

# A Study on Shi Su's Poems Translation from the Perspective of Ontological Metaphor Theory--Based on Yuanchong Xu's English Translation of Song Ci

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**Abstract:** Song Ci represents the prosperity of Song Dynasty literature and plays an important role in ancient Chinese culture. Shi Su, as a famous poet in ancient China, has his own style of writing. Shi Su's poems are bold and generous, full of unrestrained and open-minded feelings. The author often uses the rhetorical method of metaphor, so as to express his aspirations through describing concrete objects and express feelings to the nature. According to the conceptual metaphor theory proposed by Lakoff and Johnson, metaphor is not only a linguistic phenomenon, but also a reflection of how people understand and conceptualize the world in which they live. Ontological metaphor refers to the construction of some other concepts based on the concepts of objects and substances, which can be subdivided into metonymy, container metaphor and personification. Ontological metaphor refers to that people regard intangible concepts such as abstract feelings, ideas and thoughts as tangible entities or substances, and classify, group and quantify these concepts. This paper takes Yuanchong Xu's English translation of Shi Su's poems as an example to analyze the translation of Song Ci from the perspective of ontological metaphor theory.

**Key words:** Ontological metaphor, Translation of Song Ci, Yuanchong Xu

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## 1. Introduction

Song Ci is a popular literary genre in ancient China. It began in the Southern Liang Dynasty, formed in the Tang Dynasty, and flourished in the Song Dynasty. Song Ci is like a shining pearl on the crown of ancient Chinese literature. It has a same position of Tang poetry and represents the prosperity of a generation of literature. There is a book with the same title, *Song Ci*. Shi Su was a literary leader in the middle of the Northern Song Dynasty and one of the "Eight masters of the Tang and Song Dynasties". His words belong to the generous style, in his poems, there is a cure of the delicious cuisine, fresh and graceful emotion, and also generous and atmospheric ambition. In the field of poetry translation, the study of Song Ci translation has great significance.

In 1980, Lakoff and Johnson, in a book named *We Live By*, proposed that "metaphor is cognitive in nature, a mode of thinking expressed through language, rather than a simple figure of speech."<sup>[1]</sup> Metaphor takes place in human's daily life, thinking and action. Conceptual metaphor plays an important role in understanding and even translating literary works. In this book, conceptual metaphor is divided into three categories: structural metaphor, orientation metaphor and ontological metaphor. Ontological metaphor can be divided into metonymy, container metaphor and personification. As the implementation of the China's global strategy and the process of carrying forward of Chinese culture, more and more Chinese literature have been translated into other foreign languages. With the development of cognitive linguistics, the theoretical concept of conceptual metaphor has become more and more famous, and scholars have gained a new perspective on translation studies from this theory.<sup>[2]</sup> At present, there is a wide range of discussions on the translation of Chinese poetry into English from the perspective of conceptual metaphor theory, and there are few translations for an individual poet. Therefore, this paper focuses on the translation of ontological metaphor in Shi Su's Song Ci under the classification of Lakoff and Johnson's conceptual metaphor.

## 2. Ontological metaphor in Yuanchong Xu's English translation

### 2.1 Metonymy

Metonymy means to understand things endowed with abstract meaning through entities, so that we can classify, quantify, and discuss abstract things as a kind of homogeneous or separable matter. Writers use entities and substances to lay a solid foundation for all kinds of ontological metaphors, so that ontological metaphors can serve different purposes.

Example1.Original Text: 谈笑间，檣櫓灰飞烟灭——《念奴娇·赤壁怀古》

Translation: Laughing and jesting with his bride so far

While enemy ships were destroyed as planned

Like castles in the air.<sup>[12]</sup>

Example2.Original Text: 回首向来萧瑟处，归去！——《定风波》

Translation: Turning my head, I find the dreary beaten track.

Let me go back!

In example 1, “檣櫓” refers to the ancient war ships, and “灰飞烟灭” means to destroy completely. Yuanchong Xu omitted the metaphor of “檣櫓” in his translation and directly translated it into the enemy, which more clearly conveyed the author's thoughts at that time. In the process of translation, the translator has transformed the vehicle of metaphor, which not only ensures the existence of the vehicle of metaphor, but also successfully transmits its cognition to Western readers. However, when translating the word “灰飞烟灭”, Yuanchong Xu retained this metaphor, described the scene of the complete elimination of the enemy, preserved the original content, and also reflected the fierce fighting and the hero's (Yu Zhou) image of being good at fighting. In example 2, “萧瑟” means the sound of wind on leaves and is generally used as an adjective to describe the environment as dreary and desolate. In Xu's translation, the target readers could feel the same desolate feeling as the author. He translated it into dreary beaten track, which intuitively shows the dreary scenery.

