

# Cognitive Analysis of Metonymy in Classical Chinese Poetry

Wei Li

College of International Studies, Southwest University

Chongqing 400715, China

Tel: 86-133-8967-2716 E-mail: 664501376@qq.com

Received: May 10, 2023

Accepted: June 3, 2023

Published: June 9, 2023

doi:10.5296/ijl.v15i3.21061

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5296/ijl.v15i3.21061>

## Abstract

Although metonymy is widespread in poetry, it has been ignored compared to the attention that has been paid to metaphor. Metonymy is not only a figure of speech, but also a cognitive means by which one conceptual entity offers mental access to another conceptual entity. In poetry, metonymy, as a linguistic device, is able to construct rich meanings and aesthetic effects and thus highlight the theme. What's more, metonymy is able to reveal the cognitive process by which the poet perceives and thinks about the world. As for readers, their decoding of poetry is partly dependent on their mental processing of metonymy. Metonymy in classical Chinese poetry is culturally and historically situated. Thus, metonymy is a vehicle for cultural and historical information. The exploration of metonymy in classical Chinese poetry is aimed to offer a new perspective of metonymy for literary studies.

**Keywords:** Metonymy, Idealized Cognitive Model (ICM), Classical Chinese poetry

## 1. Introduction

Metonymy has long been considered as a figure of speech. The cognitive turn of linguistics cast new light on the treatment of metonymy. In accordance with the cognitive view, like metaphor, metonymy is not only a linguistic expression, but also a cognitive device. As a conceptual phenomenon, metonymy is grounded in human experience. In metonymy, one entity is used to offer mental access to another entity. In other words, one entity can help direct attention to another entity somewhat related to it. A widely accepted definition of metonymy is proposed by (Kövecses, 2006: 99):

Metonymy is a cognitive process in which one conceptual element or entity (thing, event, property), the vehicle, provides mental access to another conceptual entity (thing, event, property), the target, within the same frame, domain or idealized

cognitive model (ICM).

Metonymy, as a cognitive phenomenon, is found everywhere in our daily life, and as a matter of fact, is more fundamental than metaphor. We use language and think in a metonymic way. We are inclined to use language metonymically because it is impossible for us to convey every aspect of the meaning through linguistic devices we adopt. In this case, metonymy helps a lot since in the metonymic relationship one entity can help direct attention to another entity somewhat related to it. For instance, one well-understood respect of one entity can shift our attention to the entity as a whole. We tend to think metonymically because it is impossible for us to activate all the knowledge about a given topic. In addition, metonymic thinking is an interpretive process since, through metonymic thinking, what writers and speakers mean to convey can be inferred. We are engaged in metonymic thinking to work out meaning from language and other forms of communication. In other words, to think in a metonymic way is an everyday procedure which plays an important role in helping us comprehend the world. It is relatively easy for us to use and make sense of metonymic devices, which verifies the automaticity, effortlessness and unconsciousness in structuring human experiences with the help of metonymic relations.

Metonymy is subtle. The subtle essence of metonymy indicates that metonymy functions as a useful device for writers and speakers who are not willing to be too explicit and specific about what it is that they are talking about. Metonymy indicates implicitness, which means that metonymy belongs to literature because indirectness is one of the dominant characteristics of literary works. In classical Chinese poetry, metonymic expressions and metonymic thinking are widespread. For poets, metonymy offers a way to think and create. Metonymy is a type of shorthand that allows poets to use the shared knowledge to express their emotions and thoughts with fewer words than they would otherwise need. For readers, metonymy can help them approach the verse and have a conversation with poets. Poetry is comparatively short, especially classical Chinese poetry. Yet various poetic devices are able to endow classical Chinese poetry with abundant connotations. Metonymy, as a poetic device, plays an important part in the construction of artistic beauty and abundant connotations. But much less attention has been paid to metonymy in the study of classical Chinese poetry, compared to metaphor. This is surprising since metonymy is often devoted to creative language production and comprehension thanks to its capacity to direct attention from one entity to another and to establish chains of association. Metonymy is a far more appealing and unpredictable phenomenon than we might think. Therefore, a focus on metonymy in classical Chinese poetry from a cognitive perspective has the potential to provide new insights into the exploration of classical Chinese poetry and offer implications for appreciation, translation and teaching of classical Chinese poetry.

