

The Role and Importance of Flowers and Plants in Chinese Literature

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Flowers and plants have long been a staple of importance in various forms of literature, and Chinese literature is no exception to this fact. Throughout centuries of Chinese literature, various poets, writers, and philosophers have used images of flowers and plants as metaphors or to show symbolism in their writing or ideological beliefs. Images such as the mulberry tree, with its deeper meaning of family, home, and a strong matriarchal figure, are seen in numerous Song Dynasty poems. The orange tree, with its strength and resilience in bearing fruit during the wintertime, is often used to symbolize someone with upstanding character and purity. Finally, “the four gentlemen” of flowers, orchids, plum blossoms, chrysanthemum, and bamboo, are seen countless times throughout Chinese literature and artwork, and are beloved for their representation of idealistic virtues that Chinese literature and culture is based on. In this paper, I will discuss the importance of imagery and metaphors within Chinese literature, and look at prominent plants and flowers that are common themes in Chinese literature.

In order to appreciate the bold usage of these symbols and metaphors, it is vital to understand the difference between Chinese interpretation of literature and Western interpretation of literature, as well as the different functions that they hold. Firstly, the largest difference between Chinese literature and Western literature is the differences in the artistic nature of the two. Western literature has its artistic foundation in romanticism with prominent writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, Jane Austen, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, to name a few. This artistic foundation that western literature garners its roots from derives from the importance of the individual within society, celebrating the uniqueness of the individual and the expression of emotion. With this style of writing, often what is seen in western literature is language used in an aesthetic function, instead of a communicative function.

Chinese literature, however, is often more evocative than Western literature. The modern concept of western literature serving as an aesthetic function, is a contrast to the clear imagery and consistent use of metaphors that are seen throughout Chinese literature. Chinese literature itself, written in Chinese characters, makes the meaning of its literature easier to communicate, with each character having its own meaning and history to it. Furthermore, the use of countless metaphors, plants, animals, and various objects all help to communicate in a more direct way since these elements from nature became universally understood by the Chinese reader. A common theme that is seen throughout Chinese literature is the use of these metaphors to reflect the internal state of a person. For example, in some poetry in *The Book of Songs* the internal state of a crippling lonely person who has no family, specifically brothers, to ease his loneliness, is externally expressed as the pear tree that the man walks past numerous times throughout the changing of the seasons. Hence, a large difference between western and Chinese literature resides in the basic function of the language. The romantic works of western literature, relying on aesthetics to convey themes and motifs, is drastically different from the more directly communicative Chinese literature, which heavily relies on the use of different metaphors and symbols as an eternal expression to the internal state.

For instance, one of the most important symbols used in Chinese literature is the mulberry tree. Chinese literature uses the mulberry tree to represent the entity of home. The home that is reflected by the mulberry tree usually has a matriarchal figure at the top of it. Silkworms feed off the leaves of mulberry trees, and China has become famous for its exportation of silk. Because silk was one of the most prominent materials for making clothes, Chinese literary minds use the mulberry tree as a means to symbolize home wherein the matriarch nurtures, produces, and provides for the needs of her family. The mulberry tree is seen

often throughout Chinese literature, particularly in *The Book of Songs*, where we read, “I beg of you, Chung Tzu, Do not climb over our wall, Do not break the mulberry-trees we have planted. Not that I mind about the mulberry-trees, but I am afraid of my brothers. Chung Tzu I dearly love; but of what my brothers say indeed I am afraid” (Birch 8). In this passage the narrator clearly feels conflicted between the love she has for Chung Tzu and the opinion of her brothers. In this context, we are able to see the symbol of the mulberry tree in full effect. Instead of outright saying that the narrator is afraid of what her family will do when she leaves them for her lover, Chung Tzu, we are able to observe the narrator's internal state through the imagery of the mulberry tree. The narrator begs for her lover to not break the mulberry tree which her family has worked so hard to cultivate; in essence she is begging to not have to be torn away from her family. Furthermore, Li Bai's *Spring Thoughts* is one of the most renowned works of Chinese poetry and again we see the same mulberry metaphor at work. *Spring Thoughts* was written from the point of view of the wife of a soldier who was fighting in a war. Li Bai writes, “O grass of Yen, like green silk flowing, Green boughs low, on mulberries of Ch'in, All that time! You've been thinking of home, and all that time! My heart is breaking...” (Birch 225). The ancient Chinese view on war was that it can sometimes be a necessary evil, but overall was not looked at to be the first solution to any problem, and usually was a result of all other options being exhausted. Furthermore, war was not praised or romanticized as being heroic as it is in western culture, and because of that we know that the narrator feels deep sorrow, both with her husband being gone, but also with the uprooting of her home and family. The initial description of the green silky grass and the green boughs of the mulberry tree are given to show the previous life the narrator had with her husband before he went off to war. This imagery is harshly broken by

