. An interesting thing is that, although *qing* can directly refer to green or blue in some cases, in this sequence *qing* is distinguished from green and blue, referring to a hue between green and blue. Another proof for *qing* to be regarded as a basic color term is the situation in which *qing* and green, blue or black can be used interchangeably, or just refer to the same basic color, as in:

- qing* for green: 青草 (green grass)
 绿水青山 (green water and green mountain)
 荒地已经泛青了 (The wild land has already become green.)
- qing* for blue: 青天白云 (blue sky and white clouds)
 青花瓷 (blue and white porcelain)
 青出于蓝而深于蓝 (*proverb: lit. qing* is derived from blue but deeper than blue)
- qing* for black: 青丝 (black hair)
 青衣 (black clothes)
 皮肤发青了 (The skin looks black.)

Although in terms of referent, *qing* and another color term may refer to the same color, and in some cases the two terms can be used interchangeably, such as in 青/绿草, 荒地已经泛青/绿了, 青/蓝天白云, but in other cases they cannot, such as in 绿水青山/*绿水绿山, 青花瓷/*蓝花瓷, 青丝/*黑丝, 青衣/*黑衣. The major reason for *qing* unable to be replaced by other color terms is that people are so accustomed to using it in specific set phrases or idioms due to the beautiful, lofty, noble associations brought forth by the term *qing* (Lin 2016). Though used as a basic color term sometimes, *qing* cannot be used as freely as other basic color terms do. In other words, the usage of *qing* is much restricted to specific set expressions which invariably have close connection with the old days; both the term *qing* and the fixed expression in which it is embedded contain much antique-cultural element. *qing* is a term that can remind people of the past, evoke people's awareness of beauty, relaxation and nobility. In this sense, *qing* is a term that has a good reason to stay in Chinese vocabulary and cannot be replaced by corresponding basic color terms. So, why do we choose to use a certain word? It is not just that we choose it for expressing or evoking a certain referent, but we do so for the sake of achieving two purposes: to evoke the referent and to bring forth the associations the term *per se* carries. It is the second purpose that has injected everlasting vitality into *qing*.

In modern Chinese, *qing* is not only used in set expressions, but also used in specific contexts. Different contexts determine to a large extent what particular color *qing* refers to. There are two kinds of context: general context or situation and collocation.

The natural environment covered by various plants is a general context. In this context, *qing* is a color term that refers to green only, such as in 青草 (green grass), 青菜 (green vegetable), 青山 (green mountain), 踏青 (*lit.* treading on the green grass. *fig.* have an outing in Spring). *qing* used to refer to the color of plants, i.e., green, is the most frequently used color and the area of plants is the major context where *qing* is used in Chinese. Another example about general context is the sky, which looks blue in clear days. When *qing* is used to refer to the color of the

sky, it just means blue, such as in 青天 (blue sky), 青云 (cloud in the blue sky). However, when *qing* is used to describe a person, about his body, skin, or clothes, it normally refers to black, as in 皮肤淤青 (a bruise on the skin), 青丝 (black hair), 青衣 (black clothes). Different general contexts require different readings of “*qing*’s” referent. Ordinary basic color terms normally have a certain visual prototype that is related to one specific thing or situation, for example, the visual prototype of red is the color of the sun, and green the color of plants. The visual prototype of *qing*, however, does not correspond to one situation or thing, but three different situations or things: plants for green, the sky for blue, body and clothes for black. Differentiated general contexts serve as an effective means to help recognize what particular color *qing* most likely refers to.

Another context for *qing* to stay with is collocation. When general context is absent or unclear, people depend on what word(s) *qing* stays with to determine its referent. This is the case for all the instances we have mentioned in the past section. Sometimes even a minor difference in collocation would change the referent of *qing* dramatically. In 青瓷 (*qing* + porcelain, celadon porcelain) and 青花瓷 (*qing* + flower + porcelain, blue white porcelain), for example, it seems the only difference in the two words lies in the presence or absence of the term 花 (flower), which is nothing but a flower design that can appear in any porcelain. However, the colors perceived of the two terms are quite different, with 青瓷 activating green perception and 青花瓷 blue perception. As 青瓷 and 青花瓷 may appear in the same general context, the general context is here invalid in distinguishing color; it is collocation that plays a decisive role.

