



## Metaphor and Culture

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### Abstract

The first part of this paper revisits Qian Zhongshu's theory of vehicular diversity and multivalency in an attempt to question the plausibility and necessity of postulating conceptual metaphors that have dominated so much of our contemporary discussions of metaphor. Using examples from both Chinese and English, it tries to show that conceptual metaphors are nothing more than linguists' meta-metaphorical constructs whose number could proliferate towards infinity due to the polysemic nature of figurative expressions. It also argues that lower-level semantic associations between the vehicle and the tenor are sufficient for explaining the existence or the emergence of a metaphor. The second part of this paper goes on to demonstrate the inseparable relationship between metaphor and culture and, by analyzing the Chinese folk custom of well-wishing and Chinese scholars' penchant for certain kinds of plants in decorating their homes and offices, to reveal two predominant metaphorical patterns that lie behind what seems to be a kaleidoscope of symbols.

**Keywords:** Qian Zhongshu, Umberto Eco, Theory of metaphor, Chinese symbolism

### 1. Defining Metaphor

What is a metaphor? People from different historical periods and intellectual traditions vary in their answers to this question. In the opinion of Qian Zhongshu, one of the most important contemporary Chinese scholars on the subject, "the essence of metaphor lies in making the dissimilar similar". (1979, p. 74) But Qian does not stop at this very general formula of "x IS y"; he goes one step further to metaphorically describe metaphor as something that has "handles" and "sides". Here is what he has to say:

Metaphors may have two handles, but they also have several sides. Now, a certain thing may be one, but its qualities and capabilities are likely to be many. Consequently, the one thing is not restricted to one use or one effect. Those who employ a figure of speech may do so with different aspects in mind or with a different feature in view, so that even when the denotatum is the same the significatum will vary. That is why a single image may fulfill several different purposes or meanings even while it remains the same. (Egan, 1998, p. 125)

By "handles of metaphor" which is not specifically discussed in the above quotation, Qian Zhongshu means different political and aesthetic inclinations of the metaphor user which allows a particular thing or situation to be illuminated through multiple metaphorical vehicles. For example, marriage can be described as restricting an individual's freedom by our connecting it with a prison-house; or it could be described as giving one a sense of protection by our linking it with a harbor. There are of course many other ways of metaphorizing marriage, resulting in what is technically known in metaphor studies as vehicular diversity. By "sides of metaphor" Qian Zhongshu means the multiple use of the same lexical item to refer to different topics, resulting in what is technically called vehicular multivalency. Qian's own examples regarding vehicular multivalency are related to the image of the moon which has multiple qualities alongside each other within the same entity. /Moon-eyes/ (yue4 yan3) and /moon-face/ (yue4 mian4)<sup>1</sup> are two common Chinese expressions used to describe a person's appearance, and each appropriates one "side" or aspect of the moon: the former is based on the brightness of the celestial being and the latter on its round shape. But there are other attributes which can be and have been attributed to the moon. For instance, it can be interpreted (at least in Chinese culture) as containing the element of *yin* which is related to the female sex. Thus we have two poetic lines from Chen Zi'ang's (661-702) series: "A new moon emerges from the western sea / Replacing the *yang* force at it rises" which is said to be a veiled reference to Empress Wu Zetian. Here, Qian Zhongshu argues, the poet cannot be thinking about roundness or brightness because it would be absurd to imagine the ruthless Wu Zetian as having a beaming face which shines on her subjects. These examples therefore reveal that "a single thing may be viewed from different perspectives and will appear differently in each. When a writer uses a metaphor, he takes what he wants from it." (Egan, 1998, p. 127).

## 2. Critique of the Cognitive Theory of Metaphor

As such, Qian Zhongshu's theorization on vehicular diversity and multivalency raises some serious questions about the currently dominant cognitive theory of metaphor championed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. According to these two American scholars, our conceptual system, which is largely metaphorical, structures what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. To illustrate their point, Lakoff and Johnson choose the example of war, which is said to have structured our style of making arguments. As in a real war, they tell us, we also see the person we are arguing with as an enemy; we plan and implement strategies; we attack our enemy's views and defend our own; and of course, we could win or lose arguments. These war-like actions we perform while arguing are reflected in the following italicized linguistic expressions:

### ARGUMENT IS WAR

Your claims are *indefensible*.

He *attacked every weak point* in my argument.

His criticisms were *right on target*.

I *demolished* his argument.

I've never *won* an argument with him.

You disagree? Okay, *shoot!*

If you use that *strategy*, he will *wipe you out*.

He *shot down* all of my arguments.

(Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 4)

Although there are no physical fights, there are verbal battles in our everyday life. In this sense, the "ARGUMENT IS WAR" metaphor is what people live by in the Western culture.

As a contrary example to reveal how a metaphorical concept structures what we do in everyday life, Lakoff and Johnson urge their readers to try to imagine a culture where an argument is viewed as a dance, the participants are seen as performers, and the goal is to perform in a balanced and aesthetically pleasing way. In such a culture, they contend, people would view arguments differently, experience them differently, carry them out differently, and talk about them differently. As a result, people in the Western culture would probably not view them as arguing at all: they would simply be doing something different. Indeed, it would seem strange even to call what they were doing "arguing". For lack of a succinct term to describe this phenomenon, Lakoff and Johnson have to make do with a general statement to the effect that Westerners have a discourse form structured in terms of battle whereas people in that imaginary culture have one structured in terms of dance. (1980, p. 5)

From the above it is not difficult to deduce that Lakoff and Johnson are of the opinion that the "ARGUMENT IS DANCE" metaphor would always lead to a conception of arguments as a kind of "aesthetically pleasing" activity, characterized by an atmosphere of friendly cooperation between various conversation partners. From Qian Zhongshu's perspective, however, this assumption is very much open to doubt, because what kind of conceptualization is settled on in a given situation depends on which semantic features of the polysemic vehicle are selected for transfer onto the tenor. What this means is that the "ARGUMENT IS DANCE" metaphor might have significantly different or even contradictory associations depending on which specific features from the source domain of dance are transferred onto the target domain of argument. Verena Haser offers the following analysis in her critique of the cognitive theory of metaphor:

Speakers might very well single out for transfer a feature like 'continual movement which leads to physical exhaustion'. In the target domain ARGUMENT, this might translate into the idea of exasperation, disappointment, or confusion. The conception of arguments which emerges from this construal of ARGUMENT IS DANCE differs significantly from the one proposed by Lakoff/Johnson. That such an interpretation is possible is shown by metaphorical expressions such as *to lead a person a dance* ('to lead him in a wearying, perplexing, or disappointing course; to cause him to undergo exertion or worry with no adequate result.') (2005, p. 152)

This analysis further validates Qian Zhongshu's profound insight on the multivalent nature of metaphor and clearly points to a need for more specific explanations of how a metaphor actually works. In other words, the formula "x IS y" is rather empty unless and until we single out particular features from the source which are transferred onto the target, thus recognizing the possibility of various interpretations of the latter.

The same problem occurs when we check Lakoff and Johnson's contention above against the fact that oftentimes there are multiple metaphorical vehicles for the same tenor or topic. As was pointed out in our earlier discussion, the right side of Lakoff and Johnson's famous equation "LIFE IS A JOURNEY" could be replaced with <drama>, <a book>,

<poetry>, <a song>, <tea>, <water>, <a lamp>, <porcelain>, <a bridge>, <flax>, <flower>, <smoke>, <a dream>, <fantasy>, <a bubble>, <shadow>, <a picture>, <a riddle>, <fog>, <huge waves>, <wine>, <electricity>, <wind>, <fire>, <a poker game>, <a chess game>, <a dinner party>, <stars and constellations>, <duckweed>, <stock market>, <dust>, <long-distance running>, <a bus ride>, <morning dew>, <flower in a mirror>, <moon reflection in water>, and many more. The reason for such vehicular diversity is that a content word in any language can be analyzed into an infinite number of semantic markers which allows it to be connected with one of the numerous semantic markers of another content word on the basis of similarity. Thanks to the open-endedness of our metaphorical associations, we can very easily find a person using hundreds if not thousands of different metaphors in his or her life, but can we safely claim that his or her way of thinking and behavior is influenced by a particular group of metaphors? The answer to this question is in the negative. The most we can allow for such a hypothesis is that language users are led into a very specific view of reality each time a metaphor is employed. But when they encounter another metaphor at the next moment, the structure of the previous one is already put aside.

