

Cultural Metaphors in China: A Visual Experience of Hierarchy and Status Symbols

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This paper attempts to study the visual metaphors appearing in the architecture of the Palace Museum in Beijing (also called Forbidden City) to show the unique characteristics of hierarchy and status symbols embodied in the tradition of Chinese culture. The author believes the study of visual metaphors entailed in the traditional architecture of China provides a special angle to the savvy of Chinese culture.

Rationales and Significance

The book *The Major Metaphors that Constitute European Thought—Growth, Game, Language, Drama, Machine, Time, and Space*, written by Robert N. St. Clair (2002), provides a very useful tool and angle to study culture and thought—metaphors. In this research paper the author borrows this method and looks at Chinese culture from the perspective of cultural metaphors to answer a parallel question: are there any major metaphors that constitute Chinese thought? Even though an interesting research subject area worth exploring, it would be too ambitious a topic to be accomplished within a 16-page research paper. Therefore the focus of the present research is narrowed down to the powerful role that visual metaphors can play in the illustration of traditional Chinese culture features, namely social hierarchy and status symbols. Hopefully this study will contribute in its tiniest part to an epistemic system, the social construction of Chinese culture. The author bears in mind the following three rationales for doing this research. First, the author believes that an easy and useful way to understanding a culture is through its “cultural metaphors” (see below for operational definition). Secondly, people understand culture through what they see and feel (a visual metaphor) when they first encounter a new culture. The visual effect during a cultural understanding journey will be, somehow, much stronger than the verbal effect, taking language barrier into consideration. The third reason is practical rather than theoretical. With the economic takeoff of China and globalization process, more and more people come to China to live and work. They are interested in the fundamental cultural traditions and values that are embodied in the daily business practices and social etiquette. A visual experience of cultural metaphors will help them understand Chinese culture better.

Outline of the Paper

This paper will include three parts. The first part is the rationale and significance of writing this paper. It takes metaphor beyond its original function not as a mere rhetorical device but as a more interesting epistemological quest of cultural study. The second part is the theoretical foundation of the research. The author will review the major theories and developments in metaphor and lay a theoretical foundation for the conceptual explication of

cultural metaphor. The third part is the pictorial and descriptive research into the visual metaphors in China that play an important role in understanding Chinese culture.

Conceptual Explication for Cultural Metaphor

Definition of Metaphor

“Metaphors are really statements based on some kind of analogy where two things are compared to each other” (St Clair, 2004). Psycholinguists Lakoff and Johnson (1980) put the metaphor as “understanding and experiencing one thing in terms of another” (Lakoff & Johnson, p. 5). They argue that metaphors provide symbolic networks around which people organize their lives. Dirven and Paprotte (1985) say that metaphor is seen as “being situated in the deepest and most general processes of human interaction with reality” (p. viii). Recently, it has been generally agreed that metaphor is the way we make sense of all sort of phenomena. In this paper the author will take Lakoff and Johnson’s definition on metaphor as the working definition. The author intends to help foreigners understand and experience Chinese culture in terms of a visual experience in the Forbidden City of Beijing.

From “Visual Metaphor” to “Cultural Metaphor”

In this paper the author operationally defines “cultural metaphors” as “visual metaphors” that vividly and forcefully express the unique cultural features of one country or one living civilization. The term visual metaphor is explicatively elaborated by St. Clair (2004) in his *Visual Metaphor, Cultural Knowledge, and the New Rhetoric* in Jon Reyhner, et al. (Eds.), *Learn in Beauty: Indigenous Education for a New Century*. In this part of the book the author argues that since the publication of Kuhn's (1970) model of scientific thinking, rhetoricians now realize that metaphors pervade all forms of knowledge. Kuhn called these shifts in perspective *paradigms*. Brown (1976), a specialist in the sociology of art, sees metaphors operating in a larger context. He notes that metaphors provide a perspective on knowledge just as scientific paradigms provide a perspective on theoretical knowledge. Therefore visual metaphor is just like Kuhn’s *illustrative metaphor* that provides a global perspective or point of view to understand culture. An example of an *illustrative metaphor* is “the atom is like a solar system.” The atom has a nucleus just as the sun is the solar system’s nucleus. It has electrons whirling around that nucleus just as the sun has planets circling around it. With the passage of time, this global view comes to be more fully articulated, the details are filled out, and what was once a simple plan for the structuring of knowledge soon emerges as an *iconic metaphor*, a description picturing events in photographic detail. St. Clair (2004) then introduced Gombrich (1963), a noted art historian, who is concerned with the interpretation of symbols in art history, and his line of investigation has to do with questions of cultural value. He wants to know why gold, for example, has become a visual metaphor of value and why it has developed into a derivative metaphor of noble simplicity.

