

A Study of the Plant Metaphors in *Book of Poetry*

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Metaphor, as a systematic expression of human thinking, action and thought, is not only a form of language expression, but also a universal cognitive mode of human beings. *Book of Poetry*, containing a large number of metaphors, is a classical work of human civilization. By studying the metaphors in *Book of Poetry*, the thinking process of the people in the pre-Qin Dynasty can be fully understood. Based on the conceptual metaphor theory of Lakoff and Johnson, taking *Book of Poetry* as the corpus, this paper aims to explore the plant metaphors in the poetry. According to the different target domain, in this paper, the plant metaphors in *Book of Poetry* are classified into metaphors for virtue, for beautiful things, for blessing and for feeling, and some corresponding examples are used to elaborate them. This study is of great significance to the appreciation and dissemination of Chinese classical poetry. At the same time, by studying classical Chinese cultural works, the cross-language and cross-cultural characteristics of conceptual metaphor theory are proved.

Keywords: *Book of Poetry*, plant, conceptual metaphor

Introduction

Metaphor is ubiquitous in life. In addition to the rhetorical function, it is the way we perceive and understand the world based on our own experience (Lakoff & Johnson 2003, p. 5). Plants are closely related with human life. Plant metaphor is a tool for us to understand and recognize the world by using plants on the basis of our experience of the objective world. *Book of Poetry*, the first collection of poetry in the history of China, also known as *Poems* or *300 Poems*, is regarded as the source of Chinese culture. It contains all kinds of plants and has a fresh breath of life. There are 305 poems in total in *Book of Poetry*. Those poems can be divided into three categories: Wind (《风》), Festal Odes (《雅》) and Chung (《颂》). Of these 305 poems, 153 poems are related with plants, which account for half of the total number. Thus, it can be seen that *Book of Poetry* contains a large number of plant images, and implies rich cultural connotation. The analysis of plant metaphor in *Book of Poetry* can help us better understand the ancient ancestors' life practice, customs, culture, aesthetics, marriage and love, values and so on. The studies on *Book of Poetry* have been carried out for several centuries both at home and abroad. However, most of the previous studies interpret it from the perspectives of literature, rhetoric, translation and culture. Few of the researches have been done from the view of cognitive point. This paper aims to appreciate the plant metaphors in the *Book of Poetry* under the illumination of Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory

In traditional researches, metaphor was simply taken as a linguistic phenomenon. By the late 1970s, scholars in European and American countries, especially American scholars, began to conduct extensive and in-depth researches on metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson published the book *Metaphors We Live By*, in which the concept of “conceptual metaphor theory” is proposed for the first time. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that metaphors are everywhere, not only in our language, but also in our thoughts and behavior. Fundamentally speaking, the conceptual system governing human thinking and action is metaphorical.

Definition of Metaphor

“Metaphor” derives from the Greek word “*metaphora*”, which refers to the meaning transferred from one thing to another. Aristotle (1954) defines metaphor as “metaphor is to use the name of another thing to one thing.” According to Lakoff & Johnson, “the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 5). It can be seen that metaphor is not only a linguistic phenomenon, but more of a cognitive phenomenon. Therefore, in the cognitive linguistic view, metaphor can be defined as “understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain” (Kovecses, 2002, p. 25). In this view, a metaphor is composed of two domains, the source domain and the target domain. The conceptual domain from which we draw metaphorical expressions to understand another conceptual domain is called source domain. The target domain is the domain that we try to understand through the source domain. The source domain refers to a range of literal properties, entities, relationships, and processes. The most common source domains are concrete, visible and familiar, while the most common targets are abstract, invisible and unfamiliar concepts (Kovecses, 2002, p. 25). Studies has found that conceptual metaphors go from concrete to abstract domains. Therefore, the metaphors can be used to understand some abstract and difficult concepts.