Nobody can deny that *qing* originated from a term referring to color, or two or three different colors. In modern Chinese, it is still used this way in quite a lot of situations. It is a habit or tradition for the Chinese people to use *qing* to refer to color in particular collocations and general contexts, but the non-color reference seems to be more prevailing, due to the fact that the *qing* referring to color has more popular basic color substitutes, i.e., 绿 (green), 蓝 (blue), and 黑 (black). This is an unavoidable effect of Anglocentrism that happens on color perception (Levisen 2019). Even so, *qing*’s occurrence frequency in large Chinese corpus is still rather striking. Just compare the occurrence frequency of *qing* and other major basic color terms in the following table. That data was retrieved from the Modern Chinese section of CCL (Center for Chinese Linguistics PKU, http://ccl.pku.edu.cn:8080/ccl_corpus), which contains about 700 million characters.

Table 1 shows quite clearly that among the most popular Chinese basic color terms *qing* has the highest percentage of occurrence (31.1%), in spite of the fact that 绿 (green), 蓝 (blue), and 黑 (black), each of which sometimes can be a substitute for 青 (*qing*), have been separated from *qing*. We cannot explain the highest percentage from the notion of color, as the color of *qing* is usually unclear to most of the Chinese

Table 1: Chinese basic color terms used in CCL.

Color terms	红 ^a (red)	橙 (orange)	黄 (yellow)	绿 (green)	青 (<i>qing</i>)	蓝 (blue)	紫 (purple)
Occurrences	157,249	1,915	146,077	57,539	186,598	32,536	17,221
Percentage	26.2%	0.3%	24.4%	9.6%	31.1%	5.4%	2.9%

^aAmong the seven popular Chinese basic color terms, red is expressed as 赤, which is a term used to refer to red, but now has been replaced in most cases by the character 红. So, here we use 红 instead of 赤 as the key term to search for how frequently the character for red is used in the corpus.

native speakers. In fact, people do not seem to care about what particular color it refers to. They just love the sense expressed by the term *qing*, which might stand for vitality or youth, using it very frequently in word-formation and phrases. For example, in the CCL corpus the single compound of 青年 (youth) has 64727 occurrences and 青少年 (teenagers) has 16144 occurrences. In both compounds, 青 is used in figurative sense, meaning young, rather than referring to color.

Chinese people’s love of *qing* does not simply lie in the highest percentage of occurrence in the corpus, or in forming popular compounds, but the shape of 青 as a sign of culture appeals to people very much. Different from alphabetic languages depending on the linear arrangement of letters to form words, the Chinese character is composed of strokes or parts, and 青 is such a productive part that can be used to form different characters, as shown in Table 2.

There are two major features for the character-formation of 青: First, though 青 has just a single pronunciation of *qing*, when it is used as a part to form new characters, the new characters can be pronounced in at least seven different ways so as to indicate different meanings. Identical pronunciation may more easily evoke the same kind of meaning, but different pronunciations would definitely lead to different meanings. The multiple pronunciations suggest that the original meaning of *qing* as a color term has little or nothing to do with the newly-structured characters. Second, when giving names to babies, especially baby girls, the Chinese

Table 2: Character-formation of 青 and their pronunciations.

