

# Conceptual Metaphor in Poetic Imagery Translation: A Case Study of Xu Yuanchong's Translation of a Moonlit Night on the Spring River

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## ABSTRACT

As a renowned Tang Dynasty masterpiece, *A Moonlit Night on the Spring River* has long been a focus of translation studies. While existing studies have predominantly explored its translation from the perspectives of aesthetics or narratology, research from a cognitive linguistic approach remains underexplored. This study employs Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) within cognitive linguistics as its theoretical framework to analyze translation strategies in Xu Yuanchong's translation from three dimensions: structural metaphor, ontological metaphor and orientational metaphor. Key findings indicate that, for structural metaphors, either literal translation or explanatory supplementation is required depending on the specific cross-cultural mapping situation; ontological metaphors, benefiting from human beings' universal cognition of material entities, can be rendered literally; and orientational metaphors require reconstruction of the connection between "spatial orientation" and "emotional connotations". The findings demonstrate that adopting corresponding translation strategies based on different metaphor types can significantly enhance the cross-cultural transmission of poetic imagery.

**Keywords:** Poetic Imagery Translation, Structural metaphor, Ontological metaphor, Orientational metaphor, *A Moonlit Night on the Spring River*, Xu Yuanchong

## INTRODUCTION

Poetry constitutes the most fundamental aspect of a nation's linguistic accomplishments, representing a nation's exemplary artistic endeavors and cultural treasures. Poetry often conveys rich connotations with condensed words, and the realization of this process depends largely on the imagery within the poetry.

*A Moonlit Night on the Spring River*, an immortal monument in the annals of Chinese poetry, has garnered immense praise since ancient times. Currently, the research on the English translation of this poem has become increasingly rich, with diverse scholars engaging in extensive exploration through multiple dimensions and perspectives. Nonetheless, scholars in cognitive linguistics believe that the essence of "imagery" is highly consistent with "metaphor", asserting that the cognitive process of imagery construction in poetry is inherently metaphorical, which offers a novel metaphorical perspective for the study of poetry translation.

Therefore, starting from the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, this study selects Xu Yuanchong's translation of *A Moonlit Night on the Spring River* as the research material, and studies the poem from the three perspectives of structural metaphor, ontological metaphor and orientational metaphor, which aims at providing a fresh lens for appreciation of poetry.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. A Review of Researches on Metaphor Translation

The study of metaphor translation originated with Lakoff and Turner (1989), who began to pay attention to the significant role of metaphor in translation and the metaphor's translatability. Subsequently, as cognitive linguistics deepened its understanding of metaphors, scholars such as Newmark (1988) and Lakoff (1989) recognized the limitations of traditional rhetoric in metaphor translation and started to supplement and refine the research on metaphor translation from multiple theoretical perspectives. During the developmental phase, scholars like Searle (1997), upon realizing the value of metaphors in translation, began to expand the research domain of metaphors and apply various translation theories. Newmark (2001) proposed seven metaphorical translation methods.

### 2.2 A Review of Researches on A Moonlit Night on the Spring River

Currently, there are multiple English translations of *A Moonlit Night on the Spring River* by both domestic and international translators, among whom the influential figures include Xu Yuanchong, Zhang Tingchen, Charles Budd, and W.J.B. Fletcher. Different scholars have studied the translations from different perspectives. For instance, Lyu Zhaofang (2015) conducted an aesthetic analysis of Xu Yuanchong's English translation from an aesthetic perspective; Wang Xiaoying (2010) explored the loss of cultural significance in Xu Yuanchong's English translation from a narrative point of view. Zhang Tongtong (2016) conducted a comparative study of the English translations from the perspective of relevance theory. Qiao Xiaokang (2021) analyzed Xu Yuanchong's English translation from the perspective of adaptation theory, exploring it at the lexical, syntactic, and cultural contextual levels. Currently, the study of this poem has extended from text aesthetic translation to cognitive translation.

## THEORETICAL BASIS

### 3.1. Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Lakoff and Johnson, prominent figures in the field of cognitive linguistics, introduced the theory of conceptual metaphor in their seminal work, *Metaphors We Live By*. In this publication, they analyzed metaphor from a cognitive perspective, positing that metaphor is a cognitive mechanism through which individuals comprehend reality. This shift signaled the dawn of a new era in metaphor research.

