Evaluation of Plant Metaphors in *A Dream of Red Mansions*

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Abstract
This work attempts to evaluate the plant metaphors used in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, aiming at: 1) Identifying the metaphorical expressions associated with plant used in the book; 2) finding out the correlation between plant metaphors and their evaluation; 3) exploring the experiential bases of the operational model of abstract reason in Chinese embodied in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, achieved via metaphor mapping the concrete concept – PLANT onto the abstract concept? How is it achieved? The results indicate that the cognitive approach to metaphor postulates that all conventional conceptual metaphors are grounded in our bodily and physical experience. Once a metaphorical mapping is set up, it will impose its structure on real life through the creation of new correspondences in experience. If the metaphor is the message, the conceptual metaphor provides a method of representation through which we may identify its salient features. As a result, the evaluation of the plant metaphors can contribute significantly to our understanding of the plant metaphors within Chinese culture.

Key words: Plant metaphors; Cognitive analysis; Experiential grounding

INTRODUCTION
*A Dream of Red Mansions*, the great classical Chinese novel written in the mid-eighteenth century, has been popular in China throughout the long history. As one of the four great Chinese classical novels, it is also a gem in the world cultural treasure house. Few other Chinese novels have been appreciated and discussed by so many people for such a long time. This fact proves the greatness of the novel and the unique position it holds in the long history of Chinese literature. The examples are all selected from the Chinese novel of *A Dream of Red Mansions* written by Cao Xueqin and Gao E. The translations are all from *A Dream of Red Mansions* translated by Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang in English and published by Foreign Languages Press in 1978.

According to Lakoff, every experience takes place within a vast background of cultural presuppositions. Cultural assumptions, values and attitudes are not a conceptual overlay, which we may or may not place upon experience as we choose. Therefore, Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 57) observe, “It would be more correct to say that all experience is cultural through and through, that we experience our ‘world’ in such a way that our culture is already present in the very experience itself”. This paper explores the partial nature and the experiential basis of metaphor for the discussion of the cultural universality and variation.

1. THE PRIMACY OF PLANT METAPHORS AND THEIR INDISPENSABLE ROLES IN A DREAM OF RED MANSIONS

Plant metaphors have the domain of PLANTS as their source domain. They map the image-schematic structure of the PLANTS domain onto abstract domains, thus enable us to talk about and think of those domains in plant terms. In the process of collecting materials, we find that only a little research has been done on plant metaphors...
from the cognitive perspective. A large number of plant metaphors exist in Chinese language, but little research has been done from this aspect. The cognitive linguistic view maintains that conceptual metaphors are based on a variety of human experiences, including correlations in experience, various kinds of nonobjective similarities, biological and cultural roots shared by the two concepts, and possibly others.

Given that agriculture was an established source of livelihood in the East it is not surprising that it forms one of the most productive metaphor source domains in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. This gives justification for focusing on plant metaphors, rather than any other types of metaphors in this research.

Metaphors that highlight the isomorphism between spiritual and natural experience can be accounted by two conceptual keys: SPIRITUAL IS NATURAL and HUMANS ARE PLANTS.

HUMANS ARE PLANTS has been identified in other studies of metaphor (Goatly, 1997, p. 43) and is based on transfer from the inanimate domain of plants to the animate one of people. Human beings can be understood in terms of plant. As can be seen from the data analysis, there are such conceptual metaphors as PEOPLE ARE TREES, PEOPLE ARE FLOWERS, and PEOPLE ARE BUDS. The direction of these conceptual metaphors goes from a higher source to a lower source. The examples below are some typical metaphors:

【第五十一回】我和你们一比，我就如那野坟圈子 里面的几十年的一棵老杨树，你们就如秋天尝儿进我的那才开的白海棠，连我都禁不起的药，你们如何禁得起。

(Chapter 51: When I compare myself with your girls, I’m like a big poplar scores of years old in the graveyard, while you’re like that white begonia in bud with Chia Yun gave me last autumn – how can you take medicines too while you’re like that white begonia in bud with Chia Yun gave me last autumn – how can you take medicines too?)

