

# *The Essence Beyond Flavor: A Comparative Study of Si Kongtu's "Favor criterion" and Response-inviting Structure*

Fangying Qu<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Central China Normal University, Luoyu road, Wuhan city, Hubei province, China

a. Lunanyun123@163.com

\*corresponding author

**Abstract:** Favor criterion is a major feature of Chinese classical poetics. Si Kongtu first proposed favor criterion with the essence beyond flavor, which contains two meanings: internal favor and external favor. Internal favor originates from the author's choice and arrangement of language and characters, including the overall image composed of language, phonology, etc. in poetry. The external flavor exists outside the language, which is an imaginary realm constructed by the readers according to their own experience. Comparing favor criterion with the response-inviting structure, it is found that the latter is a purely rational analysis, focusing on the specific factors that make up the work. The former starts with the whole and expresses the theory in the form of aesthetic experience by analogy.

**Keywords:** Favor criterion, Essence beyond flavor, Si Kongtu, Response-inviting structure.

## 1. Introduction

Favor criterion is a major feature of Chinese classical poetics. Lu Ji first introduced "flavor" into the literary theory, laying the foundation for the poetic flavor criterion. Then Liu Xie and Zhong Rong elaborated the meaning of poetic flavor. On the basis of predecessors, Si Kongtu first proposed the concept of "the essence beyond flavor" in "Talking On Poetry with Li Sheng", focusing on readers' understanding and re-creation of the works. Scholars in Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties inherited and perfected poetic flavor criterion and deepened its connotation. Poetic flavor criterion has some similarities with the response-inviting structure in western literary theory, but they are different because they were born in different literary soils. Taking poetic flavor criterion as the origin, we can construct our own theoretical system and explore analytical methods different from western literary theories, which have profound historical and cultural significance and practical reference significance.

## 2. Literature Review

Different scholars have different understandings of flavor. The direct reflection of this difference is the naming of viewpoints. Li Yingcai [1], Tao Litian [2], Qi Qiongjuan [3], Zhou Chunyu [4] and Zhao Dekun [5] summarized Si Kongtu's viewpoint as rhyme criterion(yun wei shuo) according to the two sentences "the meaning beyond rhyme" and "the essence beyond flavor" in "Talking On Poetry with Li Sheng". According to the sentence "to collect the famous essays and to collect the rhyme through the ages" in Wen Fu, they think that the rhyme is a kind of beauty of talent, tolerance and essence that is revealed outside the language image. In this common, we can also find some

differences. For example, Li Yingcai analyzed Si Kongtu's poems and thought that what Si Kongtu meant by "rhyme" was to show the interest of mountains and waters with a unique way of expression. Zhou Chunyu believed that the complete "rhyme" should include the readers' experience in the process of reading. Tao Litian, Qi Qiongjuan and Zhao Dekun think that "rhyme" is a kind of aesthetic feeling that the poem itself shows. Among them, Qi Qiongjuan compares Si Kongtu's views with those of his predecessors, and thinks that the "rhyme" of "the meaning beyond rhyme" mentioned by Si Kongtu inherits the "rhyme" of "charm" mentioned in Jiao Ran's "Poetic Style", and understands "rhyme" as the charm shown by the overall state character of a poem expressed in rhythm. Tao Litian synthesized Si Kongtu's other poems and thought that "rhyme" could not only refer to the charm revealed by the overall state character of the poem, but also had some examples that were specially used for the meaning of "beauty of phonology". Zhao Dekun compares the poetic flavor criterion of Si Kongtu and Zhong Rong, and thinks that although the connotation of rhyme is similar to the poetic flavor, Zhong Rong's poetic flavor mainly focuses on the linguistic level, so he chooses to use the rhyme criterion for naming.