Furthermore, metaphors that seem ontologically inconsistent with one another can also occur in one single text. Professor Andrew Goatly of Lingnan University, for example, discovers the following “major metaphorical schemata” in his analysis of Hong Kong governments’ *Review of Education System Reform Proposals – Consultation Document*:

1. acquisition of education as a commodity or as cultural capital
2. education as construction
3. educational assessment as a mechanism
4. education as a journey
5. education as nurture and growth

(2002, pp. 263-294)

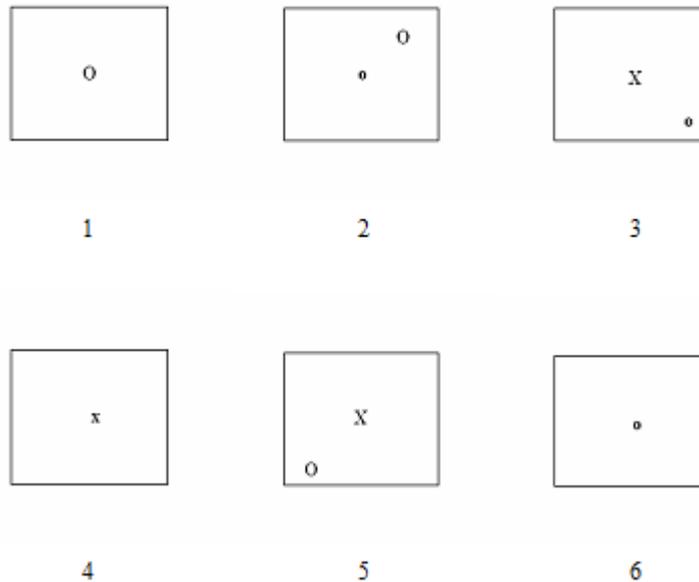
Goatly’s aim there is to criticize the ideological inconsistency in the use of metaphors in the document under question. He sees in these metaphors different ideological affiliations that conflict with one another, thus undermining the government’s original intention of encouraging internal motivation in students that will lead to their creating knowledge and to their all-round development. The “acquisition of education as cultural capital” metaphor, according to Goatly, partly belongs with the business orientation of Hong Kong even though it could also be positively related to the educational task of trying to equip students for the future. The problem with the “education as a journey” metaphor is that it is often a predetermined track with goals and objectives set by society for society which is against the spirit of exploring as yet undiscovered knowledge, but with freedom and space to move in a more open system, it is rather in tune with the progressivism of the reform proposals. The “education as construction” metaphor appears to allow more creativity than the previous metaphor, but again it depends on how much the construction materials are ready made. The “education as nurture and growth” metaphor is in line with the progressivist philosophy of motivating students, but it can also be developed along the traditional lines of training and providing. Finally, the “educational assessment as a mechanism” metaphor is deemed by Goatly to be very much in keeping with traditional regimes of thinking about education in Hong Kong because it is “linked to the idea of getting grades and external rewards and qualifications for which assessment is necessary,” but it actually can be used to describe the machine-like accuracy and dependability needed for measuring students’ progress. To avoid these inconsistencies, Goatly goes so far as to suggest an alternative set of metaphors as follows:

Instead of the teacher being seen as providing resources or knowledge, as in the acquisition of commodities metaphor, the teachers could themselves be seen as a resource, available for the students to use for any educational purpose they choose. The same idea could be translated to the construction metaphor, in which case the teacher would be seen as a tool to be used for students to achieve their own aims, rather than as an architect or designer who predetermines those aims. Turning to the journey of exploration schema, rather than a guide the teacher could usefully be seen as a cartographer producing sketch maps, again with the implication that the direction of exploration will be freer, and students would be encouraged to revise or add to the map on their return. Indeed, instead of guiding, teachers might deliberately create obstacles for students to encourage “lateral” thinking, or explorations of unknown areas. In fact, assessment and examination could be seen, not as a mechanism for measuring students according to specifications, but the students’ own descriptions of the journeys of exploration. (2002, p. 292)

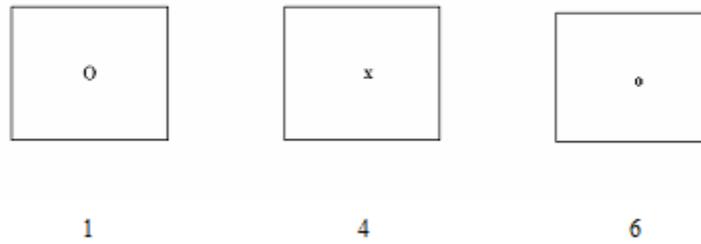
What is actually revealed in the discussion above is that no particular metaphorical schema can be said to claim monopoly in structuring or influencing our thinking and behavior. Whatever metaphor one uses through which we are led to look at the world from a particular angle, there is always another which could potentially offset what is done earlier. It must also be pointed out that our narrative texts do not always show a continually coherent relation between the source domain and the target domain of metaphor and they do not have to. The diversity of perspectives is not only tolerated but actively sought after by the writer for the purpose of shedding light on the different stages and various aspects of the same process called education.

The fact that semantic links can be established between one tenor and innumerable vehicles also raises serious doubts about “conceptual metaphor” as a plausible or efficient metalinguistic tool for the study of metaphor. As we have learned from introductory courses on phonetics, lexicology, grammar and other language related subjects, linguistic units in a language can be grouped into different categories in relation to form, function, or meaning. Phonetically, for example, they can be grouped into monosyllabic, disyllabic, and polysyllabic words on the basis of similarity in form. Grammatically, they can be grouped into nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions etc. on the basis of similarity in function at the syntactic level. Semantically, they can be grouped into synonyms, antonyms, hyponyms, or other categories on the basis of their proximity, opposition, or subordination in meaning to one another. The notion of “metaphorical concepts” proposed by Lakoff and Johnson seems designed for the same purpose of categorizing linguistic units: they are supposed to explain why several metaphorical expressions are put in the same group. Let us go back to Lakoff and Johnson’s example mentioned earlier. The conceptual metaphor “ARGUMENT IS WAR” is meant to capture what the subsumed metaphorical expressions (e.g., *indefensible*, *attack*, *on target*, *demolish*, *win*, *shoot*, *strategy*, *wipe out*, *shoot down*) have in common. In this case, they are all initially related to the concept of war which is then metaphorically projected onto the domain of argument.

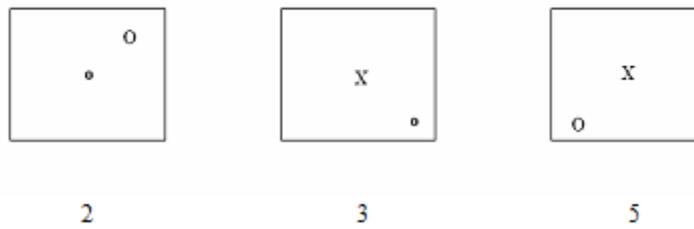
What Lakoff and Johnson’s approach overlooks, however, is the fact that those linguistic expressions subsumed under this category merely can be, but need not always be, associated with the domain of war. This is so because there is a host of crisscrossing links connecting various lexical items on the basis of similarity and any of them could serve as motivation for a new classification. To illustrate the point, we can appropriate a diagram from Goatly’s most recent book *Washing the Brain: Metaphor and Hidden Ideology* (2007, p. 23):



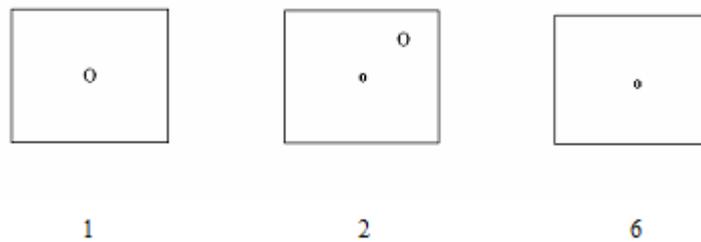
There are only six squares with different symbols in them, but there are more ways of dividing them into groups. We can use the property of having only one letter as a criterion to form the first group.



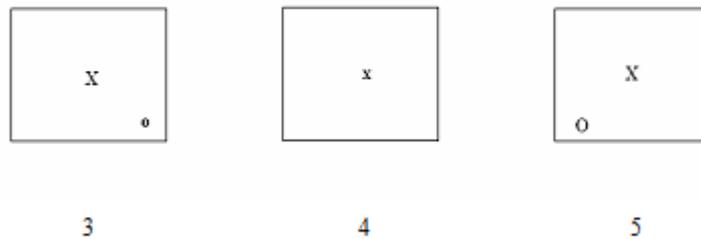
Likewise, we can use the property of having two letters as a criterion to form another group.



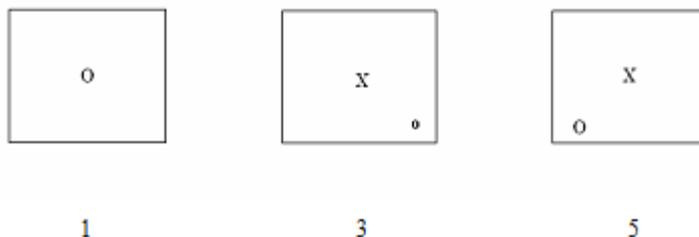
Or, we can put 1, 2, and 6 together on the grounds that they contain only *os* and no *xs*.