Metaphor is defined as "comprehending one kind of thing in terms of another." It encompasses two distinct conceptual domains: the target domain and the source domain. This process involves the mapping of one conceptual domain (the source domain) onto another (the target domain), thereby establishing connections between disparate conceptual systems. Typically, source domains consist of familiar, tangible, concrete, and ubiquitous concepts, whereas target domains frequently encompass unfamiliar, intangible, abstract, and uncommon notions.

### 3.2. Metaphor and Imagery

From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, poets employ a metaphorical thinking mode when constructing imagery. Metaphor is understood as a mapping from one domain (the source domain) to another (the target domain), enabling people to comprehend of the latter through the former. Similarly, in the realm of imagery, the "objective experiences or entities" act as the source domain, while "the poet's subjective thoughts" represent the target domain. Consequently, imagery is viewed as a specialized form of metaphor. The relationship between "conceptual metaphor" and "poetic imagery" can be characterized as a generalization-specialization hierarchy. Recognizing this, translators can treat imagery as metaphors and draw upon metaphorical translation strategies to handle imagery translation.

### 3.3. Types of Metaphor

Lakoff and Johnson divided metaphors into structural metaphors, ontological metaphors and orientational metaphors.

Structural metaphor is the most common kind of metaphor. It establishes a systematic correspondence between the source and target domains. Readers are able to grasp new or unfamiliar concepts more readily by drawing analogies with familiar, concrete entities or experiences.

Ontological metaphor utilizes material substance to endow conceptual domains with meaning. Given the material nature of our environment, the experience of substance constitutes a foundational aspect of human existence, providing a crucial basis for understanding more abstract phenomena. This metaphorical approach encompasses three primary types: material or entity metaphor, personification metaphor, and container metaphor.

Oriental metaphor refers to the conceptual metaphor organized according to the concept of spatial orientation. Spatial orientation, such as up and down, front and back, depth, center and edge, etc., is the most basic concept. People project abstract concepts such as emotions, physical conditions, quantities, and social status onto these concrete concepts of orientation, thus expressing abstract notions with orientational words.

## TRANSLATION ANALYSIS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR THEORY

### 4.1. Structural Metaphor

Metaphor is the structural mapping of one conceptual domain to another within a singular linguistic system. However, translation is the conversion between two distinct linguistic systems.

Therefore, it is imperative to consider whether the mapping between the source domain and target domain in the “source language” remains valid in the “target language”. Based on this assessment, specific translation strategies are needed to reproduce the cultural connotations of the source language, ensuring that the translation is both faithful to the original and accessible to the target language readers.

#### 4.1.1. Metaphors Are Same in Two Cultures

Languages share universal commonalities, and individuals possess similar cognitive perceptions of things. Therefore, different languages may exhibit identical metaphors, meaning that the mappings between two domains are the same in both the source and target languages. This shared foundation facilitates mutual understanding of metaphorical utterances among individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. In such cases, the translator often adopts translation strategies such as literal translation. This approach not only preserves the form and connotations of the original metaphor but also enables the target readers to experience the same emotional resonance as the original readers. In this paper, "ST" is used to refer to the source language, and "TL" is used to refer to the target language.

Example 1:

ST: 白云一片去悠悠

TT: Away, away is sailing a single cloud white

The white cloud floating in the wind is a metaphor for the solitary wanderer, creating a metaphorical mapping between the transient cloud and the itinerant traveler. This imagery is deeply rooted in Chinese poetic tradition, where natural phenomena often embody human emotions and existential states, reflecting Daoist and Confucian ideals of harmony between humanity and nature.

"Cloud" is a universal natural phenomenon, so there are similar understandings of "cloud" in both English and Chinese cultures. White clouds float, and wanderers also wander. Therefore, in Chinese and foreign cultures, there is a mapping relationship between "white clouds" and "wanderers", and clouds can be used to refer to the wandering people in both cultures, so translators can adopt the method of literal translation. The translator literally translates "白云" into "cloud white" in the translation. This literal approach succeeds because the metaphor's universality (cloud-as-wanderer) transcends cultural boundaries, which enables the foreign readers to get the same emotional experience.

#### 4.1.2. Metaphors are Different in Two Cultures

The diverse historical and cultural backgrounds give rise to distinct cognitive experiences among different nationalities. Consequently, there exists a certain disparity in cognitive patterns associated with the same entity, which means that the mappings between the source and target languages may not be the same. In such instances, the translator tends to achieve domestication through different translation methods such as literal translation with supplementary explanations or change of the source domain with supplementary explanations.