## **2. Classification of Metonymy**

The cognitive approach to the classification of metonymy is abundant in the literature. (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980/2003; Radden and Kövecses, 1999; Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez and Mairal Uson, 2007; Seto, 1999; Yamanashi, 1987). The typologies of metonymy are helpful to the researchers because they provide not only a way of classifying different types of

metonymy, but also a way of understanding how they are related to one another. The focus in this part will be on the taxonomy proposed by Radden and Kövecses (1999) because their taxonomy is considered to be the most exhaustive and popular one and therefore, the most widely cited.

Radden and Kövecses' categorization of metonymy is hierarchical. They divide metonymies into two general conceptual configurations: (1) Whole ICM and its part(s), and (2) parts of an ICM. Whole ICM and its parts involve situations in which part of something represents a whole, or situations in which the whole of something stands for its parts. Each general conceptual configuration is further divided into sub-types in view of different ICMs metonymies work in. Whole-part configurations are assumed to include the Thing and Part ICM, the Scale ICM, the Constitution ICM, the Event ICM, the Category and Member ICM, and the Category and Property ICM. Then each ICM may generate different types of metonymy. For example, the Thing and Part ICM leads to two metonymic types: WHOLE FOR PART and PART FOR WHOLE. The six ICMs under the Whole-part configuration give rise to twenty-one metonymic types.

In Part and Part metonymies, something is used to stand for a concept to which it is somewhat related. The Part and Part configuration involves the Action ICM, the Perception ICM, the Causation ICM, the Production ICM, the Control ICM, the Possession ICM, the Containment ICM, the Location ICM, the Sign and Reference ICMs and the Modification ICM. Each ICM then may also lead to different metonymic types. For instance, the Containment ICM includes two metonymic types: CONTAINER FOR CONTENTS and CONTENTS FOR CONTAINER. The ten ICMs under the Part and Part configuration then give rise to forty-three types of metonymy.

### **3. Analysis of Metonymy in Classical Chinese Poetry**

There are a lot of metonymic expressions in classical Chinese poetry. Metonymy, as an important poetic device, enriches and enhances the connotation and vivacity in classical Chinese poetry and at the same time inspires readers' imagination. Therefore, the grasp of metonymy is beneficial to our interpretation and appreciation of classical Chinese poetry, and at the same time facilitates the quality of translation of classical Chinese poetry. The intention is not to cover every ICM, but rather to look at a selection of ICMs and some of their associated metonymy types, and to explore how they work in classical Chinese poetry. The following part will focus on ICMs, metonymic types, their manifestations and the construction of meaning based on metonymic expressions, and the possible reasons that motivate the selection of certain metonymic devices in classical Chinese poetry.

#### *3.1 Whole and Part Metonymies*

##### **3.1.1 Thing and Part ICM**

###### **PART FOR WHOLE**

The first type, whole and part metonymies, denotes that we can approach a part of an ICM through its whole or access a whole ICM through one of its parts. We tend to perceive a

whole through one salient or well-understood part or approach its parts from a whole with a good gestalt. Gibbs (1994: 319-320) contends that “metonymy is a fundamental part of our conceptual system: People take one well-understood or easily perceived aspect of something to represent or stand for the thing as a whole”. Langacker (1993: 30) also states that: “a well-chosen metonymic expression lets us mention one entity that is salient and easily coded, and thereby evoke—essentially automatically—a target that is either of lesser interest or harder to name”. The great value of metonymy, to a large extent, consists in its role in focusing on and picking out salient features. To put it in another way, metonymy has the capacity to give prominence to some characteristics of a particular phenomenon and leave others in the background. Littlemore (2015: 73) reckons that one of the most common uses of metonymy in the highlighting/construal process is to foreground the information that is most important to the speaker. We can find a lot of traces of this great power of metonymy in classical Chinese poetry.