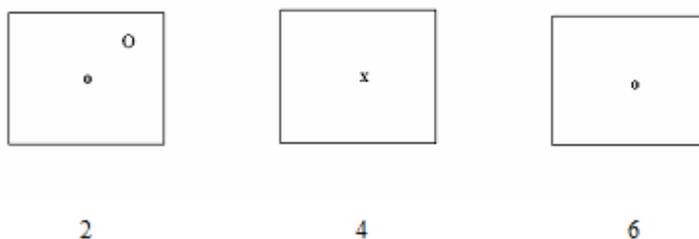
Similarly, we can put 3, 4, and 5 together on the grounds that they all contain *xs*.



Or, we can consider 1, 3, and 5 as a group because they have an upper-case letter in the center.



Correspondingly, 2, 4, and 6 can go into the same group because they have a lower-case letter in the center.



There are of course many other possibilities of combining the squares such as 1 and 6, then 3 and 5, then 2, 3, and 5, then 2 and 5, all on the basis of some kind of similarity between members of the same group. One important point (not mentioned by Goatly) to note here is that no particular criterion for classification can claim priority over any other that results in a different combination.

This situation is the same as grouping linguistic expressions under disparate “conceptual metaphors” except that the latter involves a much greater number of distinguishers or semantic markers, thus creating what Verena Haser calls “insurmountable difficulties” for Lakoff and Johnson’s theory of metaphor. In Chapter 7 of her book *Metaphor, Metonymy, and Experientialist Philosophy: Challenging Cognitive Semantics*, she offers a detailed and convincing analysis, using “ARGUMENT IS WAR” as an example.

As we can see there, given their polysemic nature, the lexical items subsumed under “ARGUMENT IS WAR” by Lakoff and Johnson are closely related to several other semantic fields, hence the possibility of ascribing them to different source domains. The most obvious case is the expression /on target/ which, according to Haser, could be ascribed to the category of “ARGUMENT IS PLACEMENT” in the sense that something is positioned accurately or inaccurately. Also to that category belong such expressions as /to the point/, /miss the point/, /beside the point/, /to hit the mark/, /to be out of place/, /to be on the right track/, /wide off the mark/, /to sidetrack/, and many others.

The categorization of /defend/ is equally free-floating. The item can be ascribed to the conceptual metaphor of “ARGUMENT IS PRESERVATION” with the source concept used in the sense of <keeping from injury or destruction>. Lexical expressions that go into that category could include /uphold/, /vindicate/, /rescue/, /save/, and /fortify/. Or, the word could be placed alongside /support/, /back/, /confirm (to make firm)/ and many others to form a new conceptual metaphor “ARGUMENT IS PHYSICAL SUPPORT”. The expression /confirm/ is further related to /firm (argument)/, /strong/, /forceful/, /weighty/, /penetrating/, and others in the sense that they all indicate the idea of strength and are often employed in the target domain of <argument>, thus suggesting another conceptual metaphor “ARGUMENT IS STRENGTH”. /Penetrating/ is also related to /piercing/, /sharp/ and /cut into/ to form yet another group of similar expressions, yielding the conceptual metaphor “ARGUMENT IS HAVING A KEEN EDGE”.

The word /demolish/ is interpreted by Lakoff and Johnson as a manifestation of the conceptual metaphor “ARGUMENT IS WAR”, but it obviously could also be grouped alongside /construct/, /lay a foundation/, /structure/, etc. under the category of “ARGUMENT IS BUILDING”. In a slightly different direction, /demolish/, in the sense of <pulling into pieces>, could join the company of /tear apart/, /take to pieces/, /dissect/, /lay bare/ as a member in the family of “ARGUMENT IS DECOMPOSITION”.

The word /shoot/, together with /attack/ and /demolish/, is cited by Lakoff and Johnson as an instance of “ARGUMENT IS WAR”, but it is related not only to words of violence but also to /put forth/, /utter/, /put forward/, /set forth/, /propose/, /go ahead/, and many more, resulting in a possible category of “ARGUMENT IS FORWARD MOTION”.

The last item /go ahead/ could then be placed alongside /arrive at (a conclusion)/, /move into (another topic)/ etc. to form a category “ARGUMENT IS JOURNEY”.

Likewise, the word /win/ does not have to be a member of “ARGUMENT IS WAR” as is suggested by Lakoff and Johnson. If we associate the term with /lay one’s card on the table (tell the whole truth)/, /trump card (the most important argument)/, /play along (not to object)/, then it becomes a member in the category of “ARGUMENT IS GAME-PLAYING”.

So far, we have been looking at lexical items in relation to the same target domain of argument, but in reality they can also be metaphorically employed in a wide range of contexts which once again force us to posit different conceptual metaphors if we wish to account for their different senses at this abstract level. Take for instance the sentence /His weight reduction efforts are right on target/ which has nothing to do with argument and therefore cannot be covered by the conceptual metaphor “ARGUMENT IS WAR”. To explain the relationship between x and y, one has to propose a new conceptual metaphor “TO KEEP FIT/HEALTH IS PLACEMENT” or, to use Lakoff and Johnson’s formulation, “TO KEEP FIT/HEALTH IS WAR”. Similarly, if we are to explain /The government’s control of population is on target/ in the same manner, we have to devise yet another conceptual metaphor “PURPOSEFUL ACTION IS PLACEMENT”.

The conclusion to be drawn here is that all the lexical items cited by Lakoff and Johnson as instances of the conceptual metaphor “ARGUMENT IS WAR” can actually be ascribed to many alternative conceptual metaphors. Given the fact most words and expressions in a language can be analyzed into innumerable semantic markers, the number of potential metaphorical concepts that can be posited on the basis of similarity is almost unlimited. This makes our effort of trying to understand the metaphorical meaning of words and expressions through conceptual metaphors cognitively unrealistic and implausible.

Apart from this, it could also be argued that the use of conceptual metaphors is rather unnecessary to our interpretation of figurative language despite its huge popularity with many contemporary scholars in the field. As is shown by Haser’s analysis, one and the same lexical item can be subsumed under more than one conceptual metaphor. /to win an argument/, for example, is cited by Lakoff and Johnson as an instance of the conceptual metaphor “ARGUMENT IS WAR”, but we now know that it can at least be ascribed to another category called “ARGUMENT IS GAME-PLAYING”. One question then arises: if a person is faced with this expression in a real life situation and does not access its meaning in the way suggested by Lakoff and Johnson, does it mean that he will understand the phrase differently or inadequately? The answer is “no” because the basic semantic information <to come out victorious> is already contained in the word /win/ and all that is needed in order to interpret the metaphor are the source concept and the figurative context in which it occurs. Likewise, if one encounters the English sentence /He bulldozed his way to the front/, to properly understand the metaphor, he or she must possess a general knowledge about a) the literal meaning of /bulldoze/ and b) the tenor or topic – someone pushing himself through a crowd with physical force – and then make a connection on the basis of similarity that will highlight the “salient features” involved. We are certainly entitled to think up many meta-metaphorical equations afterwards such as “HUMAN IS MACHINE”, “HUMAN IS OBJECT”, and “FORCE IS CLEARING SPACE”, but they only constitute a superfluous detour which distracts rather than directs our effort in the process of interpretation.

### 3. Reconnecting Metaphor and Culture

As theoretical constructs, the so-called conceptual metaphors are abstract by nature. What is more, they can be arranged hierarchically with the categories at the top being more abstract and those at the bottom less so. Take the following metaphorical expressions for example:

- 1) She is a lark.
- 2) He is a vulture.
- 3) Lorrita always keeps her children safely under her wing.

All these could be subsumed under the meta-metaphorical category of “HUMAN IS BIRD” which is obviously open-ended. We could come up with another list of metaphors that are slightly different but nevertheless related:

- 4) Lisa galloped through the book in two days.
- 5) He eventually collapsed under the heavy yoke of public opinion.
- 6) David Wong always wags his tail when his boss comes around.

Examples 4), 5) and 6) are all related to big mammals and could form a category of their own in terms of conceptual metaphor. However, when they are placed alongside examples 1), 2) and 3), the six metaphors give rise to a more abstract category of “HUMAN IS ANIMAL”. If we add to this a list of metaphors whose vehicles are not animals but plants, then the resulting meta-metaphorical category would be “HUMAN IS ANIMATE OBJECT”. It is not difficult to

note that the more abstract a “conceptual metaphor” is, the more likely it will be found in more than one language. To compare a crowd of people to a school of sardines might be a particular inclination of English language users, but to liken human beings to fish seem to be a phenomenon that occurs in most if not all cultures where there are rivers, lakes and seas. In other words, when it comes to the superordinate levels of “HUMAN IS ANIMAL” and “HUMAN IS ANIMATE OBJECT”, it would be really hard to imagine any culture that does not employ this kind of metaphorical formula. Empty as it now sounds after our analysis, the cognitive theory of metaphor has made it its goal to discover universal or near-universal conceptual metaphors that underlie metaphorical expressions in different languages and in doing so for the past two decades has overlooked numerous cases of non-universality in metaphorical conceptualization.