the subsequent description of the narrator's heart breaking because of the breaking up of her home.

In these two poems from *The Book of Songs* and Li Bai's *Spring Thoughts*, we are able to see much of the imagery that Chinese literature is so famous for. The mulberry tree is the most important image in both of these poems. In the first poem, we see the woman being afraid to leave her home and join her lover in a new life, and in *Spring Thoughts*, we witness the sorrow of a woman whose husband is at war, in essence leaving the home they have created together. The reader understands the reason why the narrators are experiencing such sorrow, which is the loss in some type of way of their home, symbolized by the mulberry tree.

Additionally, along with the mulberry tree, another very powerful metaphor in Chinese literature is the orange tree. The orange tree has been an important symbol in Chinese literature for centuries, and is sometimes associated with ideas such as prosperity and good fortune. Most important is its association with symbolizing strength and perseverance. Orange trees have the ability to bear their fruit in the winter time, when most other trees are dormant. Because of this strength and resilience, Chinese literature has made the orange tree synonymous with strength and perseverance in the midst of adversity. For example, in *The Songs of Ch'u: In Praise of the Orange Tree* we read, "Fairest of all God's trees, the orange came and settled here, Commanded by Him not to move, but grow only in the south country. Deep-rooted, firm and hard to shift: showing in this his single-mindedness" (Birch 69). The imagery used in these lines are reflective of the importance of the orange tree in Chinese literature. Because of the practicality that much of Chinese literary rhetoric is written with, we are able to see the narrator's personification of an orange tree, with regards to human qualities such as strength and upstanding character. As the song progresses, more characteristics of the orange tree are revealed such as guarding oneself

with care, being hard to shift, being pure and free from sin, and being strong in one's ways. Thus, embodying all the qualities of being strong, pure, and set in good morals, the orange tree is another clear example of the strength of metaphors and symbols in Chinese literature.

Additionally, four of the most common plants that are seen in Chinese literature are the plum, the orchid, the bamboo, and the chrysanthemum. These four flowers are often referred to as the four gentlemen of Chinese literature, and are not only Chinese literature but also Chinese art. Each of these flowers holds distinct characteristics which are common themes throughout Chinese literature.

First, the plum blossoms, which bloom during the coldest season of the year, are hearty flowers. They grow through ice to announce the arrival of spring and are delicate, yet resilient. They represent inner beauty and modest expression in challenging circumstances. A well-known poem about the plum blossom is Wang Anshi's poem, *Plum Blossom*. "There are a few branches of plum blossoms in the corner of the wall, They're blossoming alone there in the cold early spring, I know they are not snow from far away, for its delicate fragrance had been smelled before I have seen them clear" (Chinese Classical Poem: Plum Blossom). Plum blossoms are renowned and widely respected for blossoming during the winter months. Despite the cold, these flowers are able to stay resilient and bring forth a delightful fragrance. Traditionally, in Chinese literature, the winter months are synonymous with hardships, trials, and tribulations. The poem's opening line, which describes the biting winter cold at a time when most flowers have withered and died, establishes the setting. The plum flower, on the other hand, succeeds in blooming on its own, signifying the fortitude and independence of the character. The flower's fragrance pierces through the frost as a representation of how the human spirit can triumph over adversity and survive in trying circumstances.