Classification of Metaphor

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) classify metaphors into three categories: orientational metaphor, ontological metaphor and structural metaphor. Orientational metaphor, largely based on the concept of space, refers to the type of conceptual metaphor constructed by means of a basic set of orientations. For example, some specific spatial concepts, such as “up and down”, “before and behind”, “left and right”, “deep and shallow”, “in and out”, “center and peripheral” and so on, are often mapped to some abstract concepts, such as “emotion, psychological state, physical condition, quantity, and social status”. Thus, words expressing the abstract concept with the concept of orientation are produced. In the daily life, the following expressions are very common: “I am feeling up/down.” “She is rather high/low these days.” Ontological metaphor refers to “the ways of viewing events, activities, emotions, ideas, etc., as entities and substances” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 26). To better recognize and understand the experience, people make corresponding material description of their experience by using the entities and substances. In life, people often project the abstract concepts in language domains, such as psychological cognition, perception, or emotion, onto specific material domains through imagination. For example, in some metaphors, the heart is viewed as a fragile object, so the following expressions appear: “She fell apart.” “I was very emotionally fragile at that time.” These examples are all metaphorical of the mind with fragile objects. Structural metaphors refer that one concept is metaphorically

structured in terms of another. Those two concepts are overlapping with each other, and the words which are used to talk about one concept are also used to talk about another concept. This kind of metaphors can conceptualize a rational argument through something that people can comprehend more easily. This comprehension occurs through conceptual mapping between the two concepts. For example, the word “spend” which was first used to talk about “money”, was later used to talk about time, energy, effort, force, fuel, etc.

Plant Metaphors in *Book of Poetry*

Plants are the major part of nature. Therefore, people will involuntarily tend to use a lot of plant metaphors to express their aesthetic, blessing, missing, worship, appreciation, hate and other feelings. Among all the plants mentioned in the *Book of Poetry*, mulberry, millet and jujube are the most common, followed by wheat, soybean, rice, millet, reed, etc. It is not difficult to find that the plants that appeared more often were either the main grain, vegetables and fruits at that time, or the plants used for textile and dyeing at that time, or the important wood and the common plants in northern China at that time. In the *Book of Poetry*, by using metaphors, these plant images are used to express some abstract strange concepts and special emotions. In this part, according to the meaning the plant metaphors conveyed in the *Book of Poetry*, the plant metaphors are divided into metaphors for virtue, metaphors for beautiful things, metaphors for blessing and metaphors for feeling. The following content will discuss them in detail from these four aspects.

Plant Metaphors for Virtue

Many poems in the *Book of Poetry* use plants as metaphors for human morality. Pine, bamboo and Wutong are the most commonly used plant metaphors for noble character in the *Book of Poetry*. They eventually become the symbol of “virtue” in literary works, and integrated into people’s general understanding of the world.

In traditional Chinese culture, bamboo, a hollow and straight plant with joints, is mostly praised by the ancients, and has become the representative of gentleman’s virtue, such as humility, integrity, honesty and so on. In the *Book of Poetry*, bamboo already has the bearing of a gentleman, and is often used to express the virtues of a gentleman. *Duke Wu of Wei* (《卫风·淇奥》) is a typical example. This poem compares the lush and gracious green bamboos on the recess of Qi beaches of Wei to the virtue of Duke Wu. Green bamboo is the source domain, and the virtue of Wu Gong is the target domain. Bamboo is used to explain the abstract concept of virtue. The vigorous and steady upward characteristics of bamboo symbolize the spiritual virtue of Wu Gong’s active efforts and enterprising. The upright and upward characteristics of bamboo represent the integrity and honesty of Wu Gong. The growth process of bamboo, from the germination to the large areas of bamboos, and then to the bamboos growing into a dense jungle, is the same as the development process of Wu Gong’s moral knowledge, implying that Wu Gong’s virtue is also gradually developing, improving and perfecting. Through the use of metaphor, Wu Gong’s image is vividly displayed in front of readers.