This is not to deny that there exist some metaphorical equivalents across languages and cultures. To confirm this phenomenon of cultural overlapping, one need go no further than taking a look at the following sets of similes and metaphors from English and Chinese:

### **Overlapping Similes**

to know something or somebody as a person knows his ten fingers/the palm of his hand

liao3 ru2 zhi3 zhang3

applause like thunder

zhang3 sheng1 ru2 lei2

numberless as the sand

duo1 ru2 sha1 zi3

as light as a feather

qing1 ru2 hong2 mao2

as black as a raven

xiang4 wu1 ya1 yi1 ban1 hei1

as brave as a lion

shi1 zi3 ban1 yong3 gan3

as busy as a bee

xiang4 mi4 feng1 yi1 yang4 mang2 lu4

as hungry as a wolf

e4 lang2 ban1 de

as fast as lightning

ji2 ru2 shan3 dian4

as sharp as a winter's morning

xiang4 dong1 tian1 zao3 chen2 yi1 yang4 yan2 han2 ci4 gu3

(Li, 1999, pp. 16-17)

### **Overlapping Metaphors (in the narrow sense of the term)**

a bolt from the blue

qing2 tian1 pi1 li4

castles in the air

kong1 zhong1 lou2 ge2

a square peg in a round hole

fang1 rui4 yuan2 zuo4

the spring/autumn of life

sheng1 ming4 zhi1 chun1/qiu1

to hang by a hair

qian1 jun1 yi1 fa4

to rest on one's arms

zhen3 ge1 dai4 dan4

to swim with the tide  
 sui2 bo1 zhu2 liu2  
 to be in the same boat  
 tong2 zhou1 gong4 ji4  
 to trim the sail to the wind  
 kan4 feng1 shi3 duo4  
 to add fuel to the flames  
 huo3 shang4 jia1 you2  
 to sit on/ride the fence  
 qi2 qiang2  
 to get wind of something  
 de2 dao4 mou3 shi4 de feng1 sheng1  
 Constant dropping wears the stone.  
 Di1 shui3 chuan1 shi2.  
 A rat crossing the street is chased by all.  
 lao3 shu3 guo4 jie1, ren2 ren2 han3 da3.  
 You will cross the bridge when you get to it.  
 chuan2 dao4 qiao2 tou2 zi4 ran2 zhi2.  
 (Li, 1999, p. 209)

The important point to be emphasized here is that these metaphorical expressions are not concrete manifestations of some preexisting universal conceptual metaphors; rather, they are the results of arbitrary pairing of a metaphorical signifier and a metaphorical signified that happen to be identical or similar across two languages. It is amazing how Saussure's principle of linguistic arbitrariness has taken root in our mind when we discuss the relationship between a signifier and a signified at the literal level but is completely forgotten when we talk about the link between a signifier and a signified at the metaphorical level.

More often than not, the same life situation is metaphorically semiotized in different ways across languages and cultures. Let us look at two more sets of examples (with minor omissions) from Li Guonan's *Contrastive Study of Figures of Speech in English and Chinese*:

#### **Similes identical in meaning but different in form**

like a drowned rat  
 xiang4 luo4 tang1 ji1 yi1 yang4 (like a drenched chicken)  
 like a rat in a hole  
 ru2 weng4 zhong1 zhi1 bie1 (like a turtle in a jar)  
 like a duck to water  
 ru2 yu2 de2 shui3 (like a fish in water)  
 like a hen on a hot girdle  
 xiang4 re4 guo1 shang4 de ma3 yi3 (like an ant on a hot pan)  
 as stupid as a goose  
 yu2 chun3 ru2 zhu1 (as stupid as a pig)  
 as stubborn as a donkey/mule  
 jiang4 de2 xiang4 dou2 niu2 (as stubborn as an ox)  
 as timid as a rabbit  
 dan3 xiao3 ru2 shu3 (as timid as a mouse)  
 as bitter as wormwood  
 ku3 ruo4 huang2 lian2 (as bitter as goldthread)

(1999, p. 17)

**Metaphors (in the narrow sense of the term) identical in meaning but different in form**

birds of a feather

yi1 qiu1 zhi1 he4 (jackals from the same lair)

to draw water in a sieve

zhu2 lan2 da3 shui3 yi1 chang3 kong1 (to draw water with a bamboo basket)

to fish in the air

shui3 zhong1 lao1 yue4 (to capture the moon in water)

to cry wine and sell vinegar

gua4 yang2 tou2 mai4 gou3 rou4 (to hang up a sheep's head and sell dogmeat)

to go for wool and come back shorn

tou1 ji1 bu4 zhao2 shi2 ba3 mi3 (to try to steal a chicken only to lose the rice bait)

to squeeze water out of a stone

sha1 zi3 li3 zha4 you2 (to extract oil from sands)

to put all one's eggs in one basket

gu1 zhu4 yi1 zhi4 (to stake all on a single throw)

to look for a needle in a haystack

hai3 di3 lao1 zhen1 (to retrieve a needle in the ocean)

to kill two birds with one stone

yi1 jian4 shuang1 diao1 (to hit two hawks with one arrow)

to kick a man when he is down

luo4 jing3 xia4 shi2 (to drop stones on someone who has fallen into a well)

Diamond cuts diamond.

qi2 feng2 dui4 shou3 (to meet one's match in a game of chess)

There is no smoke without fire.

wu2 feng2 bu4 qi3 lang4. (There are no waves without wind.)

Justice has long arms.

tian1 wang3 hui1 hui1, shu1 er2 bu4 lou4. (The net of Heaven has large meshes, but it lets nothing through.)

The burnt child dreads the fire.

yi1 zhao1 zao1 she2 yao3, san1 nian2 pa4 cao3 sheng2. (Once bitten by a snake, one dreads coiled rope for three years.)

As you sow, you will reap.

Zhong4 gua1 de2 gua1, zhong4 dou4 de2 dou4. (Plant melons and you get melons; sow beans and you get beans.)

As you make your bed, so you must lie on it.

Zuo4 jian3 zi4 fu4 (to spin a cocoon around oneself)

He that has one servant has two, he that has two has but half a one, and he that has three has none at all.

Yi1 ge4 he2 shang4 tiao1 shui3 he1, liang3 ge4 he2 shang4 tai2 shui3 he1, san1 ge4 he2 shang4 mei2 shui3 he1. (One monk will shoulder two buckets of water for consumption, two monks will carry one bucket together, but if a third monk is added, none of them will have any water to drink.)

(Li, 1999, pp. 210-212)

These are just the tip of an iceberg as far as metaphorical non-coincidence across cultures is concerned. The reasons for such metaphorical disparity across languages are many, but the most important one derives from the fact that there are innumerable cultural units available to the metaphor user and each of those units consists of a huge bundle of semantic components that could be used to illuminate various aspects of social life. Which cultural unit is eventually chosen to serve as a metaphorical vehicle for a particular life situation is arbitrarily decided and therefore unpredictable. To vividly describe the state of someone being drunk, for example, the English speakers choose to compare the situation to that of a mouse, which often loses its sense of directions when being chased, thus giving rise to the phrase /as drunk as a

mouse/; the Chinese speakers, however, perceive a similarity between <being drunk> and <the softness of mud>, hence the metaphorical expression /as drunk as mud/. Beside, even one identical lexical unit shared by two languages can be used for very different metaphorical purposes as a consequence of its different semantic markers being highlighted. Both /rabbit/ and /tu4/ have been employed by English and Chinese speakers as a metaphorical vehicle to describe human personality. The former have singled out the quality of shyness in the animal, giving birth to the simile /as timid as rabbit/; but the latter emphasize a different quality in the animal, that is, its swiftness in movement, hence the expression /dong4 ru2 tuo1 tu4/ (as fast as a rabbit).

It needs to be pointed out that not all metaphorical expressions are as easy to understand as /timid as rabbit/ or /drunk as a mouse/. As can be seen from some of the examples above, there are a fair portion of metaphors where the connection between the vehicle and the tenor is made not on the basis of a common background to life shared by people across different languages but via a special knowledge about some unique aspects of the culture in which they appear. More specifically, what makes some metaphors difficult to understand is the fact that the vehicles used to illuminate the tenors belong exclusively to a particular way of living as manifested in its social customs as well as textual traditions.

Many culture-specific metaphors originate from the unique social customs of their users. Chinese people, for example, love watching Beijing Opera either in grand theatres or small teahouses as a form of entertainment in their spare time and know very well the props and techniques that are involved. This widespread familiarity with their “national opera” has led to quite a few culturally unique metaphors where certain details of the art are used as vehicles to illustrate other aspects of life:

- ◇ pao3 long2 tao4 – to appear in dragon designs worn by groups of soldiers or attendants in Beijing Opera
- ◇ chang4 hong2 lian3 – to wear the red mask of the hero in Beijing Opera
- ◇ chang4 bai2 lian3 – to wear the white mask of the villain in Beijing Opera

The meaning of the first expression above has been extended to include <to play a minor or insignificant role in a group activity>; and those of the second and third have acquired the metaphorical meanings of <to pretend to be generous and kind> and <to pretend to be harsh and severe> respectively. It is a popular belief among Chinese people that at least one of the two parents in a family has to wear the white mask in front of their children so that the latter are properly disciplined.