As the most prominent part of a ship in ancient China, 帆 (*fān*, sail), motivated by PART FOR WHOLE, is usually used to stand for ship. In example (1), the metonymic vehicle, 帆 (*fān*, sail) is used to refer to the sailing ship navigating in the Yangtze River. In classical Chinese poetry, 帆 (*fān*, sail) is also a symbol of departure and farewell. In the poem, *Seeing Meng Haoran off at Yellow Crane Tower*, 帆 (*fān*, sail) also signifies friendship. The conjunction of 孤 (*gū*, lonely) and 帆 (*fān*, sail) does not necessarily indicate that there was only one sailing ship in the Yangtze River; instead, it implies that the poet, Li Bai, was only concerned about that ship which was taking away his bosom friend, Meng Haoran. This is an implicit manifestation of their strong friendship ties. In this poem, the juxtaposition of images 孤帆 (*gūfān*, lonely sail), 远影 (*yuǎnyǐng*, the shadow afar), 碧空 (*bīkōng*, blue sky) and 长江 (*Chángjiāng*, the rolling Yangtze River), paints a farewell scene and foregrounds their deep friendship by blending the emotions into the scene.

- (1) 孤帆远影碧空尽，唯见长江天际流。(李白《黄鹤楼送孟浩然之广陵》)

*Gūfān yuǎnyǐng bīkōng jìn, wéijiàn Chángjiāng tiānjì liú.* (Li Bai *Huánghè lóu sòng Mèng Hàorán zhī Guǎnglíng*)

His lessening sail is lost in boundless blue sky,

Where I see but the endless River rolling by.

*Seeing Meng Haoran off at Yellow Crane Tower* (Xu Yuanchong 2021: 205)

In example (2), *Seeing Secretary Chao Back to Japan* written by Wang Wei in 753 AD, is also a farewell poem. The poet's friend, Chao Heng, was going back to Japan to visit his family by sea. Although shipbuilding and navigation technology in Tang Dynasty reached a high level, the long journey to Japan across the sea in 753 AD was still rather risky. The juxtaposition of the metonymic expression, 帆 (*fān*, sail), used to refer to ship, together with the breeze, highlights the hardship and hazard of the long voyage to Japan. The description of the hardship of the journey is intended to reflect the poet's apprehension about the safety of his friend.

- (2) 向国唯看日，归帆但信风。（王维《送秘书晁监还日本国》）

*Xiàngguó wéi kànrì, guīfān dàn xìnfēng. (Wáng Wéi Sòng mìshū Cháojiān huán Riběguó)*

Look at the sun, O please!

Your sail should trust the breeze.

*Seeing Secretary Chao Back to Japan (Xu Yuanchong, 2021: 197)*

### 3.1.2 Scale ICM

#### UPPER END OF A SACLE FOR WHOLE SCALE

In example (3) and (4), 春 (*chūn*, spring) and 秋 (*qiū*, autumn) are used to represent the whole year based on UPPER END OF A SACLE FOR WHOLE SCALE. Why are spring and autumn regarded as upper ends of this scale? One possible guess is that in Shang Dynasty (1600-1046 BC) and the Western Zhou Dynasty (1121-771 BC) in ancient China, one year was divided into only two seasons, spring and autumn. Even if later one year was sub-classified into four seasons, people still kept the preference for spring and autumn to represent one year. The preference for 春 (*chūn*, spring) and 秋 (*qiū*, autumn) over summer and winter to stand for the whole year can be partly attributed to the value of these two seasons in agricultural society: spring is the best time for sowing while autumn is the time for good harvest. Besides, in ancient China spring and autumn abounded with important social activities. For ancient Chinese, spring was the season of sacrificial activities. Through offering sacrifices to ancestors and gods, the ancient Chinese anticipated good weather and bumper harvest. Autumn was a season of harvest and war. The ancient Chinese were first engaged in gathering crops. After the harvest was finished, it was likely that neighbouring countries would launch a war to scramble for provisions and territory. What's more, the ancient Chinese demonstrated a strong favor for spring and autumn because of the temperate climate in these two seasons, hoping that the whole society would be as peaceful and stable as spring and autumn. The preference of spring and autumn in ancient China may trigger the metonymic expression of spring and autumn to stand for the whole year in classical Chinese poetry.

