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## 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

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### 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长的几十年的一棵老杨树，你们就如秋天芸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。

(wo he ni men yi bi, wo jiu ru na ye fen quan zi li zhang de ji shi nian de yi ke lao yang shu, ni men jiu ru qiu tian Yun'er jin wo de na cai kai de bai hai tang, lian wo dou jin bu qi de yao, ni men ru he jin de qi.)

(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 potent even for me?)

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”。

(san gu niang de hun ming jiao “mei gui hua”.)

(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-chun'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。

(shei zhi yi ge ren ya er ye mei you.)

(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 1**

**Conceptual Map for HUMANS ARE PLANTS/ SPIRITUAL IS NATURAL**

Conceptual key	Conceptual metaphors
Humans Are Plants/ Spiritual Is Natural	People are flowers
	People are trees
	People are fruit
	Spiritual guiding is nuturing

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”.

宝钗 — 牡丹 — 艳冠群芳 — 任是无情也动人

Pao-chai – peony – beauty surprising all flowers –

Though heartless she has charm.

探春 — 杏花 — 瑶池仙品 — 日边红杏依云栽  
Tan-chun – apricot-blossom – fairy flower from  
paradise – A red apricot by the sun grows in the clouds.

李纨 — 老梅 — 霜晓寒姿 — 竹篱茅舍自甘心  
Li Wan – old plum-tree – cold beauty in frosty dawn –  
Content to stay by the bamboo fence and thatched hut.

湘云 — 海棠 — 香梦沉酣 — 只恐夜深花睡去  
Hsiang-yun – crab-apple-blossom – deep in a fragrant  
dream – So late at night the flower may fall asleep.

麝月 — 荼蘼 — 韶华胜极 — 开到荼蘼花事了  
Sheh-yueh – rose – flower of final splendour – When  
the rose blooms, spring flowers fade.

香菱 — 并蒂 — 联春绕瑞 — 连理枝头花正开  
Hsiang-ling – two flowers on one stem – double beauty  
linked with good fortune – Double flowers bloom on a  
single stem.

黛玉 — 芙蓉 — 风露清愁 — 莫怨东风当自嗔  
Tai-yu – hibiscus flower – quiet and sad in wind and  
dew – Blame not the east wind but yourself.

袭人 — 桃花 — 武陵别景 — 桃红又是一年春  
His-jen – peach-blossom – exotic scene at Wuling –  
Another spring returns and the peach blooms red.

Nevertheless, illusion after all is an illusion; no matter  
how brilliant it had been, the prosperity eventually cannot  
be everlasting in reality except that in the fairyland.

Why is the same plant changed into different meanings?  
The author thinks different people may discover or create  
different similarities. Similarity is an important principle  
of metaphor. Zhao Yanfang (2001, p. 97) insists, “The  
principle of similarity refers to the tendency of people to  
regard the same or similar things as a unit. The principle  
of similarity is indispensable in constructing conception  
and language. The same or similar things are easily  
given similar names and similar things are used to make  
metaphors to each other”. Actually, in many cases, these  
similarities are not physical. They are psychological.

The meaning of the parable depends on knowledge  
of the effects of various environmental factors on the  
growth process: These can be either positive or negative  
and imply a further conceptual metaphor: CONDITIONS  
OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH ARE CONDITIONS OF  
NATURAL GROWTH.

The conceptual metaphor CONDITIONS OF  
SPIRITUAL GROWTH ARE CONDITIONS OF  
NATURAL GROWTH represents the cognitive basis for  
the parable of the flowers and the similar parables.

For instance, in Chapter 58 《红楼梦》第五十八回：  
宝玉因想道：能病了几天，竟把杏花辜负了！不觉已  
到“绿叶成荫子满枝”了！因此仰望杏子不舍。

（“What a shame!” he thought. “Just those few days in  
bed and I missed the apricot blossom.” And in among the  
green leaves now the young fruit hangs from every bough.  
He stood and gazed at the tree.）

They were Du Mu’s lines, written on his last visit to

Hu-zhou, when he met with the beautiful young dancer  
of a dozen years before and found that she was now a  
married woman with a brood of children. How did it go?

On the surface reading, it seems easy to show the  
reader a picture of flourishing apricot in the prosperous  
mid-spring. However, the real schema and intention in  
author’s mind is exactly reversed, which hidden in the key  
sentence “绿叶成荫子满枝”. This is a literary allusion  
originating from the Du Mu’s poetry 《叹花》：

自是寻春去较迟，不须惆怅怨芳时，  
狂风落尽深红色，绿叶成荫子满枝。

（The spring-time blossoms, white and red,  
Before the thieving wind have fled;

And in among the green leaves now,

The young fruit hangs from every bough.）

The last line “子满枝” is not only describing the scenery  
of fruits hanging on the tree but also forming a metaphor to  
refer to many having lots of children, which is the real story  
happened to the poet himself. Du Mu had ever fallen in  
love with a young girl when he visited Hu Zhou. However,  
after 14 years he revisited here and found the young girl  
had already married for 3 years and raised 3 children.  
Hence, he wrote this poetry for pathos. Obviously, Paoyu  
at this very moment is in the same mood with the poet Du  
Mu. He quotes the line in the poetry to show his worry on  
this young nice girl’s marriage in the future. He thought  
of Xing Xiu-yan’s betrothal. It would only be a year or  
two now before she married. The organic cycle provides a  
prototype model for a spiritual cycle of birth, development,  
enlightenment, death and rebirth. The weeping willow  
and the blooming peach blossom actually make the sharp  
contrast to the sadness in Paoyu’s heart, which also indicate  
that Paoyu has forefeeling of his big family’s declining  
even though it is still in its prosperous spring.

## 2. EVALUATION OF PLANT METAPHORS

What is perhaps the most salient discourse role of plant  
metaphors is their powerful rhetorical role in providing an  
evaluation; it is very rare for any of the plant metaphors  
not 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  
a positive emotional feeling towards those young girls  
living in Grand View Garden.

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

plants serves 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】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**四根水葱儿**。

(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!)

【红楼梦】【第一百一回】你们一心一计和和气的，省得我**是你们眼里的刺**似的。

(ni men yi xin yi ji he he qi qi de, sheng de wo shi ni men yan li de ci shi de.)

(Chapter 101: You can live in peace and harmony, without me as a thorn in your side.)

【红楼梦】【第七十八回】袭人本来从小儿**不言不语**，我只说他是**没嘴的葫芦**。

(Xiren ben lai cong xiao er bu yan bu yu, wo zhi shuo ta shi mei zui de hu lu.)

(His-je's always been so quiet I felt she was rather stupid.)

【红楼梦】【第一百十九回】这几天竟是如在**荆棘**之中。

(zhe ji tian jing shi ru zai jing ji zhi zhong.)

(Chapter 119: These days he felt on thorns.)

【红楼梦】【第四十四回】你们淫妇忘**八一条藤儿**，多嫌着我，外面儿你哄我！

(ni men yin fu wang ba yi tiao teng er, duo xian zhe wo, wai mian er ni hong wo!)

(Chapter 44: You whores and bitches have ganged up against me, yet you make such a public show of trying to please me.)

## 3. SUMMARY

In conclusion, plants are a productive source domain of evaluating metaphors in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. They are extensively used for evaluation and persuasion because of the importance of agriculture and consequent familiarity with the farming cycle and the attributes of plants. We have also seen that knowledge of both the stages of plant growth, and the influence of the environment on the successful growth of plants, are very important types of knowledge that account for the isomorphism between spiritual and natural domains.

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