Another case in point is the long tradition of Buddhism and its practice of monastic life in China. Despite the official oppression from time to time, this alien religion from Indian has gradually taken root in a land that is dominated by the worldly ideology of Confucianism and become an integral part of Chinese life. It is no surprise that some aspects of the monastic life have been employed to shed light on its secular counterpart as can be seen in the following examples:

- ◇ pao3 de2 liao3 he2 shang4 pao3 bu4 liao3 miao4. – The monk may run away, but the temple cannot run with him. (A fugitive must belong to some place that can provide clues to his whereabouts.)
- ◇ ping2 shi2 bu4 shao1 xiang1, lin2 shi2 bao4 fu2 jiao3. – Never burn incense when all is well but clasp to Buddha’s feet when in stress. (Make no effort until the last minute.)
- ◇ fang4 xia4 tu2 dao1, li4 di4 cheng2 fu2. – Drop one’s cleaver and become a Buddha. (Achieve salvation as soon as one gives up evil.)
- ◇ zuo4 yi1 tian1 he2 shang4, zhuang4 yi1 tian1 zhong1. – Go on tolling the bell as long as one is a monk. (Take a passive attitude towards one’s work.)
- ◇ wu3 ti3 tou2 di4 – to prostrate oneself before Buddha (to admire somebody from the bottom of one’s heart)
- ◇ jie4 hua1 xian4 fu2 – to present Buddha with flowers given by another (to make a gift of something given by another)
- ◇ fu2 kou3 she2 xin1 – a Buddha’s mouth but a viper’s heart (honey words with evil intent)
- ◇ fu2 tou2 zhao2 fen4 – to smear Buddha’s head with dung (to desecrate)

Obviously, all the metaphorical vehicles here are related to the monastic life of Buddhist monks that has become familiar to most Chinese but not to people in a non-Buddhist culture. To be able to make sense of the expressions, foreigners have to learn about Buddhism and its practice either in person or from reading.

For a similar example on the English side, we can look into the eating habit of Westerners that depends on bread as their staple food as opposed to rice which is the main diet of Chinese and many of their neighbors in Asia.

- ◇ to earn one’s bread – to make a living
- ◇ bread and butter – basic means of income
- ◇ bread and cheese – the barest necessities of life

- ✧ to take bread out of one's mouth – to take away another's livelihood
- ✧ to know which side one's bread is buttered – to be mindful of one's own interest
- ✧ bread and water – a simple meal

What is taken for granted in the West (e.g. spreading butter on bread, using cheese to make a sandwich) are actually unfamiliar to most rice eaters in the East, thus making it difficult for them to comprehend many of the bread-related metaphors. This does not mean that Easterners and Westerners think differently as a consequence of not having a certain “conceptual metaphor”; on the contrary, the same analogy appears in both Chinese and English as can be seen in /bao3 zhu4 fan4 wan3/ (to keep one's rice bowl – to remain employed) and /qing1 cha2 dan4 fan4/ (tea served without any refreshments and rice served without lavish dishes – a simple life style).

Culture-specific metaphors are generated not only out of the unique behavioral patterns and material objects of their users but also from the users' written records of real or fictional events and characters that are not shared with other nations. In the latter case, the motivating link between a current life situation and a metaphorical expression is provided by knowledge about a particular linguistic or pictorial text, be it from history books, ancient myths, folklore, literature, popular media, and what not. We can get a glimpse of the inseparability between metaphor and culture from the following examples:

- 1) to meet one's Waterloo
- 2) le4 bu4 si1 shu3 (to have so much fun that one forgets about Shu)
- 3) Achilles heel
- 4) Shi4 wai4 tao2 yuan2 (the Land of Peach Blossoms)
- 5) Catch-22
- 6) Ah Q

The first two examples (one from English and the other from Chinese) are allusions to real historical figures and events which are used as metaphorical vehicles for similar life situations. /to meet one's Waterloo/ was originally related to Napoleon whose ousting of King Louis XVIII in 1815 made him an enemy of Great Britain, Prussia, Austria, and Russia. To remove their common military threat, the four countries declared war and sent their troops in his direction. Napoleon wanted to crush the British and the Prussians before Austrians and Russians could arrive, so he moved his forces toward Waterloo, where he was eventually defeated by the allied forces. Because of its particular historical association, the metaphorical expression is unlikely to find an equivalent in another language or culture.

Likewise, /le4 bu4 si1 shu3/ (to have so much fun that one forgets about Shu) is related to a famous Chinese historical figure Liu Shan, who was a ruler of the Kingdom of Shu during the Three Kingdom Era in ancient China. Liu Shan was known to be a coward who cared only about having a good time himself rather than the wellbeing of his subjects. Not long after he succeeded his father Liu Bei as the new emperor of Shu, his territory of jurisdiction was seized by the Kingdom of Wei where he was kept under custody as “Duke of Peace and Happiness”. One day, Sima Zhao, a very powerful general of Wei, invited Liu Shan to a dinner at which the traditional songs and dances of Shu were performed. When Liu's subordinates heard the music of their homeland, they were all shedding tears over the defeat and humiliation their kingdom had suffered. Liu Shan, however, was completely unaffected and continued to enjoy wine and food. When Sima Zhao asked him, “Don't you miss Shu?” Liu Shan replied, “I'm having fun here; why should I miss Shu?”, hence the expression /to have so much fun that one forgets about Shu/. The phrase is now used to refer to anyone who “is having so much fun that he has forgotten about his home and work”, but to understand its full import, one has to be familiar with the historical anecdote that gave rise to the metaphor.

Metaphorical allusions, however, do not have to be related to real historical figures and events all the time. In fact, many metaphorical expressions can be traced back to unreal or fictive worlds that vary from one culture to another. However “pre-scientific” or superstitious some of those texts may seem, they provide an important foundation for the understanding of a large number of metaphors that are very much in force today. The third metaphor above, for example, is related to a mythical story of ancient Greece in which Achilles' mother Thetis took her son by the heel at the time of his birth and dipped him in the river Styx in an attempt to make him invulnerable, but the heel in her hand remained dry and Achilles later died because of it. The story cannot be scientifically proven, of course, but it does provide a metaphorical vehicle whose present meaning is <the one and only weak spot>.

The fourth example given above originated from an old Chinese tale about a fisherman in Wu Ling district. One day, he went on a fishing trip which accidentally brought him to a peach orchard located on the inner side of a mountain with a small cave at its foot. The inhabitants there were leading a quiet and happy life without ever having an argument or dispute. After entertaining the fisherman, they asked him not to tell what he saw there to others when he returned to the outside world. The fisherman, however, told this experience to his fellow villagers who then followed him back on a

confirmation trip but could not find the place. One can safely claim that nobody in China actually believes in the existence of such a legendary place, but that does not prevent people from using the expression to mean metaphorically <a land of peace away from the turmoil of the world>.

Examples 5) and 6) represent another important source for culturally unique metaphors, that is, the so-called belle-lettres which is often nationally-based. /Catch-22/, as we know, is a term coined by Joseph Heller in his novel of the same name, describing a paradox in a law, regulation or practice in which one is a victim regardless of the choice one makes. This metaphorical signifier is formed via a summary of the whole book: A U.S. Army Air Forces Bombardier wishes to be excused from combat flight duty. In order to be excused from such duty, he must submit an official medical diagnosis from his squadron’s flight surgeon, demonstrating that he is insane and therefore unfit. According to the Army regulations, however, any sane person would naturally not want to fly combat missions because they are very dangerous. By requesting permission not to fly combat missions on the grounds of insanity, the bombardier actually demonstrates that he is sane and therefore fit to fly. Obviously, a certain degree of familiarity with the literary text alluded to is essential to the understanding of the metaphor.

The same can be said of the last example presented above. The metaphor alludes to an entire literary text entitled *The True Story of Ah Q* by arguably the best 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese writer Lu Xun. Ah Q, the main character in the novel, is a peasant whose personality is depicted as rather thoughtless and self-deluding. When he is humiliated by his fellow villagers, he always manages to obtain a sense of victory by consoling himself in one way or another. For instance, one time when he is doing well in a gamble, a skirmish erupts during which he not only loses his money but is also physically beaten up, but he is able to gain his peace of mind by slapping his own face, imagining that he is hitting his enemies. Even when he is taken out to be executed at the end of the story, he consoles himself by thinking that “in this world probably it is the fate of everybody at some time to have his head cut off”. On the strength of this whole textual situation, the phrase /Ah Q/ can now be used to refer to any person who interprets his defeats as moral victories.