- (3) 别来几春未还家（李白《久别离》）

*Bié lái jǐ chūn wèi huánjiā. (Lǐ Bái Jiǔbiélí)*

You have been away from home for several springs.

*Parting*

- (4) 谁谓历三秋（李白《江夏行》）

*Shuí wèi lì sānqiū. (Lǐ Bái Jiāngxiàxíng)*

He has been away for three years.

*Ballad of Jiangxia*

### 3.1.3 Event ICM

#### SUB-EVENT FOR WHOLE EVENT

The farewell poems in ancient China are often filled with the strong smell of wine because for ancient Chinese drinking wine is regarded as a vital ritual in bidding farewell to a friend. Therefore, in the ancient Chinese poems, the account of parting scene usually goes with drinking wine. Drinking wine is the string that pulls together the whole poem as in (4). The first line begins with filling the jade bottle with fine wine, which is a good lead-in for the unfolding of the farewell poem. Then in the following part, 衔杯 (*xiánbēi*, hold a cup in the mouth), a metonymic expression based on SUB-EVENT FOR WHOLE EVENT, is a favorite expression used to stand for the whole process of drinking wine in classical Chinese poetry. The substitution of 衔杯 (*xiánbēi*, hold a cup in the mouth) for drinking wine is easily comprehensible since drinking wine is a common practice in seeing off a friend in ancient China. In addition, 衔杯 (*xiánbēi*, hold a cup in the mouth) shares the same structure with the first two words in the previous line, 系马 (*xìmǎ*, tie the horse), VERB+NOUN, and thus helps keep the lines neat and symmetric and forms a perfect instance of antithesis. On the basis of antithesis, neat and balanced poetic lines sound more rhythmic and smoother. The metonymic expression 衔杯 (*xiánbēi*, holding a cup in the mouth) has the capacity to deliver the accurate meaning and in the meanwhile manages to achieve antithesis in the verse.

(5) 玉瓶沽美酒，数里送君还。

*Yùpíng gū měijiǔ, shùlǐ sòng jūn huán.*

系马垂杨下，衔杯大道间。（李白《广陵赠别》）

*Xìmǎ chuíyáng xià, xiánbēi dàdào jiān.* (Lǐ Bái *Guǎnglíng zèngbié*)

With fine wine in the jade bottle, I saw you off for miles and it was time to return;

Tying my horse to the poplar tree, I stood there with wine cup still in the mouth.

*Farewell in Guangling*

### 3.1.4 Category and Property ICM

#### PROPERTY FOR CATEGORY

In the following poem, *Butterflies in Love with Flowers* written by Ouyang Xiu, 红 (*hóng*, red) is used to stand for red flowers since most flowers in nature are red. Color, the most salient property of plants in the world, tends to attract attention. Red, as a very eye-catching color, is usually used by ancient Chinese poets to refer to flowers. The metonymic expression 红 (*hóng*, red) as in (5), based on SALIENT PROPERTY FOR CATEGORY, foregrounds the most prominent and impressive characteristic of plants and helps portray a sad scene: a scattering of flowers falls beyond the swing. The young maiden shed tears for both falling flowers and herself. The description of the sad scene is intended to highlight the young maiden's sadness. Thus the metonymic device 红 (*hóng*, red) in the poem aids not only in the expression of the young maiden's emotions and but also in the construction of artistic



beauty.

(6) 泪眼问花花不语，乱红飞过秋千去。(欧阳修 《蝶恋花》)

*Lèiyǎn wèn huā huā bù yǔ, luàn hóng fēi guò qiū qiān qù. (Ōuyáng Xiū Dié liàn huā)*

My tearful eyes ask flowers but they fail to bring

An answer. I see blossoms fall beyond the swing.