Plant Metaphors for Beautiful Things

Flowers and grass are easy to be associated with beautiful things because of their beautiful appearance. Therefore, a large number of poems in the *Book of Poetry* use flowers and grass to metaphor women’s beauty, such as the lines “桃之夭夭，灼灼其华” in *The Newly-Wed*. In the poem, the beauty of peach flowers is used

to symbolize the bride's beautiful appearance. Peach flower is the source domain, and the beauty of the bride is the target domain. Peach blossoms in spring, which is the most beautiful season of the year. The peach blossoming in spring also represents the bride's youth and beauty. The fragrance of peach flowers implies the charm of young brides. In addition, the soft and light peach flowers give people a feeling of elegance and delicacy. It can be seen that peach flowers are closely related to the beauty of women.

The lines in another poem, *The Princess' Wedding* (《召南·何彼禕矣》), use the beautiful plum flowers and peach flowers to highly praise the beauty of the bride and the luxurious vehicle and clothes. Spring flowers not only predict the happiness of marriage, but also bring readers rich imagination. The beautiful flowers swaying in spring remind people of the charming temperament and beautiful appearance of the young bride. Inspired by the *Book of Poetry*, even now people always use beautiful peach flowers and plum flowers to describe the beautiful appearance of young women.

Plant Metaphors for Blessing

When the ancestors saw the vines of creeper continuously extending, climbing and attaching to the shrubs and trees, they associated these images with the relationship between husband and wife depending on each other and loving each other. Harmonious relationship between husband and wife will inevitably bring about family harmony and prosperity. The continuity of creepers symbolizes the continuous family wealth and happiness. Therefore, creeper in the *Book of Poetry* implies the meaning of family prosperity and fortune. In the poem, *Married Happiness* (《周南·樛木》), the poet used creeper as a metaphor for blessing of fortune and happiness. The poem goes like that "Up crooked southern trees are climbing creeper's vines. On lords whom their wives please, quite happiness shines" (Xu, 2006, p. 5). This is a poem expressing blessing. It may be to celebrate the new marriage, the arrival of children, or other friendly and happy scenes. The poet takes creepers winding around a tall wood as a metaphor for the gentleman who will get an endless blessing.

From the above analysis, it can be seen that creeper is generally regarded as the embodiment of blessing. In addition, in Chinese traditional culture, gourd symbolizes having many children and grandchildren, and happiness and wealth.

The Chinese ancients were extremely eager to have many children and grandchildren to make the family prosperous forever. Therefore, in the *Book of Poetry*, poets usually used some plants as metaphors for the meaning of newborn, prosperous and vigorous reproductive ability. "Gourd" is one of them. In addition, gourds are relatively lush and seedy, so ancestors often used "gourd" as a metaphor for having many children and grandchildren and prosperity. In the *Major Festal Odes*, the poet wrote "瓜瓞绵绵", which means a family developed prosperously like spreading melon vines. In this poem, the melon vines refer to the vines of gourd. Melon vines is the source domain, and the continuous descendants are the target domain. The line uses the vines of gourd as a metaphor to imply the meaning that under the leadership of Gu Gong Father Dan, the people of Zhou dynasty prospered, and the country was prosperous and never declined.

Plant Metaphors for Feeling

Some plants make people feel happy, while some plants make people think of someone. The plants, such as flowers and grass, have become the carrier of people's complex mood. By using a kind of plant as a metaphor, many poems in the *Book of Poetry* have expressed various feeling, such as the soldiers' yearning and

missing for their families, the missing of young men and women in love, and the men's or women's lament for their dead wife or husband.

In Chinese, the pronunciation of willow (柳) is similar to the word “留” meaning staying at somewhere. Therefore, willow is usually used as a metaphor for reluctantly parting. In the *Minor Festival Odes: A Homesick Warrior*, the poet wrote “When I left here, Willows shed tear” (Xu, 2006, p. 92). In the poem, the soldier was going to leave home for war. At this time, the willows were floating. The willows' reluctant attitude and the soldier's reluctance to leave their home are cleverly integrated. From the attitude of willows, the soldier's pain of being far away from home and uncertain of life and death arises spontaneously. In this metaphor, willow is the source domain, and the soldier's yearning for home and family is the target domain.