Furthermore, despite their frail appearance, orchids are prized for their delicate scent and in Chinese literary references are frequently thought of as being elegant, often symbolizing humility. Famous Chinese literary mind, Xue Wang once said, “My love for the orchid is different from all the other blossoms, For it does not color to charm the spring sun. Under the cold dew of the west wind and deep forest, It smells fragrant even if no one is around” (Magnificence). Xue Wang points out not just the physical beauty of the orchid and its enchanting fragrance, but also how it is consistent despite who is observing. Xue Wang notes that the orchid does not bloom or show in a boastful manner in order to charm the sun, but it survives under the cold dew in dense forests. This metaphor is seen throughout Chinese literature as an image of contrast, because although the orchid has every right to be boastful, it remains humble.

Moreover, the sturdy and straight bamboo plant is also referenced throughout Chinese literature, where it is praised for its resilience and strength despite being swayed by gusts of wind. Due to its ability to swing and bend even under the most violent winds without breaking, it is a representation of both physical and mental power. Its hollow trunk symbolizes modesty. In Zheng Xie’s poem, *The Rock Bamboo*, we see these characteristics played out. “The bamboo clings firmly to the mountain steep, In the chasm of rock it plants its root so deep. In spite of all beats, it stands still, not bending low, Whether from east, west, south or north the wind does blow” (Chinese Poems The Rock Bamboo). Among several notable qualities of bamboo is the way that it plants itself in rocks. This, coupled with the height of bamboo which puts it in the way of large gusts of wind, is another factor that informs Zheng Xie’s praise of the bamboo tree. The poem opens by extolling the beauty of the humble-looking rocks and bamboo, which have

grown famous for their tenacity. The rocks are sturdy and unyielding despite the onslaught of waves, yet the bamboo, with its flexible yet powerful character, can bend and sway in the wind without breaking. The poem continues by implying that the rocks and the bamboo are able to endure and flourish as a result of their inner fortitude. The human spirit may withstand and conquer challenges by its own resiliency and inner power, just as the bamboo bends but does not break, and the rocks hold fast despite the waves.

Finally, the chrysanthemum is praised countless times throughout Chinese literature. Chrysanthemums are stunning and colorful flowers that frequently blossom in the fall while other flowers are starting to fade away, thus symbolizing the ability to overcome any obstacles. The chrysanthemum is serene, in tune with others, but yet honorable and unyielding, and frequently symbolizes unity and friendship in Chinese literature. In addition to symbolizing unity and friendship, oftentimes it is synonymous with family, harvesting time during the autumn season, and home. This is seen in Tao Qians, *Drinking Wine*, when he writes, “I made my home amidst this human bustle, Yet I hear no clamor from the carts and horses. My friend, you ask me how this can be so? A distant heart will tend towards like places. From the eastern hedge, I pluck chrysanthemum flowers...” (Drinking Wine). In this poem, the chrysanthemum is utilized as a means to describe the narrator's home. The narrator reflects that despite living among the hustle and bustle and the stress of government, he still finds respite and strength in his home. The chrysanthemum helps to show the narrator's affinity for peace and serenity, as well as imagery for the author finding respite in his home.

The direct and communicative nature of Chinese literature places heavy value on imagery and metaphors throughout much of its literature. Although having so many metaphors in order to communicate more directly may initially seem counterproductive to the very nature of Chinese

literature, once we take a look at the weight and symbolism of these metaphors we are able to see the value that they hold. The mulberry tree feeds silkworms, which in turn help to provide clothing for countless households, and is used to promote a household and family values. Orange trees, with their deep roots and strong foundation, bear fruit during the winter months, reflecting someone or something with deep values and upstanding character who has good morals. Finally, the four gentlemen of flowers, the orchid, plum blossom, chrysanthemum, and bamboo are used, often separately, throughout Chinese literature and promote the traditional values of Chinese culture. These plants and flowers serve a deeper purpose than simply marking the season or time of year; they are also the backbone of personification in Chinese literature. Metaphors, imagery and symbolism, which are reflected by these plants and flowers, help to offer an evocative language, which resonates on a deeper level with the reader. Flowers and plants took on familiar representations of significant and sacrosanct elements of life that Chinese readers would recognize and resonate with. These indispensable metaphors are a crucial part of Chinese literature, and are a large part of the continued success and empowerment that pre-modern Chinese literature holds today.

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