According to St. Clair, metaphors can be used to understand cultural differences from the new perspective of visual images. By using the concept of cultural metaphor in this paper the

author intends to expand the boundary of metaphor not simply as rhetoric but also as a persuasive way of expressing the deepest core values and cultural orientations. Cultural metaphors thus include both words and images that can express the social construction of one particular culture. Chinese culture, to a great extent, is visual and pictographic by nature. This is reflected in the oracle language, the first recorded language of China, whose words resemble the pictorial shapes of their original objects.

The Ubiquity of Metaphor Research

Metaphors have many dimensions or are multi-dimensional. People have held different philosophical and theoretical speculations on metaphor for centuries. Aristotelian scholars use metaphor as a picture of speech and a means of persuasion; linguists study metaphors as grammatically symbolic systems; psychologists study metaphors as a speech of thought so as to complete a “cognitive turn” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) in metaphorology; sociologists study metaphors as social and cultural construction; scientists study metaphors as theoretical models and paradigm shifts; educators study metaphors as enhancing lexical expansion and learning process; more recently, some avant-garde researchers have studied metaphors as an epistemic form or new rhetoric, as a way of knowing, understanding, and expressing knowledge (St. Clair, 2004). These shifts in metaphor study represent epistemological transformations (St. Clair, 2004) and St. Clair (2002) argued that the Kuhnian paradigmatic shifts are, in reality, metaphorical transitions.

With these interdisciplinary endeavors, particularly since the “cognitive turn,” the ubiquity and revaluation of metaphor as an important topic for cognitive and social research has happened since the 1960s and prospered at such a scale that it has flourished and opened brand new scopes for cross-disciplinary metaphor study. Van Noppen et al. (1985) published a bibliography, covering the past fifteen years, that contains more entries than the one by Shibbes (1971), which deals with a previous period of more than fifteen centuries. Great contributors to cognitive metaphor study are found in such seminal philosophical publications on metaphor as Black (1962), Turbayne (1963), and Hesse (1966). Important books developing the cognitive approach in more recent times are MacCormac (1985), Kittay (1987), Levin (1988), Soskice (1988), and Winner (1988). New collections have been edited by Haskell (1987), Van Noppen (1990), Fernandez (1991a), and Shen (1992). Moreover, Lakoff and Johnson’s *Metaphor We Live By* (1980) has been followed by Lakoff (1987a), Turner (1987), Johnson (1988), Kovecses (1988), and Lakoff and Turner (1989). It is obvious metaphor has thus become comparable to other instruments of conceptualization. With the founding of the special journal *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity*, the institutionalization of metaphor as a specific domain of research in the social science was completed¹.

¹ The ideas of this paragraph are borrowed from Steen G. (1994). *Understanding Metaphor in Literature: An Empirical Approach*, p.4

Pictorial Research into Cultural Metaphors in China

A Brief Introduction to Chinese National Culture

Chinese culture is deeply rooted in Confucian cultures. Based on the four cultural dimensions of core values established by the well-known anthropologist Geert Hofstede² (1997) many researches have concluded that Chinese people generally are risk-avoidant rather than risk-taking with high uncertainty avoidance. People are long-term oriented and tend to prepare for the future by paying more attention to education and saving for the rainy day. There is high power distance in the society, which means the society is more unequal than other societies and people generally respect authority. Chinese society is a highly collective one with *guanxi* (social network) and social harmony acting as the stability agent. Out of these cultural orientations some key words can be used to describe Chinese culture: hierarchical power, status symbol, face-preservation, and reciprocal social relationship (*guanxi*). The origin of these cultural orientations should be traced back to thousands of years of feudal history where royal power and status have been supreme and non-challengeable and the formation is a long and gradual process. Below the author will take you on a culture metaphor tour of Beijing's Forbidden City, also named Palace Museum in Beijing, to make you feel the visual power of hierarchy and status symbol.

Pictorial Research³ into Cultural Metaphors in China

Palace. In the earliest Chinese writings palace meant no more than an ordinary house. After the founding of the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC), palace came gradually to mean a group of buildings in which the emperor lived and worked. Since then, the Chinese palace grew ever larger in scale. The Forbidden City of Beijing, which served as the imperial palace for both Ming and Qing emperors (1368-1911), covers an area of 720,000 square meters and embraces many walls, towers, pavilions, and studies, measured as 9,900 bays. The name, which can be literally translated as "red forbidden palace city," illustrates the mysterious, awesome, and complex nature of the palace.