However, the focus of Si Kongtu's discussion is not the rhyme itself, but outside the rhyme. In Si Kongtu's discussion, the outside rhyme refers to the language and characters of the poem, the phonology and the implied meaning outside the surface meaning, which can only be achieved by the reader's own imagination. Before Si Kongtu, in Jiao Ran's Poetics, it was mentioned that "high level: the charm is clear and smooth, which means a high level". The "charm" here is the whole realm of poetry. Therefore, some scholars think that the meaning beyond rhyme mentioned by Si Kongtu is influenced by Jiao Ran. They interpret the "rhyme" mentioned by Si Kongtu as charm and think that rhyme is the beauty of artistic conception that the poem itself shows. However, if this explanation is made, the meaning of outside rhyme will be beyond charm and artistic conception, which is different from Si Kongtu's own discussion. However, if rhyme is understood as phonology, the scope of discussion here is limited to the linguistic level itself. Rhyme criterion is divided into phonology and poetic flavor, but the beauty of phonology is not the focus of Si Kongtu's attention.

Other scholars believe that Si Kongtu's view is the result of development based on Zhong Rong's "taste criterion"(zi wei shuo). Taste criterion originates from Zhong Rong's "the most tasteful work", which is a discussion of five-character poems. In the following explanation, he mentioned that the characteristics of the five-character poem are "to narrate things, shape images and express feelings to the fullest". He emphasized the skills and methods of describing things [6] and paid attention to the position of "internal flavor" in the poem. However, Si Kongtu expanded the scope of "flavor" and believed that "flavor" was the key to distinguish poetry from non-poetry. He first proposed the concept of "external flavor". In Si Kongtu's article, there is no emphasis on the phonology of the poem. Therefore, Zhang Qingmin [7], Chen Shengbing [8], Ren Wei [9], Fan Baoying [10] and others named Si Kongtu's point of view as "poetic flavor". Among them, Ren Wei, Chen Bisheng and Fan Baoying pay close attention to readers' appreciation and enjoyment of the works. Ren Wei believes that poetic taste is the standard to distinguish poetry from non-poetry, and he understands "flavor" as the aesthetic enjoyment with endless aftertaste and unspeakable aesthetic pleasure produced by appreciators when reading works full of "charm". Chen Bisheng divided the flavor argued by Si Kongtu into poetic flavor and tasteful poetry, in which poetic flavor refers to an artistic charm possessed by poetry, and tasteful poetry is a method of evaluating specific poetry. Fan Baoying's understanding of the first meaning of poetic flavor is similar to Chen Bisheng. Both of them think that poetic flavor is an aesthetic feeling objectively existing in poetry. However, in his understanding of the second meaning, Fan Baoying thinks that poetic flavor is the ultimate flavor generated by the re-creation of poetic flavor through association by aesthetic recipients. However, Zhang Qingmin only pays attention to the connotation of poetry and points out that "flavor" is a kind of long-lasting aesthetic feeling in poetry, and does not discuss the role of readers in the process of producing poetic

taste. Therefore, whether it is from the perspective of historical changes, through the analysis of the development of poetic flavor, the discussion of Si Kongtu can be classified into the category of poetic flavor, or it can be summarized from the discussion of Si Kongtu alone, which may be more appropriate than poetic flavor criterion.

In addition, some scholars confused "rhyme" with "poetic flavor" and did not give an exact definition of Si Kongtu's point of view. For example, when Yang Jingchun explained the meaning of "the essence beyond flavor", although he summarized Si Kongtu's point of view with poetic flavor criterion, he only focused on the meaning and development of "rhyme" [11].

### 3. On Discrimination of Si Kongtu's "flavor criterion"

#### 3.1. The Development of "poetic flavor"

Flavor criterion is a major feature of Chinese classical poetics. The original meaning of flavor is taste. In the pre-Qin period, Confucius's "when listened to the music 'Shao' in the state of Qi, I did not know what taste the meat is in three months.", linked the taste with the beauty of music. Laozi introduced the concept of "flavor" into philosophy from the viewpoint of "Do something with an attitude of inaction, deal with things in a way that does not cause trouble, and treat blandness as a taste". In Laozi's view, tastelessness is not to deny the existence of taste, but to transcend the limited sense of feeling and desire satisfaction, enter an infinite aesthetic realm of freedom, and obtain a high degree of aesthetic pleasure [12]. Later, Ban Gu wrote in "Han Shu" that "His language really has a flavor" and used "flavor" to discuss the beauty of language. When the Wei, Jin and Southern and Northern Dynasties saw the awakening of literary autonomy, Lu Ji of the Jin Dynasty introduced the word "flavor" into literary theory for the first time and endowed it with aesthetic significance. He said in "Wen Fu" that "Although there is no law of choice, it is very difficult to make proper arrangement of language. But to be familiar with the rules and order of change is like opening a spring and kissing nature. If we miss the chance to change, we will make do with it. It is like starting with the tail and reversing the confusion. If the colors are not matched properly, the color will be cloudy and bright." This passage laid the foundation for the "poetic flavor" and marked the germination of the theory of poetic flavor [13]. Liu Xie put forward the view of "yu wei qu bao" in "Yin Xiu", arguing that the rhyme of a poem is wrapped up one layer by one, and flavors are connected, and it is difficult to peel off one layer at a time [14]. Zhong Rong of the Liang Dynasty regards "taste" as the standard of poetry evaluation in "Shi Pin", and thinks that the five-character poetry is "the most tasteful work". The "taste" here is derived from "to narrate things, shape images and express feelings to the fullest" [15]. The more "detailed" the writing, the more "taste".