**4. Metaphorical Patterns**

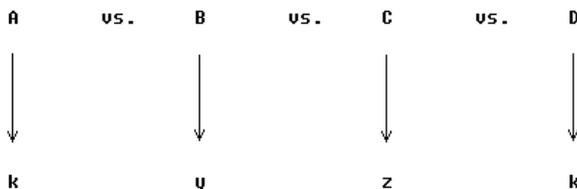
From the examples given earlier, we can see that the relationship between metaphor and culture is mostly haphazard and therefore unpredictable, but this does not mean we cannot find in a culture certain metaphorical patterns that are related to its members’ collective value orientations which tend to highlight certain aspects of things and phenomena in the process of metaphorical conceptualization.

To demonstrate the effect of social mores on the use of metaphors, let us consider in some detail what Vivien Sung calls “the five most sought-after values in Chinese culture” (2002, p. 11), that is, luck (fu2), prosperity (lu4), longevity (shou4), happiness (xi3), and wealth (cai2). For thousands of years, the Chinese have generally believed that they can increase their chances of success in life or at least make one another happier by surrounding themselves with auspicious objects or their images, and this has led to an enormous repertoire of metaphors, both verbal and nonverbal, that are related to the above mentioned “five blessings” (wu3 fu2). Auspicious objects can be natural as well as man-made, ranging from animals to vegetation to artifacts which in themselves do not possess any inherent “values” but become signs or symbols thereof once they are connected to human wishes and aspirations, mostly by dint of iconicity and/or indexicality. More specifically, the connection between salient cultural values and otherwise purely material objects are made through resemblance either in content or in form if those objects are already represented in language.

In his seminal essay “The Semantics of Metaphor”, Umberto Eco has this to say about “contiguity by resemblance of signifieds”:

A semiotic explanation of different rhetorical figures can be attempted through the development of the theory of interpretants as represented in the Model Q<sup>2</sup>.

Suppose a code is formed that posits a system of paradigmatic relations of the following sort:



where the horizontal line constitutes a paradigm of different sememes and the vertical correlation constitutes relations from sememe to seme or semantic mark (k is a semantic mark of A; obviously, according to the Model Q, k can become in its turn a sememe k to be analyzed through other semantic marks, among which even a could be considered).

To name A by k is a case of synecdoche (the veil for the ship, *pars pro toto*). Since k could even be the seme <crown> characterizing the sememe <king>, to name A by k can also be a case of metonymy (in traditional terms; in terms of our

present approach, such a difference tends to disappear). But *k* happens to be also a seme of another sememe, namely, *D*. Therefore, by an amalgamation through *k*, one can substitute *A* with */D/*. This is a case of metaphor. A long white neck being a property of a beautiful woman and of a swan, the woman can be metaphorically substituted for by the swan. Apparently, one entity is in place of the other by virtue of a mutual resemblance. (Innis, 1985, p. 261)

A distinctly Chinese example of this would be mandarin ducks which, because they usually live in pairs and mate for life, are often portrayed on pillowcases, bedcovers, and other Chinese household articles to signify a long and harmonious marriage.



Mandarin Ducks

It is not that people of other cultures have failed to notice the monogamous habit of the bird but that they do not make a point of linking it with conjugal life in its ideal state which gives birth to the metaphor.

Eco's insight on "contiguity by resemblance of signifiers" is even more pertinent to the study of Chinese culture because a huge percentage of its metaphors are the results of phonetic analogy or slippage. As is the case with content-based metaphors, the connection between the vehicle and the topic of a form-based metaphor was originally non-existent until it is initiated and then repeatedly reinforced through a mediator which sounds the same or similar. Umberto Eco thus explains:

In truth, though, the force of the pun (and of every successful and inventive metaphor) consists in the fact that prior to it no one had grasped the resemblance. Prior to 'Jungfrau' there was no reason to suspect a relationship between Freud, psychoanalysis, fraud, lie, and lapsus (*linguae* or *calami*). The resemblance becomes necessary only after the contiguity is realized. Actually (*FW* itself is the proof), it is enough to find the means of rendering two terms phonetically contiguous for the resemblance to impose itself; at best, the similitude of signifiers (at least in the place of encounter) is that which precedes, and the similitude of signifieds is a consequence of it. (Innis, 1985, p. 256)

This phenomenon occurs at an extremely high frequency in Chinese language which is known for its enormous amount of homophones or near homophones. Very often there are words which have entirely different meanings but sound exactly or almost the same. It is little wonder that in their pervasive well-wishing activities Chinese people have taken full advantage of such a rich resource of identical or similar sounds, giving rise to a large number of blessing-related symbols.

#### 4.1 Symbols of Luck

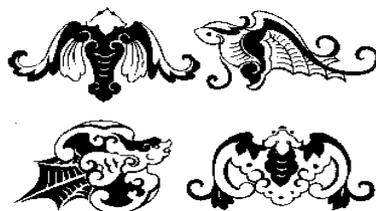
The Chinese word for <luck> is /fu2/ as in /fu2 qi4/ (good luck) and /fu2 xiang4/ (a face showing luck) or /yun4/ as in /yun4 qi4/ (good fortune). In as early as the 14<sup>th</sup> century, /fu2/ of various sizes could be found on the doors of many Chinese houses expressing their residents' wish for a better future. It was usually placed upside down because "to reverse" /dao4/ is a homophone of "to arrive" /dao4/, thus signifying <luck is coming>. The practice has continued until the present day, especially for the occasion of the Spring Festival which marks the beginning of a lunar new year. If the backdrop for the character is in red color as in the following figure, the whole poster stands for <great blessing> because /hong2/ (red) is pronounced in exactly the same way as another character which means <enormous>.



Luck Is Coming

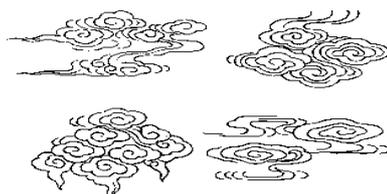
One prominent Chinese symbol of luck is bat, which in most other cultures tends to be associated with darkness and evil. The reason for this is that the Chinese character for bat is phonetically the same as the one for <luck>. /bat/ is also used

in combination with other objects or words to form propitious entities at a higher level. A picture of more than one bat, for example, means <multiple good luck>.



Multiple Good Luck

Another phonetically motivated symbol of luck is /yun2/ (cloud) which sounds similar to and is therefore employed to signify /yun4/ (good fortune). As with /bat/, /cloud/ is mostly used in visual contexts where patches of cloud overlapping one another stand for <continuous good fortune> or clouds in different colors imply multiplied blessings.



Auspicious Clouds

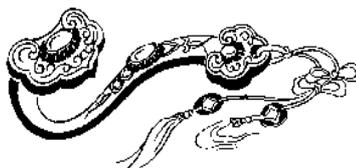
For a very recent use of the symbol, we may turn to the opening and closing ceremonies of the 29<sup>th</sup> Olympiad held in Beijing from August 8 to 24, 2008. Amongst many “obscure” signs that contributed to the exotic spectacles shown to billions of television viewers around the world was the pattern of clouds decorating the cauldron on top of the bird-nest stadium which carried the Olympic flame for a fortnight:



Olympic Torch above the Bird-Nest Stadium in Beijing

For those who are familiar with the Chinese symbol, the overlapping clouds stand for the good wish that the host wanted to extend to all the athletes and the people who were watching the games.

There are many content-based symbols of luck as well. One interesting example is the S-shaped itch-scratcher called /ru2 yi4/ which literally means <to feel satisfied>.

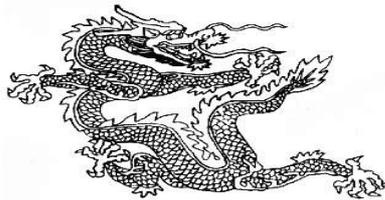


Itch-Scratcher

At one point in history, the gadget was liberated from its utilitarian function of obtaining physical satisfaction and turned into a gift between relatives and friends symbolizing <everything you wish>. This explains why the earliest ru2

yi4 scepters were made of wood or bamboo and later ones were made of jade, porcelain, silver or gold: expensive materials certainly add to the symbolic meaning of <good fortune>.

The most widely known Chinese symbol of luck is probably the dragon, a magic animal which, according to Chinese mythology, is able to shrink to the size of a tiny worm or to swell into a gigantic reptile with claws and scales. It is believed to reside either under the earth or at the bottom of the sea in winter and rise into the sky in spring, causing thunder and rain in its ascension.



Dragon

Initially the dragon was worshiped by the common Chinese as a benevolent creature which prevented droughts and brought harvests, but it gradually evolved into a general symbol of protection and fortune.