Different plants need different environment conditions. Poplar is a kind of plant with strong vitality, a fast-growing deciduous tree. Meanwhile white begonia is a tender tropical or subtropical plant that requires precise circumstance and temperature. The young girls living in “大观园” (Grand View Garden) are chaste and innocent who just resemble the quiet and elegant white begonia. Paoyu names himself “a big poplar” for being a man much stronger than the girls.

【第六十五回】三姑娘的浑名是“玫瑰花”。

(Chapter 65: The third young lady has the nickname Rose.)

Rose is a plant having prickly stems, pinnately compound leaves, and variously colored, often fragrant flowers. Everyone loves pretty and fragrant rose except its dense and erect thorns. The third young lady Tan-ch’un’s high and upright; efficient and able character just matches the nickname “Rose”.

【第七十一回】谁知一个人芽儿也没有。

(Chapter 71: But to my surprise there was no one at all.)

These examples show that HUMANS ARE PLANTS is a very pervasive metaphor in *A Dream of Red Mansions*; it is classified as a conceptual key because it accounts for a group of related conceptual metaphors such as PEOPLE ARE TREES, PEOPLE ARE FLOWERS, PEOPLE ARE FRUIT, and SPIRITUAL GUIDING IS NUTURING etc. They are summarized, with the example, in Table 1.

The isomorphism – or structural equivalence – between the natural and the spiritual domains applies to both entities (as in nominal forms) and behavior (as in verbal forms).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conceptual key</th>
<th>Conceptual metaphors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humans Are Plants/</td>
<td>People are flowers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spiritual Is Natural</td>
<td>People are trees</td>
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<td></td>
<td>People are fruit</td>
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<td>Spiritual guiding is nuturing</td>
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Another group of metaphors that are commonly found in the parables in *A Dream of Red Mansions* are based on knowledge of organic process in terms of its stages and the relationship between environmental factors and natural outcomes. The parables can be viewed as extended metaphors in which Lakoff’s invariance principle operates. Metaphorical mappings preserve the cognitive topology (that is, the image-schema structure) of the source domain, in a way consistent with the inherent structure of the target domain. For example, there is image based knowledge that the conditions that encourage natural growth are also those that encourage spiritual growth. We can see this in an excerpt from the parable of the Grand View Garden.

At first sight, it is only a magnificent garden where talent pretty young girls live. Actually, how similar it is to that little graveyard Taiyu buries drop blossoms! It is in the Grand View Garden that finally all the beauty’s fate is just as the flowers fading and falling. It overlaps the blossom graveyard in decadent desperation and inside sadness. More extensively speaking, it could be regarded as the “Tai Xu Huan Jing” in man’s world because both are extremely prosperous and grand. Meanwhile, they not only share the same beautiful nature scenery but also correspond in the story narration for nearly all the beauties’ fate in Grand View Garden has already revealed early in “the Register of Twelve Beauties of Jinling” and twelve songs called “A Dream of Red Mansions” which are seen and listened to by Paoyu in “Tai Xu Huan Jing”.

Pao-chai – peony – beauty surprising all flowers –
Though heartless she has charm.

Tan-chun – apricot-blossom – fairy flower from paradise – A red apricot by the sun grows in the clouds.

Li Wan – old plum-tree – cold beauty in frosty dawn – Content to stay by the bamboo fence and thatched hut.

Hsiang-ling – two flowers on one stem – double beauty linked with good fortune – Double flowers bloom on a single stem.

Hsiang-yun – crab-apple-blossom – deep in a fragrant prototype model for a spiritual cycle of birth, development, enlightenment, death and rebirth. The weeping willow acts as a symbol of a spiritual cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

Sheh-yueh – rose – flower of final splendour – When the rose blooms, spring flowers fade.