Before Si Kongtu in the Tang Dynasty, there were many discussions about "flavor". Jiao Ran's "Shi Yi" says: "the key to reciting a poem is to give full play to the inner creativity. It should be based on emotion as the main expression, and then coordinate the rhyme with the meter, and increase its literary grace with beautiful words. Just like the flowers hidden under the green poplar forest, they give off fragrance from time to time. This article, there are deeper flavors." Liu Yuxi's "Reply to Liu Zihou's Book"(Da Liu Zi You Shu) also said: "I chanted and searched carefully. I felt that these two articles are concise and profound in language". Si Kongtu first discussed poetry with "flavor", which can be found in "Commenting on Poetry with Wang Jia"(Yu Wang Jia Ping Shi Shu) and "Reply to Liu Zihou's Book"(Ti Liu Liu Zhou Ji Hou). The first mentioned that Wang Wei and Wei Yingwu's poems are both interesting, pure and fresh, and they are as smooth and natural as the clear springs. The second mentioned that "Today, I saw Liu Zongyuan's poem and felt a very deep flavor." In "Talking On Poetry with Li Sheng", Si Kongtu first proposed the concepts of the essence beyond flavor and the meaning beyond rhyme. He said: "The image in front of us is written by a poet without being superficial. The artistic conception of a poem is far-reaching and cannot be contained in a

sentence. Only in this way can we talk about the meaning beyond rhyme”, “Now the poems of the same period can't compare with yours. If we still strive for perfection, we will know what the essence beyond flavor is”.

### 3.2. The Meaning of “flavor”

Si Kongtu's "flavor criterion" cannot be produced without the influence of predecessors. Liu Yuxi and Wang Changling's explanation of "flavor" mainly analyzed a kind of aesthetic feeling existing in the poem itself, while Jiao Ran noticed that the flavor of the poem can only be obtained through the process of distinguishing and tasting. Si Kongtu's flavor criterion has a great development with the predecessors, and its meaning needs to be returned to the original. Si Kongtu has two articles directly related to poetic flavor, one is "Talking On Poetry with Li Sheng" and the other is "Commenting on Poetry with Wang Jia". In my opinion, the "flavor" put forward by Si Kongtu contains two meanings: internal flavor and external flavor. Internal flavor originates from the author's choice and arrangement of language and characters, including the overall image formed by language, phonology, etc. in poetry. In "Talking On Poetry with Li Sheng", Si Kongtu wrote: "The Yangtze River and the south of Wuling are mostly sour and salty people. As for vinegar, it is not without acid, but only with acid. As for salt, it is not salty but salty. People in the Central Plains no longer use them for seasoning and table meals because they know that they lack mellow taste except for sour and salty taste. Those people in the south of the Five Ridges are accustomed to that kind of taste without distinguishing beauty from beauty, of course." Si Kongtu thinks that the taste of vinegar and salt is thin and superficial, lacking in mellowness. Therefore, people who are accustomed to the salty and sour south of the Five Ridges cannot distinguish beauty from non-beauty. He compared the inherent beauty of the poem itself to the salty and sour taste of food, which is the feeling that most people can obtain through reading. It does not need to be further understood and created by the readers, and there is no distinction between good and bad.