The earliest symbolization of the dragon is said to have begun in remote antiquity although its specific meaning may not always be clear to contemporary people. According to Ju Yueshi and Qu Ming-an (2001, p. 696), there was a discovery made in June 1993 by some Chinese scholars from the Hubei Institute of Archaeology at an excavation site in Zhangcheng village of White Lake area, Huangmei County, which reveals a giant dragon made of pebble stones. Dated at around 4000 years B.C., the artificial animal measures 4.46 meters in length, 2.28 meters in height, and 0.3-0.65 meters in width; it is portrayed as a pinniped with its long neck raised in the mode of flying. By the time of Han Dynasty (206 B.C. – A.D. 220), the dragon had become a symbol of such positive force that the imperial courts thereafter wanted to monopolize it as a symbol of royalty. Everything surrounding the emperor was now linked to dragon. The emperor's countenance was called /long2 yan2/ (dragon's face), the emperor's body /long2 ti3/ (dragon's body), the emperor's robe /long2 pao2/ (dragon's robe), the emperor's throne /long2 zuo4/ (dragon's seat), the emperor's bed /long2 chuang2/ (dragon's bed), and so on. As can be expected, the emperor's children are called /long2 zhong3/ (dragon's seeds), and some imperial families went so far as to intentionally mix up their genealogies with those of the dragon for the purpose of justifying their royal status. Liu Bang, who later became the First Emperor of Han Dynasty, for instance, had to compensate for his peasant origin in an attempt to compete for the throne against his rival Xiang Yu, who was from an old and renowned family of generals. He is said to have invented the story in which his mother Madame Liu was dozing off near a pond one day and experienced conjugation with a dragon in her dream. It was very dark at the time with lightning and thunder all over the sky. Worried about the safety of his wife, Liu's father went out to look for her but only to witness a dragon overpowering her. Madame Liu was thus impregnated and later gave birth to Liu Bang. That was why her son was so different from ordinary people. (Yi Siyu, 2005, p. 215)

Despite its hijacking by the imperial courts, the dragon as a symbol of good fortune continues to be very popular with the common folk in China. In the Chinese cyclic system of twelve animals indicating the year of a person's birth, the dragon is perceived to be the most propitious, causing many to desire to give birth to their children in that particular year. For the same reason, /dragon/ is contained in the names of virtually everything: people, mountains, rivers, towns and villages, food and flora. In the rural areas of China there used to be and still are many temples of the Dragon King (long2 wang2 miao4) where people go and burn incense to please this God of Rain for good harvests and peaceful life. At the end of the Spring Festival every year, Chinese in some places still stage "dragon dances" which evolved from the earlier worship of the mythological animal for the inducement of rain. In other places people hold a Dragon Festival in the second month of the lunar year during which they set off dragon-like strings of firecrackers as an appeal for good fortune in the coming year.

#### 4.2 Symbols of Prosperity

The second category of the five blessings is /lu4/ which originally means <mandarin's salary>. From Han Dynasty down to the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Chinese society, with occasional disruptions due to large-scale social upheavals, always held the practice of selecting its public officials through a competitive civil examination system. Those who passed the examinations even at the lowest level were usually guaranteed a comfortable and stable life. This kind of achievement was generally considered more honorable and respectable than becoming rich through other channels such as business, hence a separate category of blessing from /cai2/ (wealth).

One of the best known symbols of prosperity is an image of a deer because the Chinese character for the animal sounds exactly the same as that for <prosperity>. Used in combination with the symbols for <luck> and <longevity>, it presents an extremely propitious message of triple blessings to its viewer.



Luck, Prosperity and Longevity

Another interesting symbol of prosperity is /hou2/ (monkey) which happens to have the same pronunciation as another word which has the meaning of <the rank of count in the Chinese officialdom>. A picture of one monkey on the back of another, therefore, indicates a wish for securing official posts across generations. The character for <back> and the one for <generation> are both pronounced as bei4, hence the double connections. Similarly, a picture of a monkey riding a horse conveys the meaning of instant success in becoming an official because /ma3 shang4/ (mounting a horse) means <quickly> or <immediately>.

Two content-based symbols of prosperity are in order here. The first one is carp as in the common Chinese phrase /li3 yu2 tiao4 long2 meng2/ (a carp leaping over the dragon's gate). Chinese mythology has it that every year carps swim upstream along the Yellow River to spawn and those who are able to jump the rapids towards the end of their journey are transformed into dragons. This feat is often compared to success in passing the state examinations and is frequently shown in New Year pictures as below:



Carps Jump over Dragon Gate

The second content-based symbol of prosperity is /mou3 dan1/ (peony) which is widely appreciated by Chinese people for its huge petals and bright colors. During Sui and Tang dynasties (581-907), the plant became popular in the imperial palaces and thus earned the title of /hua1 wang2/ (king of flowers). Since then, peony has always been interpreted as a symbol for prosperity and nobility. The image of a peony in a vase, for example, is used to express the wish for <prosperity> and <peace>, with the former coming from its previous association with rank and honor and the latter coming from vase /ping2/ which is pronounced the same way as the character for <peace>.



Prosperity and Peace

#### 4.3 Symbols of Longevity

To have a healthy body and a long life is the greatest wish of all people around the world, including the Chinese. Of the five blessings mentioned earlier longevity is considered the most important and has inspired a good many symbols that are related to the subject.

Two phonetically-induced symbols in this category are /mao1/ (cat) and /die2/ (butterfly) whose pronunciations are similar to and identical with two other characters for <advanced in age>, or more specifically, <over seventy or eighty years old>. A picture of a cat, a butterfly, and some peonies thus signify <prosperity in old age>, and a picture of a melon (which contains innumerable seeds inside it) and a butterfly stands for <old age with a large number of children>.



Prosperity in Old Age

A more direct phonetic symbol of longevity is /shou4/ (flycatcher) which is a homophone of the character for <long life>. Thus a picture of a flycatcher in conjunction with a camellia stands for <springtime forever>, and a picture of a flycatcher and a bunch of bamboos /zhu2/, which is a homophone of the character for <to wish>, signifies <wishing for a long life>.

There are many content-based symbols of longevity that are used by the Chinese either in daily life or in art and painting. One of them is /gui1/ (tortoise) which is widely admired for its extremely long life span. There have been exaggerated Chinese records of the tortoise living for up to one thousand or even three thousand years. (Williams, 1976, p. 405) For this reason, /gui1 ling2/ (tortoise age) is frequently used as a metaphor for long life. In fact, the tortoise as a symbol of longevity was so popular during the Tang and Song dynasties that many people of that historical period incorporated the character /gui1/ into their names in the hope that it could prolong their lives. (Ju & Qu, 2001, p. 714)

Another very popular Chinese symbol of longevity is /mian4 tiao2/ (noodles) which take on this function on the basis of their extended length. When noodles of one kind or another are served on someone's birthday, they are meant to wish the person a long life.

There are also plenty of things and objects that are metonymically related to the idea of long life. Drinking chrysanthemum tea, for example, is believed by many Chinese to be able to improve eyesight, alleviate dizziness, facilitate blood flow, and ease the burden of stomach, which are essential to a healthy and long life. Thus chrysanthemum is often used as a symbol of longevity, gaining the nickname as /chang2 shou4 hua1/ (the flower of longevity). It sometimes appears in conjunction with wolfberry (another Chinese plant that is said to possess multiple medicinal functions) to form a complex pictorial symbol that expresses a wish for long life.

It is worth repeating here that the attributes of things do not have to be existentially testable in order to enter a metaphorical relationship. /ling2 zhi1/ (fungus of immortality), for example, is said to be able to give eternal life to those who consume it or even able to revive people from recent death which certainly is scientifically untrue, but its alleged supernatural ability has made it one of the most prominent symbols of longevity in Chinese culture. As such, it is often shown being held in the beak of a crane, creating a symbol of double longevity.

The same is true with the use of peach as a symbol of longevity. Chinese legends have it that a magic peach can prolong the life of its consumer by six hundred years. This supernatural quality is derived from the story that magic peaches grow in the garden of the Queen Mother of the West and bear fruits once every three thousand years. Over the centuries, Chinese literary works have kept this magic power alive, culminating in Wu Cheng-en's novel *Journey to the West*, in which magic peaches are described as tiny in size but, once eaten, could turn one into an immortal. For this reason, peaches are one of the most popular gifts to be presented to an elderly person on his or her birthday. A picture of peaches and bats thus signify <a lot of luck and a very long life>.



A Lot of Luck and a Very Long Life

#### 4.4 Symbols of (Marital) Happiness

Happiness as a general term runs across all the categories of human yearning mentioned above which is why /wu3 fu2/ is sometimes translated into “five-fold happiness” instead of “five blessings”. But when used in the narrower sense, it specifically means “conjugal bliss” that is essential to a contented life. Consequently, it is also related to the wish for fertility which has been one of the central concerns of the Chinese agricultural society for thousands of years.

A very common phonetically-motivated symbol of marital happiness is /xi3 que4/ (magpie). Literally, the Chinese phrase means “happy bird” and the adjective /xi3/ is the same character used for happiness in general. Thus a picture of two magpies facing each other stands for <conjugal bliss>.



Double Happiness

/he2/ (lotus) is another phonetically-related symbol of marital happiness. Pronounced in such a way, it generates a pun with either the character for <harmony> or the one for <togetherness>, which are deemed important to a successful marriage. A picture of two lotus flowers, therefore, is used to wish the receivers a harmonious relationship (he2 mu4 xiang1 chu3).