*Butterflies in Love with Flowers* (Xu Yuanchong 2021: 205)

### 3.2 Part and Part Metonymies

#### PART FOR PART

The second type, part and part metonymies, suggests that we might have access to a part through another part within the same ICM. While the relationship between parts and a whole generally pertains to things, the relationship between parts usually holds for the entities within an event that compromises participants and relationships. Part for part metonymies usually arise from the interplay between a relation and its participants, or when a relation is conceived as a thing or when a thing is regarded as a relation. Part for part metonymies also abound in classical Chinese poetry.

##### 3.2.1 Action ICM

#### ACTION FOR AGENT

As presented in (6), 东山卧 (*dōngshānwò*, lie in Dongshan Mountain) is a metonymic expression to refer to Xie An, who lived in seclusion based on ACTION FOR AGENT. Xie An was a great statesman and the Prime Minister in Eastern Jin Dynasty (317-420 AD).

Li Bai was profoundly influenced by Confucian philosophy and Taoist philosophy. Confucian doctrine inspired him to go into secularity, achieve aspirations and make contributions to the country while Taoist belief propelled him to depart from secularity and go into seclusion, and seek the way to immortality. The reconciliation of these two seemingly contradictory tenets is embodied in his idol, Xie An, who was a great statesman and the Prime Minister in Eastern Jin Dynasty (317-420 AD). Xie An, a perfect combination of the initiative advocated by Confucian philosophy and pursuit of free and independent individuality proposed by Taoist philosophy, was free to switch between secularity and seclusion. In his young age, Xie An declined offers to be appointed as government official and lived a reclusive life in Dongshan Mountain. Then in order to sustain prosperity of the whole clan, he started his political career and acquired high prestige thanks to his outstanding leadership in the Battle of Feishui. In this way, Xie An set a role model especially for scholar bureaucrats who yearned for both achievements in political career and a free lifestyle. Thus Dongshan Mountain, the site where Xi An lived as a hermit, is a preferred metonymic vehicle in Li Bai's poetry to stand for Xie An, which involves a LOCATION FOR LOCATED mapping. In example (7), 东山卧 (*dōngshānwò*, lie in Dongshan Mountain) which involves two mappings, LOCATION FOR LOCATED and ACTION FOR AGENT, is used to refer to the reclusive life of Xi An since

Xie An in Dongshan Mountain is a typical example for this category.

(7) 莫学东山卧, 参差老谢安。(李白 《送梁四归东平》)

*Mòxué dōngshān wò, cēncī lǎo Xiè Ān. (Li Bai Sòng Liáng Sì guī Dōngpíng)*

Imitating the reclusive life of Xie An will make the hero grow old.

*Seeing Liang Si off to Dongping*

### 3.2.2 Causation ICM

#### EFFECT FOR CAUSE

In (8), 胡沙 (*húshā*, intruding dust) stands for rebel army based on the metonymic mapping, EFFECT FOR CAUSE, since the cloud of dust was raised by the horsemen and soldiers in the rebel forces. Therefore 胡沙 (*húshā*, intruding dust) suggests the invasion of rebel forces and 净胡沙 (*jìng húshā*, clean intruding dust) indicates quelling the revolt. With the aid of 净胡沙 (*jìng húshā*, clean intruding dust), the poet reveals his strong wish to quell the revolt with ease like Xie An.

(8) 但用东山谢安石, 为君谈笑净胡沙。(李白 《永王东巡歌十一首 其二》)

*Dàn yòng Dōngshān Xièānshí, wèi jūn tánxiào jìng húshā. (Lǐ Bái Yǒngwáng dōngxúngē shíyīshǒu qí èr)*

If Master Xie again from Eastern Mountain rose,

He'd quell with ease the rebels as he'd sprinkle sand.