Pronunciation ^a	Character-formation
<i>qing</i>	清, 晴, 请, 氰, 蜻, 晴
<i>jing</i>	精, 静, 靖, 婧, 菁, 睛, 靓
<i>qian</i>	倩, 蒨, 筭
<i>liang</i>	靛
<i>dian</i>	靛
<i>tian</i>	靛
<i>cheng</i>	靛

^aThe pronunciation is expressed in Chinese phonetic transcription.

parents prefer to use characters containing the part of 青, such as 清, 静, 婧, 菁, 晴, 倩 for their given names. The reason why these characters are chosen is that they look, sound, or are felt good, though many people may not tell precisely what the character they choose actually means. Both features mentioned above reveal an important fact that the Chinese people love using the character of *qing*, but they do not care whether it still refers to color or not, and even do not care what the character containing *qing* actually refers to; it seems that it is not the actual meaning that matters, it is the comforting atmosphere with which the character is associated.

5 *qing* as a mirror of Chinese thinking modes

Holistic perception and analytic perception are regarded as two quite different thinking modes with the former for Asians and the latter for Westerners. According to Nisbett and Miyamoto (2005, p. 467), Westerners “tend to engage in context-independent and analytic perceptual processes”, while East Asians “tend to engage in context-dependent and holistic perceptual processes”. Language serves as a mirror that can best reflect people’s thinking mode. In the West, language has long been treated as a “system of systems”, typically represented by Halliday’s (1985/1994) Systemic-Functional Grammar, and each system or subsystem can be studied independently, such as the system of sound (phonetics or phonology), the system of meaning (semantics), the system of words (lexicology), the system of sentence structure (syntax), etc. In terms of English sentence, every word in it has a strictly defined syntactic or semantic role to play, and every word class can be definitely specified. Various grammatical restrictions make it possible for a sentence to function independently, with the understanding of the sentence relying less on the context or situation. Chinese, however, is quite different. There is often no clear-cut line between sentences, as the use of punctuations in Chinese is rather flexible, depending to a large extent on the intention of the writer. Chinese word classes are often elusive. In 你漂亮了 (you + beautiful + Asp., meaning “You are beautiful now” or “You have become beautiful”), for example, 漂亮 (beautiful) can be taken as either an adjective or a verb, depending on how the reader understands it. In 人来了 (person + come + Asp.), for another example, it contains several uncertainties if no specific context is provided: it is not clear how many persons there are: one or more than one? The tense is not clear: present, past or future? The status of definiteness of the noun 人 (person) is uncertain, because it is believed that in Chinese bare noun in the subject position or the one placed before the verb is just “to a large extent definite” (Chen 2004). Since there are so many uncertainties in several linguistic aspects, Chinese has to rely more heavily than English does on context to differentiate

meaning. In other words, Chinese may tolerate the inaccuracy at the linguistic level, and achieve precise reference by integrating linguistic cues with context.

This general trait of Chinese applies to the color term *qing* as well. When *qing* is used to refer to a certain color, its reference must be associated with a specific context, a situation or a collocation. If the situation or collocation is not a usual one in which a certain color is specified, people would be very much puzzled about what color it actually refers to. For example, in the sentence 这张纸是青的 (this piece of paper + BE + *qing*) or the phrase 青纸 (*qing* + paper), nobody can tell definitely what color the paper is, because the Chinese rarely, if never, talk about the color of paper by using the term *qing*; the Chinese would say instead 这张纸是绿/蓝/黑的 (This piece of paper is green/blue/black) or 绿/蓝/黑纸 (green/blue/black paper). However, when *qing* is used together with, for example, hair, *qing* would mean black; with the sky, it would mean blue; with plants, it would mean green. *qing* as a color term in modern Chinese can only be used in some long-established situational and linguistic collocations. Out of these collocations, *qing* would be unable to refer to colors.