External flavor is the focus of Si Kongtu's discussion. Si Kongtu thinks that this kind of external flavor exists outside the language, and the reader constructs an imaginary realm based on his own experience. In "Talking On Poetry with Li Sheng", Si Kongtu wrote: "the "six essences" included in the poem include satire, cadence, reserve and elegance. However, if one writes directly what one has in mind, one can naturally develop one's own characteristics with one's own "personality". Taking poetry as an example, Si Kongtu thinks that satire, cadence, reserve, elegance and other styles belong to the category of internal flavor and are the realm that most people can reach. However, what is hidden beyond the "six essences" and makes poetry have the meaning of "case in it" is the external flavor. Si Kongtu believed that the realization of this external flavor must first be the combination of formal beauty and content beauty, emphasizing the implication in the overall realm and character of the poem. In the following discussion, he wrote: "Wang Wei's and Wei Yingwu's poems are light, profound, exquisite and meticulous. Their works are unique. Can't they be compared with those with elegant and forceful styles? Jia Dao's works do have aphorism, but as far as the whole article is concerned, the content is rather lacking lustre." In "Commenting on Poetry with Wang Jia", Si Kongtu wrote: "Wang Wei and Wei Yingwu's poems are pure and fresh, with clear springs flowing smoothly and naturally. More than a dozen gifted scholars in the Dali period were followed. Yuan Zhen and Bai Juyi exerted great strength but lacked charm, just like the rich businessmen in the city". He evaluated Wang Wei's and Wei Yingwu's poems as elegant, remote, exquisite and meticulous. Yuan Zhen and Bai Juyi exert strong force but lack spirit and rhyme; However, Jia Dao's works do contain sentences with profound meaning, but the content is vague. This is all an evaluation of the overall style of the work. In Si Kongtu's view, external flavor is the key to distinguish the good from the bad of a work, and it is the part that requires the reader to actively distinguish the experience in the reading process.

Si Kongtu also put forward his own opinions on how to create the external flavor of poetry. In "Commenting on Poetry with Wang Jia", Si Kongtu proposed that the works advocated by the poets should achieve "the fusion of thought, emotion and scene". In this article, Si Kongtu limits the scope of discussion to poetry, especially five-character poetry and seven-character poetry, and requires the author to integrate thoughts, feelings and scenes. In "Talking On Poetry with Li Sheng", Si Kongtu also points out the characteristics of good images. He wrote: "the image is real, but not superficial, the artistic conception is profound, but the implication is inexhaustible, then we can talk about the aftertaste beyond the words". He proposed that the poetic imagery should be both concrete and vivid, and implicit and rich, leaving the reader with room for imagination, that is, the poetic meaning with multi-directional, multi-meaning, and connotative features [16], so as to discuss the aftertaste beyond the words.

In addition, Si Kongtu also attaches importance to the natural expression of emotion. In "Talking On Poetry with Li Sheng", he wrote: "If you write directly what you have learned in your heart, you will naturally be able to learn from it with your "personality."

Point". He believed that if you write what you want, you will naturally be able to create your own characteristics with a special style. In "Reply to Liu Zihou's Book", he also mentioned this special style and regarded it as the expression of the poet's natural nature. Si Kongtu thinks that he is famous for his lack of literature and humanity, or for his poems. If he has poems and essays, his poems and essays must have their own characteristics and some common characteristics [17]. In Si Kongtu's view, the author can create works with excellent external flavor only by creating images that can make readers associate further and combining the images with his own thoughts and feelings.