Marital happiness would be incomplete without children, the fruits of a couple’s love. This aspect of family life was particularly valued in the agrarian culture of China where more offspring simply meant more labor power to work in the field and to look after the elderly in the house. It is no surprise that the emphasis should find its way into the symbolization of objects. /li4 zi3/ (chestnut), for example, is identical in pronunciation with the phrase for <to establish children>. The fruit is thus often used as an auspicious gift for the newly wed in the hope that they will be able to give birth to many children soon.



Dates and Chestnuts = To Have Many Children Soon

Content-based symbols of conjugal bliss also abound in Chinese folk culture. In addition to the case of mandarin ducks mentioned earlier, /shi2 liu3/ (pomegranate) is much used as a wedding gift, not because it sounds similar to another word but because it directly conjures up a desirable state of things in relation to marriage. More specifically, the fruit in question contains a large number of seeds which is analogous to having many children in the family.



To Have as Many Children as Pomegranate Seeds

#### 4.5 Symbols of Wealth

The notion of wealth in Chinese is expressed through the character /cai2/. Except in those ideologically sensitive historical periods such as the Cultural Revolution of the 1960-70s, the character in its apolitical context does not carry any negative connotation and is in fact viewed as an important component of happiness. For centuries, the Chinese have been surrounding themselves with a variety of symbols of wealth which they hope will bring them profit in business and fortune in the family.

One such symbol is /yu2/ (fish) which is phonetically identical with the character for <surplus>. For this reason, a picture of fish has become an extremely popular New Year decoration to wish its viewers financial successes in the coming year. When fish appears in connection with /lian2/ (lotus) which is pronounced the same way as the word for <continuous>, the semiotic complex means <successive years of surplus>. If a real fish is served at a dinner table during the Spring Festival, it is usually left untouched to symbolize the wish for surplus of wealth for the family.



Successive Years of Surplus

Another phonetically motivated Chinese symbol of wealth is /fa2 cai4/, a kind of darkish grass that grows in the Gobi Desert of northwest China. The plant is tasteless and ugly-looking, yet it is highly valued because of its phonetic similarity to the expression for <to become wealthy>. It is commonly served at New Year's dinners to symbolize the wish for greater financial gain in the coming twelve months.

As is to be expected, there are also symbols of wealth that are not phonetically induced. Shoe-shaped gold or silver ingots, for example, often appear in New Year pictures. Called /yuan2 bao3/ in Chinese, they were once used as a standardized monetary unit from the 13<sup>th</sup> century down to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, hence a metonymic sign of riches.



Gold or Silver Ingot Used as Money

Also used as a symbol to promote wealth on New Year's Eve is dumpling which resembles the shape of ancient Chinese money mentioned above. This particular food is served on the occasion to convey the wish for a better financial year for the consumer. People in some regions of China even go so far as to insert a real coin into one of the dumplings in the process of making them. It is believed that the person who recovers it would enjoy a financially prosperous new year.

The above cases of metaphor and metonymy reveal once again that virtually everything in the world can be imbued with symbolic meaning. If we try to classify the innumerable objects and phenomena that the Chinese use for symbolic purposes, we find that many of them are concerned with the same few fundamental themes. In other words, many of the

Chinese symbols are related to the pervasive yearnings for good luck and fortune, for high civic and social rank, for a healthy and long life, for a happy and harmonious marriage with multiple children, and for riches and wealth, constituting what can be called a folk culture of wish-making.

### 5. The Subcultural Dimension

Human beings everywhere live in a complex society that can be analyzed in more than one way. Different geographical regions leave their mark on the people who inhabit those places; different ethnic groups follow dissimilar cultural customs and traditions; people of different classes and occupations hold diverse philosophies of life. These “subcultures” certainly have an impact on how people use metaphors in their everyday communication. As Zoltan Kovecses puts it, “[s]ubcultures often define themselves in contradistinction to main stream culture, and, often, they can in part be defined by the metaphors they use. And sometimes the self-definition of a subculture involves the unique metaphorical conceptualization of important concepts on which the separateness of the subculture is based.” (2005, p. 97) Indeed, if we take a close look at the plant-related symbols that Chinese scholars often use either in the form of real objects or their images in art works for the purpose of home and office decoration, it is not difficult to discover that they tend to be related to the predominant themes of overcoming adversity and self-effacement which is required of their profession.

One such plant is the flowering plum which is traditionally viewed as a symbol of fortitude and intrepidity. The conceptual ground behind the metaphor is that the plum tree is the first to bloom in early spring when traces of snow are still visible. This aspect of “braving the frost and snow” (bu4 wei4 yan2 han2, jing1 shuang1 ao4 xue3) is deemed similar to an essential quality of the ideal Confucian scholar who is supposed to stand up to bureaucratic bullies and social evils.

In contrast to the plum, which is a flower of early spring, the chrysanthemum continues to blossom in late autumn when nearly all other flowers have died or withered. For this reason, it is used by many as an emblem of patience and perseverance which is considered an indispensable quality of the “superior man”.

Next comes the orchid which has been interpreted as a symbol of refinement and modesty. This symbolic significance has to do mainly with the scent of the flower which is very mild but travels a long distance. Also valued is the fact that the orchid can grow on deserted lands or in deep valleys, coming into bloom in total solitude. Such is a desirable quality of the Confucian scholar who enjoys a quiet but productive life away from the public attention.

Then there is the bamboo which has been entrusted with the meaning of honesty and moral integrity and has become a favorite plant of the literati. (Zhao, 1996, p. 66) The center of the bamboo (its heart) is naturally hollow which links it with a Chinese phrase /xu1 xin1/ which means <modesty> or <humility>. More importantly, the texture of the plant is such that it breaks rather than bends which makes it a perfect symbolic vehicle for the upright character of the Confucian scholar.

As can be seen from the above, the flowering plum, the chrysanthemum, the orchid, and the bamboo have been made to signify some high virtues of the Confucian scholar. Collectively, they are known as /hu1 mu4 si4 jun1 zi3/ (the Four Gentlemen among Plants or the Four Noble Plants) and have served as a major motif of Chinese poetry and visual arts for well over a thousand years.



The Four Noble Plants in Chinese Painting

A good explanation for such a “noble” use of plants can be found in the works of Pierre Bourdieu, whose concept of “the economic world reversed” throws a very interesting light on the issue of social distinction.

According to the French theorist, the economic world we live in can be further analyzed into several subfields, each endowed with a specific rationality of its own, and how agents function in one economic subfield is not the same as in the others. The economic universe which Bourdieu himself studied the most (Bourdieu, 1984 & 1993) is the field of artistic production where the “common” economic law is shown to be reversed or rendered upside down. More specifically, artists are required by their internalized principle of art for art’s sake to disassociate themselves from direct financial profits or monetary gains that ordinary people are allowed to pursue openly and happily.

The same applies to the bureaucratic subfield in which the agents are supposed to sacrifice their personal interests to those of the public. As Bourdieu points out,

[T]here exist social universes in which search for strictly economic profit can be discouraged by explicit norms or tacit injunctions. “Noblesse oblige” means that it is that *noblesse* or nobility that impedes the nobleman from doing certain things and allows him to do others. Because it forms part of his definition, of his superior essence, to be disinterested, generous, he cannot be otherwise, “it is stronger than him.” (1998, p. 86).

In other words, members of the noble class are not allowed to be irreverent toward their collective ideals which, in the case of the Chinese literati, tend to be represented through the natural plants they find pertinent. And by such incessant metaphorical representations they try to produce and reproduce at least the appearance of conformity to the behavioral rules that constitute their specific social field.

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### Notes

Note 1. The Arabic numerals 1, 2, 3, and 4 immediately following the pinyin of Chinese characters are used here and afterwards to indicate the four different tones that exist in the Chinese language.

Note 2. The Quillian model (Model Q) is based on a mass of nodes interconnected by different types of associative links. For the meaning of every lexeme, memory should contain a node which has as its ‘patriarch’ the term to be defined here

called *type*. The definition of a type A foresees the use of a series of other signifiers (as its own interpretants) which are included as *tokens* (and which, in the model, constitutes other lexemes).

The configuration of meaning of the lexeme is given by the multiplicity of its links with several 'tokens, each of which becomes, becomes, in its turn, a type B. Type B is the patriarch of a new configuration which includes many other lexemes as tokens; some of these lexemes were also tokens of type A. Thus type B can actually take type A as one among its own tokens.

"The over-all structure of the complete memory forms an enormous aggregation of planes, each consisting entirely of token nodes except for its 'head' node" (Quillian, p. 327)

This model therefore anticipates the definition of every sign, thanks to its interconnection with the universe of all other signs that function as interpretants, each of which is ready to become the sign interpreted by all the others: the model, in its complexity, is based upon a process of unlimited *semiosis*. Starting with a sign that is considered as a 'type', one can retrace, from the center to the extreme periphery, the entire universe of cultural units. Each of these can in turn become the center and generate infinite peripheries. (Innis, 1985, p. 271).