Example 2:

ST: 谁家今夜扁舟子

TT: Where is the wanderer sailing his boat tonight?

The term "扁舟子" is commonly interpreted as "man sailing his boat." In Chinese literary works, the imagery of "扁舟" frequently serves as a metaphor for a state of "wandering". Consequently, "扁舟子" is often employed to refer to a "wandering man".

In Western cultures, boats lack this rich metaphorical heritage. While they may signify adventure (e.g., Odysseus), they rarely convey the Chinese aesthetic of "departure and wandering life". To bridge this cultural gap, Xu Yuanchong, in his translations, supplemented the literal translation of "sailing his boat" with the word "wanderer." This translation strategy successfully conveys the lyrical depth of the original while accommodating cultural differences, demonstrating how Chinese philosophical and aesthetic traditions can be made accessible to a global audience.

#### 4.2. Ontological Metaphor

Conceptual metaphor entails a mapping between two distinct conceptual domains. However, in ontological metaphor, it is particularly noteworthy that ontological metaphor specifically employs "material substance" as the source domain to form the mapping onto the target domain, thereby materializing abstract concepts. Given that humans inhabit a material world, our foundational experiences are rooted in the interaction with physical objects and substances, and the experience of entities and substance is the basic experience. Consequently, individuals from diverse cultures share a common cognitive framework in understanding "material substance". This shared understanding facilitates a similar mapping in ontological metaphors across English and Chinese, and foreign readers can easily understand and accept the ontological metaphors in the original text.

In other words, in ontological metaphors, the source domain is often certain, and people often share similar cognition of this certain source domain. Therefore, in most cases, translators only need to pay greater attention to the target domain when translating ontological metaphors. Translators often employ literal translation to reproduce the denotative meaning of the target domain while selecting suitable words so as to replicate the emotional tone and artistic ambiance of the original text.

Example 3:

ST: 不知江月待何人

TT: We do not know tonight for whom she sheds her ray.

This sentence treats the moon as a real person, entailing a "personification metaphor". In the current research, it is widely acknowledged that rhetorical metaphors and rhetorical personification within the traditional literary realm are categorized under the umbrella of ontological metaphor (Zhang Zilong & He Mingxia, 2023).

Xu Yuanchong's translation as "she" brilliantly captures the moon's traditional feminine symbolism in Chinese poetry, where the moon acts as a compassionate observer of human affairs. Furthermore, Xu translated the subsequent phrase "待何人" as "shed her ray", suggesting that the moon bestows its moonlight upon its beloved, like a woman who lavishes her affections upon her loved one. Xu's translation successfully conveys both the rhetorical device and its underlying cosmological significance, bridging cultures while preserving the original's lyrical and philosophical richness.

### 4.3. Orientational Metaphor

Orientation metaphor employs spatial concepts to express abstract notions such as emotions, physical states, and social hierarchies. In such metaphors, the "spatial orientation" is the essence and is hidden within the "imagery", and the imagery serves as its exterior manifestation. Therefore, for poems with orientational metaphor, the poet's sentiments are subtly embedded within the internal "spatial orientation", rather than the superficial "imagery". Consequently, during translation, accurately reproducing the mapping between "spatial orientation" and emotion holds greater significance than preserving the superficial mapping between "imagery" and emotion.

Regarding spatial orientation, two primary situations emerge: Firstly, when a single image possesses its own spatial position, exemplified by an object positioned at a significant height. Secondly, when multiple images form a positional relationship together, such as the considerable distance between two locations. Consequently, we delineate the following two cases.

4.3.1. When a single imagery possesses its own spatial position, we choose literal translation approach and preserve the original imagery.

Example 4:

ST: 何处相思明月楼

TT: Who, pining away, on the moonlit rails would lean?

The phrase "明月楼", which means a tower with the name of Mingyue, implies an orientational metaphor. When individuals occupy high positions, they experience a sensation of coldness, which subsequently provokes feelings of solitude. Consequently, a gradual mapping develops between the spatial concept of a "high place" and the emotional state of "loneliness." This phenomenon explains the frequent association in numerous ancient Chinese poems between expressions of "loneliness" and "high places," exemplified by verses like "明月楼高休独倚", which means "Rest not alone upon the tower high under the bright moon" and "高处不胜寒", which means "The heights are too cold to bear alone." Here, "明月楼" serves as a concrete manifestation of the abstract notion of "high place." Over time, a direct mapping relationship has also emerged between "明月楼" and "cold loneliness."