The holistic perception of *qing* is also reflected in its non-color reference. One of the major reasons why *qing* is used so extensively in modern Chinese is that it has already become a sign that stands for something good in several aspects. First, as a phonetic sign, *qing*'s pronunciation is identical with 轻 (light, or not heavy), whose synesthetic effect (from tactile perception to visual and psychological perception) causes people to relate *qing* to the relaxing light hue of green or blue, or just a feeling of vitality or relaxation. *qing*'s pronunciation is also identical with 清 (clear or clean) that can bring forth the sense of purity. All combined, these associations leave people a general impression of the meaning of *qing*, the impression of something pleasant. As a linguistic sign combined with other characters to form compounds or phrases, *qing* carries with it some antique flavor, reminiscent of the ancient noble and precious antiquities. Though *qing* can be used to refer to green, blue or black, or some intermediate color between green and blue, the reference to green occurs most frequently. Blue comes the second, and black has the least occurrence frequency. That is to say, it is much easier for *qing* to be associated with green, the color of nature, and blue, which is mainly related to the sky, high there, and spacious and clear. They are all pleasing associations that derive from the perception of green plants or blue sky. Third, the character 青 as a part can be used in forming other characters, and there are dozens of such characters. Some of these characters such as 清, 情, 晴, and 倩, are rather popular among the Chinese people. They are often used in giving names to new-born babies, or in expressing pleasant, relaxing, and easy-going feelings. People may not be aware of the specific meaning of 青 or the meanings of other characters containing the part of 青; they just prefer to use these characters due to the vague but delightful association of the visual sign of 青.

Several trends in the use of *qing* throughout history seem obvious: (1) *qing* as a basic color term has long been rarely used, or used only in rather restricted situations, deeply embedded in specific contexts; context-dependent is an impressive feature. (2) *qing*'s charm lies in the combination of antiquity and beauty, so it becomes very popular in character-, word-, and phrase-formations, and the characters containing *qing* are used rather frequently in modern Chinese. (3) *qing* used as a color term is getting less and less important, and its reference to a certain specific color is also getting less important. It seems that people in most cases do not care what the character precisely refers to; people love using it for it can evoke vague but pleasant emotions, something people cannot tell exactly but can feel genuinely.

The three trends mentioned above can to a large extent reflect how the Chinese handle language and think in words.

Both perception and the mode of thinking for the Chinese and Asians as well are characterized by holisticality, which is opposite to taking things as something independent from each other (Nisbett and Miyamoto 2005). Holisticality features relation and context-dependence. By relation, it is meant here that the understanding of one thing must depend on how it is related to other things. If the link between the thing itself and other related things is cut off, it would be difficult or even impossible to know what it is. In the case of *qing*, one can hardly tell what color it refers to, or even what sense it delivers if it is not used together with another word, or words, or context. Holistic perception is synonymous with the theory that the man is an integral part of nature (天人合一), a theory which is regarded as the greatest contribution of Chinese culture to the human being (Qian 1988). This is the major guiding principle that underlies quite a lot of social and cultural phenomena of the Chinese people. Take traditional Chinese medicine for an example. Its general belief of treatment is to adjust and improve a relatively large body system as a major concern so as to cure a specific disease. For this purpose, massage is often used to relax muscles of certain areas of the body or the entire body in order to relieve stress and improve the circulation. This can contribute to the treatment of a single symptom of headache, dizziness, depression, or insomnia. Some combination of herbs can be used to “reduce the internal heat” of the whole body so as to cure the red and swollen eyes, the aching and swollen teeth or throat, the loss of appetite, dental ulcer, constipation, bleeding nose, and so on and so forth. One dose of medicine can serve many purposes, because, according to the belief of traditional Chinese medicine, every single disease is the result of the break of its relation with other organs or body parts. To treat the disease, people must restore the normal relation between the malfunctioning organ and the related organs or even the whole body.

6 The pursuit of individualized perception

The Chinese do not seem to worry about uncertainties expressed by words and other nonverbal signs; on the contrary, they are to a large extent obsessed with those uncertainties.