#### 4. The Influence of "flavor criterion"

The unprecedented prosperity of poetry creation in the Tang Dynasty promoted the great development of poetry theory. Si Kongtu, on the basis of summing up the predecessors' theories about "flavor", put forward the viewpoint of "the essence beyond flavor", pointing out that, to obtain the flavor beyond taste, one needs to achieve the poetic image of "the image of the poem is just around the corner, but the artistic conception is extremely profound". It must have both form and spirit and the image of the poem is just around the corner, but the artistic conception is extremely profound. Under the influence of Si Kongtu, Su Shi put forward the viewpoint of "utmost flavor" in his book "After reading Huang Zisi's poems". He said: "Si Kongtu lived in a time of war and turmoil at the end of the Tang Dynasty. His poems were elegant and showed the tradition of ruling the world. He commented on the poems and said: "plum is only sour, salt is only salty, but their diet cannot be without salt and plum. Their beauty often exists outside of salty and sourness." He highly praised Si Kongtu's external flavor. Compared with Si Kongtu, Su Shi further explained the poetic flavor. He commented "Wei Yingwu's and Liu Zongyuan's poems are simple and unsophisticated, with meticulous wording and rich content. They also reflect the strong poetic flavor in the simple and natural artistic style." The highest aesthetic ideal was "simple and unsophisticated", and the insipid nature outside was inherently rich and elegant [18]. Su Shi said: "the formation of poetic aesthetics has a unique evolution law, accompanied by a journey from shallow to deep, and finally attributed to nature". In his view, the so-called bland is not completely bland, but after a difficult journey, gorgeous to achieve the state [19].

Scholars in the Jin and Yuan dynasties inherited the Song scholars' understanding of poetic flavor. Jie Xisi enumerated and explained "flavor". The "Authentic Poem Method"(Shi Fa Zheng Zong) says: "the fourth focus on poetry flavor. Si Kongtu taught people to learn poetry by recognizing the flavor. Public Poe tries to cite famous sayings, such as 'Green trees make the village dark', 'Chess sounds make the courtyard idle', 'Flowers shade the sky at noon' and so on. On the basis of his predecessors' theories, he proposed that poetry creation should "have fewer words and more meanings, and see more flavor". He believed that the vagueness and obscurity brought by fewer words can enrich the



meaning of poetry and create artistic conception outside the world of things. In addition, he also reiterated that poetry creation should have "utmost flavor" and take insipid as the utmost good taste, showing the characteristics of blending Tang and Song dynasties [20].

## 5. A Comparative Study of Chinese Poetics and Response-inviting Structure

In expounding "the essence beyond flavor", Si Kongtu proposed the proposition of "the image of the poem is just around the corner, but the artistic conception is extremely profound". He asked the poet to make the thoughts and feelings deeply hidden in the scenery while picturing the objective images. This kind of state needs to touch the imagination of readers, so that they can use their own life experience and aesthetic ideal to understand and appreciate the ideological content embodied in artistic conception, and get enlightenment and taste in association and imagination.

This view involves the contradiction between words and meaning. The first person to realize that words do not mean everything is Laozi's and Zhuangzi's philosophy. They put forward that "Words are used to convey ideas. Once you understand the meaning, you forget the words." However, at that time, language was only regarded as a tool to express infinite meaning. By the time of Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, Lu Ji had put forward the contradiction of "the human mind or the structure of the article cannot fully reflect the situation of things, and the language or diction of the article cannot fully express the inner thoughts" in his "Wen Fu". Liu Xie said in "Wen Xin Diao Long" that "'Yin' is skillful with rich content and 'Xiu' is exquisite with excellence and originality". The so-called "Xiu" is for the description of objective objects. "Yin" refers to the writer's affection in literary activities. It is hidden and needs to be explored and developed. This is closer to the stratification of "inside rhyme" and "outside rhyme". When he arrived at Zhong Rong, he said in "Shi Pin" that "There is an end to the words, but not to their message". However, this limitation is not explained. Si Kongtu's plan clearly points out that since there is such a limitation, it is better to simply express one's feelings beyond the language and words, and pursue the "the meaning beyond rhyme" of the work through a series of artistic techniques such as implication, symbol and suggestion [21].

Iser believes that the "meaning gap and uncertainty" is the link between the author and the reader, which can give full play to the active role of the reader, fill up the various meaning gaps in the text and give it a stable meaning. It is precisely "the uncertainty and the lack of meaning of a work that motivate the reader to find the meaning of the work and thus give him the right to participate in the composition of the meaning of the work", which constitute the structural mechanism of the work, i.e. the response-inviting structure of the literary text [22]. Its main aesthetic significance lies in its strong appeal, which urges aesthetic recipients to fill in the blank of this article's meaning with certainty in the process of reading, thus completing the unfinished work [23].