In Chinese literary works, this kind of shift from "indirect mapping" to "direct mapping" is a prevalent phenomenon. As numerous poets repeatedly utilize a particular poetic imagery, it acquires a normative

associative meaning, thereby facilitating the formation of poetic metaphor (Xiao Kairong, 2023). To illustrate this transition, the following figure may be employed.

Despite cultural disparities between China and the West, individuals' comprehension of direction remains consistent. Regardless of whether one is Chinese or Western, the experience of feeling cold at elevated locations will induce a perception of solitude. Consequently, even in the absence of an analogous phrase such as "明月楼" within Western cultural contexts, a literal translation approach can be employed to maintain the imagery of the "楼" in the translated text.

However, Xu Yuanchong's translation renders "明月楼" as "the moonlit rails", employing a part-for-whole representation technique. This translation attempts to establish a mapping relationship between the concepts of "loneliness" and "railing", as illustrated in the subsequent figure.

However, within Western cultural contexts, there is no direct metaphorical mapping from "loneliness" to the physical architecture "Mingyue Tower." Xu Yuanchong's translation endeavors to establish a secondary mapping between "rails" and "loneliness," an approach that undoubtedly increases the complexity of comprehension for Western readers.

4.3.2. When multiple imagery elements form a positional relationship together, we use flexible translation methods to reproduce the orientational relationship.

Example 5:

ST: 碣石潇湘无限路

TT: It's a long way from northern hills to southern streams.

This verse employs an orientational metaphor, utilizing the geographical imagery of "Jieshi" and "Xiaoxiang" to collectively establish a positional relationship that conveys the concept of "long distance". In Chinese philosophy, Taoism's concept of "harmony between man and nature" views these geographical locations as part of the cosmic order, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all things. When an individual is situated thousands of miles away from his native land, it becomes inevitable that he will experience a profound sense of loneliness and a poignant longing for his hometown. Consequently, there exists a mapping between the positional relationship of "long distance" and the emotions of "loneliness and homesickness". In the context of translation, the accurate rendition of this positional relationship is paramount. Xu Yuanchong employs the phrase "a long way" to enable the reader in the vastness of the distance.

Furthermore, "Jieshi" and "Xiaoxiang" represent two specific Chinese place names that are unfamiliar to Western readers. Literal translation of these names could disrupt the reader's reading experience. Therefore, Xu Yuanchong employs the translations "Northern Hills" and "Southern Streams" respectively, in order to help Western readers to perceive the vast distance that separates these locations.

## CONCLUSION

Utilizing the framework of conceptual metaphor theory, this study conducts a comparative analysis of the imagery present in both the original and translated texts, examining them through three dimensions: structural metaphor, ontological metaphor, and orientational metaphor. Based on this investigation, the following conclusions are drawn.

Firstly, for structural metaphors, it is imperative to assess whether the mapping relationship in the source language also persists in the target language. Based on this assessment, appropriate translation strategies can be

determined. In cases where a corresponding mapping relationship exists, a literal translation approach can be employed. Conversely, if no corresponding mapping relationship is found, the meaning of the original text can be reproduced by either adopting a literal translation with supplementary interpretation or by altering the source domain while also providing interpretation.

Secondly, for ontological metaphors, they map abstract concepts to material entities. The shared understanding of “material substance” across cultures enables similar mappings in English and Chinese ontological metaphors. As a result, literal translation methods are frequently employed when transferring these metaphors.

Thirdly, for orientational metaphors, the poet's sentiments are subtly embedded within the internal “spatial orientation”, rather than the superficial “imagery”. The choice of translation methods is determined by the number of the imagery elements involved. When the spatial orientation is implicitly conveyed through a single image, a literal translation approach is often employed. Conversely, if the orientational relationship is constructed through multiple imagery elements, the translator can flexibly select a translation method that can effectively reproduce the orientational relationship in the target text.

In conclusion, in the practice of metaphor translation, translators should engage in a considerate analysis of specific issues and adopt suitable translation strategies based on the distinct metaphor types, so as to ensure that the target audience can achieve an aesthetic experience that is commensurate with that of the original readers.

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