In quite a lot of core concepts of Chinese spiritual and material cultural forms, uncertain interpretation is a rather prominent feature. It is never easy to tell exactly what the heavily culture-loaded terms actually mean, such as *qi* (气, which roughly means the air inside and outside one's body), *gong* (功, which roughly means the power contained in or released from one's body), *dao* (道, a central concept of Daoism or Chinese philosophy, indicating an unspeakable 'way' of life), *wu* (悟, which roughly means sudden enlightenment), etc., which are most essential in the general system of Chinese spiritual culture. They are understood vaguely but applied widely. In the case of painting, for another example, different from paintings of Western styles, the most important classic Chinese painting is the so-called "Chinese ink painting" (水墨画), as shown in Figure 1.

In Figure 1, the focus of this painting is the fisherman who is fishing on the boat, which is placed against a large area of blank space, with only some ripples indicating the water. The use of blank, technically termed as 'blank-leaving' (留白), in this type of painting is the most extraordinary feature. By leaving a blank, the focus is further



Figure 1: A Chinese ink painting (the use of this picture has been authorized by the copy-right holder of *Fine Ars* (《美与时代》)).

highlighted and the nature of the blank area or the void is left to the viewer to judge or imagine what it is. Blank is left intentionally by the painter, and it can be perceived by the viewer and does refer to something. So, blank here is a sign in the sense of semiotics (Tanaka-Ishii 2017; Wang 2021). Blank-leaving is a way the composer employs to call for the participation of the viewer into meaning excavation or meaning construction. In other words, the composer provides only limited but crucial information to guide the viewer to interpret on his own way. In the case of Figure 1, similar to the case of ‘Wind and Thunder Gods’ painting analyzed by Tanaka-Ishii (2017), it contains both absent signifier and absent signified, the former referring to the blank space, and the latter the unspecified meaning, but both of which are forms of blank-sign. However, some semioticians (e.g., Sebeok 2001, p. 40) do not acknowledge the existence of absent signified for the fact that the signified is not a complete void in that it contains some basic information, such as water indicated by the flowing boat in Figure 1. Then here it is quite necessary to clarify the concept of absent signified as a blank-sign. According to Jakobson (1984, p. 153), when he explains the concept of zero value on the part of the signifier, he says that the signifier stands for an “undifferentiated or nonspecific meaning”. That is to say, “(w)hatever the meaning is, the fact is that it is not completely absent; it contains something that justified it as a signified or as part of a sign” (Wang 2021, p. 129).

Figure 1 is an example of blank-sign containing both absent signifier and absent signified, while *qing*, together with the terms of *qi*, *gong*, *dao*, and *wu* mentioned above, is the kind of blank-sign with present signifier but absent signified. The fact that the signifier is present suggests that the explicit form of *qing* can be perceived directly, thus activating the process of meaning exploration, the search for the signified. As the meaning of *qing* can be explained in multiple ways, when the addresser chooses to use the term in a certain context, he can be so sure about what this term precisely means, thus leaving no or less room for other interpretation; or he may choose the word out of a single simple reason, such as phonetic consideration (just sounds good), structural consideration (just looks fine), associative consideration (suggestive of something noble, pleasing), etc. No matter what these considerations are, they are just part of the meaning the term *qing* has. There is still much room to be filled out by someone else. This room is the blank the addresser has left behind when he is using the term in context. But for the addressee, he has two choices to make: to neglect the blank attached to the term, or to fill out the blank with his own interpretation. So, now we can see there are two kinds of individualized perception that happens on *qing*: the addresser’s and the addressee’s idiosyncratic perceptions. What makes the individualized perceptions possible is the specific nature of *qing* as a blank-sign, with the signified open for individualized interpretation.