Hsiang-ling – two flowers on one stem – double beauty linked with good fortune – Double flowers bloom on a single stem.

Tai-yu – hibiscus flower – quiet and sad in win and dew – Blame not the east wind but yourself.

Hsien-yun – crab-apple-blossom – deep in a fragrant prototype model for a spiritual cycle of birth, development, enlightenment, death and rebirth. The weeping willow acts as a symbol of a spiritual cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

Sheh-yueh – rose – flower of final splendour – When the rose blooms, spring flowers fade.

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We should recall that the difference between a successful and a disastrous harvest for the agricultural people that inhabited the region of the East would have been the difference between prosperity and material comfort on the one hand and poverty and famine on the other. It is not, then, surprising that the domain of metaphor is a powerful rhetorical role in providing an evaluation; it is very rare for any of the plant metaphors to convey a very important covert evaluation of positive or negative forms of behavior. We may infer from this a further conceptual metaphor that accounts for this pattern of evaluation: HUMANS ARE FLOWERS. This may remind us of metaphors related to flowers such as peach blossom that were used to convey the charming and lovely girl in the data. The rhetorical role of evaluation is best described here as appraisal since it conveys both positive and negative forms of behavior.
Evaluation of Plant Metaphors in *A Dream of Red Mansions*

Plants serve as a very potent source for evaluation in the Chinese culture. In some cases the particular types of plant are important in determining the nature of an evaluation. Different types of plant can be chosen to convey either positive or negative evaluations.

### 2.1 Positive Evaluation

I will first illustrate some positive evaluation that is conveyed by valued plants. In the following examples words in bold show the plant metaphor and italicized words communicate a positive judgment.

【红楼梦】【第六十八回】俏丽若三春之桃，清洁若九秋之菊。

(qiao li ruo san chun zhi tao, qing jie ruo jiu qiu zhi ju.)

(Chapter 68: She was pretty as peach-blossom in spring, simple and austere as chrysanthemums in autumn.)

【红楼梦】【第三回】闲静时如姣花照水，行动处似弱柳扶风。

(xian jing shi ru jiao hua zhao shui, xing dong chu si ruo liu fu feng.)

(Chapter 3: In repose she was like a lovely flower mirrored in the water; in motion, a pliant willow swaying in the wind.)

【红楼梦】【第四十九回】大太太的一个侄女儿，宝姑娘一个妹妹，大奶奶两个妹妹，倒像一把子四根水葱。

(da tai tai de yi ge zhi nv er, bao gu niang yi ge mei mei, da nai nai liang ge mei mei, dao xiang yi ba zi si gen shui cong er.)

(Chapter 49: Lady Hsing’s niece, Miss Pao-chai’s cousin and Madam Chu’s two cousins are as pretty as four fresh young shallots. They really are!)

While all these uses are metaphorical, the evaluation that is implied is based on world knowledge of attributes such as providing fruit, decorative, height etc.. Knowledge of these attributes provides the image basis for metaphorical uses.

### 2.2 Negative Evaluation

Negative evaluation can also be conveyed through the use of plant metaphors, though this is much less common because of the general aridity of region leading to a positive evaluation of whatever is fertile. Negative evaluation is based on knowledge of attributes that impede the successful cultivation of fruiting plants or that are potentially harmful to man. It is knowledge of the lack of productivity and harmfulness of certain types of plant that forms the basis of their evaluation in metaphor. The following examples are some typical instances of negative plant metaphors.

【红楼梦】【第六十九回】心中一刺未除，又凭空添了一刺，说不得且吞声忍气，将好颜面换出来遮掩。

(xin zhong yi ci wei chu, you ping kong tian le yi ci, shuo bu de qie tuo sheng ren qi, jiang hao yan mian huan chu lai zhe yan.)

(Chapter 69: Before she had rid herself of one thorn in her side, here — out of the blue — was another!)