## 2.2 Container metaphor

Lakoff & Johnson explained the container metaphor as “We are creatures separated from the surrounding world through the surface of our skin. The world is our experience outside of our body. Each of us is a container, which has interfaces and differences between inside and outside”<sup>[1]</sup> (Lakoff & Johnson 1980:29). Container metaphor is the most typical and representative metaphor in ontological metaphor. Empirically, people often think of the body as a pattern of container with interiors and boundaries. In general, we tend to organize our immaterial experiences in terms of physical experiences, such as emotional, psychological and cultural experiences, which are probably the most fundamental processes in human experience. Through people's understanding of themselves, they can be mapped to other abstract things, events or states in specific space fields and daily life experience. In this way, other things or events can also be regarded as human bodies, imagined as containers, and conceptualized, thus generating “container metaphor” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999)<sup>[4]</sup>. Container metaphor is widely used in our daily life and in literature.

Example1. Original Text: 照野弥弥浅浪，横空隐隐层霄。——《西江月·顷在黄州》

Translation: Wavelet on wavelet glimmers by the shores;

Cloud on cloud dimly appears in the sky.

Example2. Original Text: 恰似姮娥怜双燕，分明照，画梁斜。——《少年游》

Translation: The Moon Goddess seems to care

For the swallows in pair.

She sheds her light

Into their dream

On painted beam.

Example3. Original Text: 世事一场大梦，人生几度凉秋。——《西江月》

Translation: Like dreams pass world affairs untold,

How many autumns in our life are cold!

Example4. Original Text: 故垒西边，人道是三国周郎赤壁。——《念奴娇·赤壁怀古》

Translation: West of the ancient fortress appears

Red Cliff where General Zhou won his early fame

When the Three Kingdoms were in flame.

Example5. Original Text: 归去无眠，一夜余音在耳边。——《减字木兰花·神闲意定》

Translation: Sleepless when back, I hear

It's music lingering all night long in the ear.

People unconsciously use container metaphor.<sup>[4]</sup> There is no lack of container metaphor in ancient Chinese poems. For example, “gloom mood” has always been a topic often talked about by scholars and poets. They give this abstract emotion concrete weight, and

regard “gloom mood” as a material which can be measured and accommodated. There are also some similar expressions in English, such as “be wrapped in sadness”. For example, in example 1, the shores and sky are compared to containers with boundaries. When the translator translate Chinese to English, he should pay attention to use these English prepositions, for example Yuanchong Xi used prepositions like “by” and “in” here. The human organ “ear” is a container, and music is some kind of external substance. In example 5, the content of the poem compares one's own body to a container and Yuanchong Xu uses “in the ear” in his translation. In examples 2 and 3, dream and life are compared to containers, that is to regard abstract emotions and life experiences as containers. In Example 2, The goddess of the Moon (Chang'e) puts the moonlight into the dream of lovers, which describing the affection between lovers. In example 3, the writer compared one's life to a container and sighed the long years spent in life. In example 4, war is compared to a container. “In flame” is a metaphor for the war between The Three Kingdoms. It shows the historical background of the triad of The Three Kingdoms.

It can be seen that in the target language culture, there are also concrete cognitive ways of thinking, such as containerization or accommodation of abstract emotions. Therefore, when translating, sometimes we can make the target language readers to understand and empathize with us by literal translation of container metaphors.

### 3. Conclusion

Based on Lakoff & Johnson's classification of conceptual metaphor, this paper takes ontological metaphor as the theoretical basis. Ontological metaphor is subdivided into three types: metonymy, container metaphor and personification, which are analyzed and studied with examples.

In the process of thinking about which translation method should be adopted, the translator should also realize the meaning of ontological metaphor. Through the analysis of the expression of ontological metaphor in Song Ci, the translator can interpret its cognitive connotation, and compare the similarities and differences between the poet and the target language readers in the cognitive construction process of the same concept, which is helpful for the translator to accurately grasp the deep connotation of the original text, and get a more accurate translation that can make the target language readers empathize. Through the analysis of ontological metaphor in Shi Su's poems from the perspective of ontological metaphor theory, this paper explores and compares the similarities and differences between poet and translation on the construction of similar concepts and cognitive processes, which has important enlightenment on how to translate ontological metaphor in poetry. In the process of translating ontological metaphors, translators should try their best to convey the ontological metaphors in the source language poetry to the target language readers no matter what translation strategies, methods and techniques they adopt. As Yuanchong Xu said, to build a cultural power, we must make Chinese culture go to the world arena. Poetry is an important part of Chinese traditional culture, so poetry translation is an important step for Chinese culture to go worldwide. A good translation of Chinese poetry is conducive to spreading Chinese culture to the world.

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