7 Concluding remarks

Since the introduction of *qing* as a color term into Mandarin early in Chinese history, it has gone through quite a lot of changes in its reference capacity. These changes cover multiple aspects and have been motivated by a variety of social-cultural forces. As a color term, it was once used as a major basic color term of just a few most essential color terms; it was used to refer to blue, green or black, which were closely associated with concrete objects, a kind of highly contextualized usage. As time went on, its reference became more and more loosely defined, or its meaning became more and more general, so general that in many situations people could not tell exactly what particular color it referred to, or even people doubted whether it still referred to color at all. Under the influence of Anglocentrism on the part of color classification, the Chinese have already completely accepted the more ‘refined’ or ‘universal’ English basic color term counterparts, having basically removed *qing* from Chinese basic color term list. However, following the above trend of generalization and erosion, *qing*’s rate of occurrence does not see an overall sign of decline; on the contrary, it remains active, and even more active than ever before. All the roles *qing* played in the past still remain, though in restricted areas, and in some aspects, such as character formation, word and phrase formation, associative usages, etc., it enjoys striking popularity among the Chinese people. The relative loss of its color-related senses has to a large extent amplified its wide application and further strengthened its cultural property; it has already definitely become a rather important sign of Chinese culture.

As further evidence to show the value of *qing* with everlasting charm and as an extraordinary cultural heritage of China, the following cases deserve meditation. First, on the website of Princeton University Art Museum (<https://artmuseum.princeton.edu>), there is a poster entitled “Blue-Green Realms in Chinese Painting”, which is about the blue-green² mode of painting landscapes established by the Tang dynasty (618–907). It says that “painted landforms in blue-green colors were used as allusions to the distant past or to paradisiacal realms [...]. [The particular paintings] were used in alchemical practices searching for an elixir of immortality. More than just a representation of the natural world, therefore, the paintings also embodied the magical properties associated with the imagined realms of the immortals”. In the world-renowned Tang wall paintings at the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang, China, blue–

² On the webpage of Princeton University Art Museum, a follow-up annotation is attached to the term “blue–green”, that is, “(qinglu, 青绿). 青绿 normally has the same meaning as 青(qing). Their major difference lies in the context in which it is used. The single character of 青 as a word was mainly used in ancient Chinese, while the double character of 青绿 is preferable in modern Chinese. The same is true for the use of 青绿 in the TV program 只此青绿 mentioned below.

green is the dominant color. The second case comes from the most popular TV program of CCTV (China Central Television), a yearly event of Spring Festival Gala that would attract about a billion viewers around the globe every time when it is televised on live. On the New Year's Eve of 2022, a dancing program named 只此青绿 (The official translation is: *Poetic Dance: The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting*) quickly became an internet sensation, winning unprecedented high praise of countless people around the globe. People are overwhelmed by its fantastic dance and its simple but sublime blue-green (*qing*) color. This performance becomes a robust revival of the Chinese people's awareness of ancient Chinese culture. In this process, the blue-green color plays a leading role. However, no consensus could be reached as to how to translate the Chinese title literally into English, because no one could be sure of translating 青绿 (*qing* + green or *qing*) appropriately without causing ambiguity. So they avoided translating 青绿 into a kind of color, and avoided this color term in the title. The final official translation is liberal or free one that is based on the form (poetic dance) and plot (the Journey of a legendary landscape painting) of the performance.

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Bionotes

Jun Wang

Soochow University, Soochow, China
junwang@suda.edu.cn

Jun Wang is a professor of English and linguistics at Soochow University, China. He got his PhD in contrastive linguistics from Shanghai International Studies University. His research areas include cognitive linguistics, semiotics, contrastive linguistics, pragmatics and discourse analysis, with a special focus on anaphora, metaphor, metonymy, compounds, nonverbal communication, etc. He is currently Secretary-general of the Chinese Association for Language and Semiotic Studies, and member of the standing directorate of China Cognitive Linguistics Association. He has published books including *Indirect Anaphora in English and Chinese* (2013) and *A Cognitive Approach to Indirect Anaphora Resolution in English Narrative Discourse* (2004), and over 50 articles on a great variety of topics.

Chenghui Guan

Soochow University, Soochow, China
743811179@qq.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1771-8671>

Chenghui Guan is a PhD student in the Department of English at the School of Foreign Languages, Soochow University, China. She received an M.A. in Foreign Linguistics and Applied Linguistics from Sichuan Normal University. Her research interests are mainly Multimodal Discourse Analysis and Cognitive Linguistics.