The poem *One Day When I See Her Not* (《王风·采葛》) can be regarded as a classic representative poem of expressing the yearning for lovers in the *Book of Poetry*. The poem uses three plants, “vine”, “reed” and “herb” to express the man's infinite missing for his sweetheart. Gathering vine is for weaving, which means that his sweetheart is good at needlework; gathering reed is for sacrifice, implying that the girl he loves can handle the big and small things of sacrifice at home; herb is used to cure diseases, which means that the girl knew medical skills. There is no word of “love” in the whole poem, and there is no word about missing. It just used “vine”, “reed” and “herb” to show that the girl he loves is a good wife, which indirectly strengthens the man's yearning for his sweetheart.

General Features of Plant Metaphors in *Book of Poetry*

In the *Book of Poetry*, there are some similarities between the source domain and the target domain of the plant metaphors. Shu Dingfang (2000) pointed out that there are basically two kinds of similarities of the metaphors, one is “physical similarity”, the other is “psychological similarity”. This part will discuss the general features of the plant metaphors in *Book of Poetry* from the perspective of the similarities between the source domain and the target domain.

Physical similarity refers to the similarity between the source domain and the target domain in function, shape, color or appearance. For example, when it comes to flowers, people will immediately think of their gorgeous colors, graceful and pleasant fragrance. All of these shapes, colors, and exterior features will make people associate them with beauty. Most plant metaphors in the *Book of Poetry* are constructed by using some physical characteristics, such as the growing place, taste, shape, color, name, and different states of the growing process of plants. Many poems about flowers written in the *Book of Poetry* are metaphors for women's beautiful appearance, such as reed, peach blossom, Chinese Usnea, hibiscus, sunflower, etc. Peach blossoms in *The Newly-Wed* are flaming red, which are similar to the characteristics of young girls' delicate skin. Therefore, in this metaphor, the source domain, the beauty of the peach blossom, and the target domain, the bride, have physical similarities, that is, they both have very beautiful appearances and elegant temperament, and their beauty can bring a pleasant feeling to the people around, and it will make people have a strong feeling of love.

There are also a few plant metaphors in the *Book of Poetry* constructed through psychological similarity. The psychological similarity means that there is no objective similarity between the source domain and the target domain. The similarities between the two things are built through their own culture, customs, aesthetics and other aspects of cognition. Some poems in the *Book of Poetry* use the plant worship psychology and the

symbolic meaning of witchcraft to construct plant metaphors, which are used to express the rich feelings of the inner world of the pickers, and convey their joys and sorrows. These emotional expressions were produced under the special conceptual background at that time, reflecting the special folk customs and conceptual consciousness of the era of the *Book of Poetry*.

Conclusion

As the first collection of poems in China, the *Book of Poetry* has always attracted much attention. The previous studies on the *Book of Poetry* were mostly from the perspectives of literature, rhetoric, translation and culture. This paper attempts to understand and appreciate the *Book of Poetry* under the guidance of the theory of conceptual metaphor. Concept metaphor is to use the concrete, tangible, familiar, and simple things in the source domain to understand the abstract, invisible, strange, and complex things in the target domain. Since plants and people have an inseparable relationship, people will involuntarily tend to use a large number of plant metaphors to express their love, blessing, missing, worship, appreciation, hatred and other aspects of the emotion. The metaphors in the *Book of Poetry* has exerted a great influence on the thought, culture, cognition and other aspects of later generations. This cognitive study of the *Book of Poetry* is only the tip of the iceberg. So far, the research on the function of metaphors in the *Book of Poetry* has not attracted enough attention. It is hoped that more scholars can discuss the metaphors in the *Book of Poetry* deeply.

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