*Song of Eastern Expedition of Prince Yong (II) (Xu Yuanhong 2014, p.213)*

### 3.2.3 Possession ICM

#### POSSESSED FOR POSSESSOR

In feudal China, the rulers set up a set of moral principles and laws in order to reinforce the social hierarchy and consolidate their dominant position. The absence of these proprieties would lead to confusion about the duties between ruler and minister, between father and son, between elder brother and younger one. The notion of propriety took root in traditional Chinese culture and exerted influence on people's daily life in feudal China. In ancient China, the possessions such as the carriage could serve as symbols of the possessor's social status. In example (8), 万乘 (*wànshèng*, ten thousand chariots), based on the metonymic mapping POSSESSED FOR POSSESSOR, can serve as a metonymic vehicle to stand for the Son of Heaven in ancient China. According to the propriety in Zhou Dynasty (1046-256 BC), the Son of Heaven was allotted a territory of a thousand li square and ten thousand chariots. *Tao Te Ching* (《道德经》) also chronicles the connection between a myriad chariots and the Son of Heaven. The substitution of 万乘 (*wànshèng*, ten thousand chariots) for the Son of Heaven manifests his authority and strong military forces.



(9) 万乘高其风 (李白《赠卢征君昆弟》)

*Wànshèng gāo qí fēng (Li Bai Zèng Lú Zhēngjūn Kūn Dì)*

The emperor values their demeanor.

*To Lu Zhengjun*

### 3.2.4 Location ICM

#### PLACE FOR INHABITANTS

The impact of propriety also reached further into the residential system in ancient China. For example, the residence system in the house of civilians conformed to the strict rules. Place denotes the social rank of the people located in the house. According to propriety in ancient China, the locations of parents and children were different inside the house. 堂 (*táng*, the principal room) was the place where parents resided. 高 (*gāo*, high) can either mean that the principal room has a high ceiling, or can be used to show respect to parents. Since 高堂 (*gāotáng*, the principal room) is closely connected with parents, it acts as a metonymic vehicle for parents as in example (10). Thus the metonymic expressions in relation to location in the common people's houses reflect the strict regulations in the clan system in ancient China.

(10) 抱剑辞高堂 (李白《送张秀才从军》)

*Bào jiàn cí gāotáng. (Li Bai Sòng Zhāng Xiùcái cóngjūn)*

Sword in hand, you bid farewell to parents.

*Seeing Zhang Xiucan off to Join the Army*

## 4. Conclusion

Metonymy may not embody the logical genius or the terminological sparkle of metaphor, but its greater subtlety and closer connection to ordinary usage make for a strikingly frequent employment in literary texts and a stylistic impact that is far from negligible (Matzner, 2016: 65). Metonymic expressions are prevalent in classical Chinese poetry, and thus are worth our attention.

The exploration of specific manifestations of metonymy in classical Chinese poetry reveals that as a shorthand expression, metonymy not only draws our attention to the entity it represents, but also lends extra connotations to the entity. The delivery of abundant connotations with just a few words is a dominant characteristic of classical Chinese poetry. It is safe to say that metonymy belongs to classical Chinese poetry thanks to the indirectness and subtlety of metonymy. In addition, cognitive analysis of metonymy in classical Chinese poetry demonstrates how the poet perceives and conceptualizes the world. Thirdly, metonymic expressions in classical Chinese poetry are culturally and historically situated. The appropriate understanding of metonymy is, to some extent, dependent on the correct understanding of the cultural and historical background. Besides, metonymy can also function as a lens through which readers can have a glimpse of culture in that historical

period. The cognitive analysis of metonymy in classical Chinese poetry in this research is conducive to appreciation, translation and teaching of classical Chinese poetry. Yet the current study is limited to metonymic patterns in classical Chinese poetry in general. It would be interesting to go beyond the sphere of the current research to implement comparative research. In future research, there are other possible directions to be investigated, for instance, to compare choice of metonymic patterns by different poets, or to compare the historical development of metonymy in different periods in ancient China.

### Acknowledgements

This paper is supported by Humanity and Social Science of Chongqing (No. 2020WYZX03), Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities (No. SWU1209350), and Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities (No. SWU1209336).

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