From the perspective of literary acceptance, poetic flavor criterion and the response-inviting structure have certain similarities, and both realize the role of the reader's recreation in the process of text acceptance. Iser believes that the blank is a driving force, and the blank of the text structure becomes the driving force of the interaction between the work and the reader, which stimulates the reader to participate more actively in the re-creation of the literary text. Poetic flavor criterion regards literary works as a kind of structure in which the exterior and the interior are connected and the reality and the reality coexist. This structure "ferments" in the reader's reading of the works so as to obtain aesthetic objects and produce aesthetic experience. Only when readers fill these gaps with creative imagination in aesthetic reading can literary works be freed from the shell of language symbols and obtain something outside of the images [24].

However, Chinese and western literary theories, after all, are rooted in different literary soil and theoretical traditions, and their implications and specific references are also quite different. The background of the response-inviting structure is the establishment of the concept of pure literature in the contemporary era, while Chinese literature, for a long historical period, has never been pure

literature, and literature is difficult to separate from philosophy and history. Therefore, response-inviting structure is more inclined to expatiate on the narrative literature, while poetic flavor criterion is the requirement for the five-and seven-character poems written by the Chinese in the Tang and Song dynasties. In addition, the expression in Chinese classical poetics is not all rational, but a combination of sensibility and rationality, focusing on the perception of experience [25]. Poetic flavor criterion uses concrete images and images to think, and has a set of concepts that do not separate from concrete images, forming its own way of discourse. Analogical reasoning is often used to express the theory in the form of aesthetic experience [26]. Response-inviting structure has a clear connotation and a clear definition of its functions and elements, which is a purely rational analysis.

In addition, the response-inviting structure is a platform for the interaction and communication between readers and the text, emphasizing that the generation of the meaning of the text lies in the readers filling in the blank of the text [27] and putting the reader's acceptance process in a more important position. Poetic flavor criterion is an elaboration of each process of the production of a work. It explains the poetic flavor from the perspectives of the author's creation and the reader's appreciation. At the same time, Iser pays too much attention to the interaction between the reader, the text and the reading relationship, and analyses the text from the reading process [28], but ignores how such a gap arises. Si Kongtu paid attention to the readers' acceptance activities while taking into account the creation of poetic flavor. Specifically, Si Kongtu thinks that a good poetic flavor can only be produced by combining the author's naturally revealed emotions with concrete and meaningful images, and only "the fusion of thought, emotion and scene" and "the fusion of meaning and scene" can produce "something else outside of the images".

However, the response-inviting structure also has limitations. When talking about specific works, Iser pays more attention to the plot, characters, background and other specific elements of the work [29], dividing the whole work into parts. However, literary and artistic works pay more attention to the sense that the whole gives people. The poetic flavor criterion puts forward "the combination of formal beauty and content beauty" and emphasizes the meaning that the whole poem contains, and uses this flavor to comment on the content, form, technique, style and appreciation of poetic creation [30]. In addition, in the process of the development of poetic flavor criterion, Jiexi and others argued the poetic flavor from the perspective of scene and artistic conception creation, dropping the connotation of the poetic flavor into the "artistic conception", further deepening the connotation of the poetic flavor and having extremely rich aesthetic connotation [31]. Therefore, when using the poetic flavor criterion or the response-inviting structure to analyze a work, one must first distinguish the applicable scope of the two. Si Kongtu's poetic flavor criterion limits the scope of discussion to five-character poems and seven-character poems. Today, people's ancient poetry creation can also be evaluated by poetic flavor criterion. The response-inviting structure is more inclined to the analysis of narrative literature. Secondly, the response-inviting structure pays attention to the specific elements of the work while poetic flavor criterion focuses on grasping the stylistic features of poetry from the perspective of the whole.

Poetic flavor criterion combines taste and literature, transcends single feeling and fully embodies the characteristics of Chinese poetic creation and theory. China's developed food culture is the cultural foundation for the formation of the theory of poetic flavor. The ancient Chinese people's unique intuitive and perceptive thinking is the subjective reason for the formation of the poetic flavor criterion. The characteristics of the Wei, Jin and Southern and Northern Dynasties are the historical turning point for the formation of the theory of poetic flavor [32]. Taking the poetic flavor criterion as the origin, we can construct our own theoretical system, explore different analytical methods from western literary theories, and evaluate the poetic works more appropriately with the theory rooted in the native land, which has profound historical and cultural significance and practical reference significance.

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