The red-color walls, a color of fire, sun, and heart, have the illustrative functions of the palace as the center of the kingdom and protector from evil spirits. Tiles of yellow glaze, the color of gold and rice, shine beautifully under the sun and are a symbol of royal supremacy and noble simplicity. Therefore yellow color has become the symbol of supreme power and status symbol that is reserved only for emperors and empresses. No ordinary civilians were allowed to use this color in ancient China (Du, 2002, p. 72-73).

² The four national cultural dimensions explained in Geert Hofstede's (1997) book of *Cultures And Organizations: Software Of The Mind* are power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, and uncertainty avoidance.

³ Special thanks to www.images.google.com. All the pictures in this paper are downloaded from this website.

Ornamental Pillars (Huabiao). Ornamental pillars, the Chinese name of *huabiao*, are often seen on the grounds of palaces, imperial gardens, and mausoleums. The picture in picture 2 shows a pair of such ornamental pillars carved out of marble standing in front of Tian'anmen, the Gate of Heavenly Peace, at the center of Beijing. Each pillar, entwined by a divine dragon engraved in relief, carries a plate on top, on which squats an animal called *Kong*. This creature in Chinese mythology is supposed to be born of the dragon and good at keeping watch. It is generally referred to as the "stone lion." The ornamental pillar has a long history behind it and can be traced back to Yao and Shun, legendary sage kings in remote times. Their original function is to solicit public criticism by erecting wooden crosses at marketplaces so that people can write their complaints and wishes on them. These wooden posts were replaced during the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD) by stone pillars. Eventually they grew more and more decorative and ornately carved until they became the sumptuous columns exclusively used in front of palace gates. The dragons engraved on them have become the symbol of awesome emperors' power (Du, 2002, p. 75-76).

The Number "Nine" and Imperial Building. It may not be known among western visitors that the number "nine" carried a special significance in old China. Ancient Chinese regarded odd numbers as masculine and even numbers as feminine. "Nine", the largest single-digit odd number, was taken as representing the "ultimate masculine" and was, therefore, symbolic of the supreme sovereignty of the emperor. For this reason, the number "nine" (or its multiples) is often employed in palace structures and designs.

A noticeable example is the number of studs on palace gates as shown in picture 3. The studs are arranged in nine rows and nine lines ($9 \times 9 = 81$). This is also true of the marble gates of the "underground palace" of the Dingling Mausoleum in Beijing. Ancient palaces generally consisted of nine courtyards. The Forbidden City of Beijing is traditionally measured as having a total floor space of 9,900 bays. The picturesque towers (picture 4) guarding the four corners of the palace compound each have 9 beams and 18 columns. The three famous screen walls shown in picture 5 have nine dragons on each. An extreme example of the "game of nine" is perhaps the Circular Mound Altar in the temple of Heaven as shown in picture 6. Site for the Ming and Qing emperors to worship Heaven, the altar is in three tiers. The upper terrace is made up of nine concentric rings of slabs. The innermost ring consists of nine fan-shaped slabs, the second ring 18 (2×9) slabs, the third 27 (3×9) slabs...until the last or ninth ring, made up of 81 (9×9) slabs. The number nine is not only used on buildings but also used for the imperial New Year dinner, which is composed of 99 dishes (Du, 2002, p. 80).

Marble Baluster Head. Another important power and status symbol in Beijing's Forbidden City is its 1,460 marble balusters as is shown in picture 7. They serve to reflect China's highly hierarchical ranks. Traditional Chinese halls, towers, and pavilions in the old palaces normally stand on terraces. They are bordered with marble balustrades. These upright posts, or balusters, have heads sculpted in the shapes of dragons, phoenixes, lions, flames, clouds, and so on. However, dragon and phoenix images on baluster heads were exclusive to imperial buildings. These legendary creatures carved with clouds on white marbles are found in The Three Great Halls of the Forbidden City. These halls stand majestically on the terrace of three tiers, each of which is surrounded by many white marble balustrades. Viewed from a

distance, they look like a stone forest and give the halls an ethereal loftiness. This arrangement is unique because The Three Great Halls were the sites where the emperor held grand ceremonies, received his ministers, and issued important edicts. For people of lower ranks to use this same magnificent layout or the dragon-and-phoenix motif would be a capital crime punishment (Du, 2002, p. 81-82).

Stone Lions. In front of traditional buildings (even modern buildings now) such as palace halls, government offices, mansions, and other houses of style, one can still see a pair of lions standing guard. Carved out of stone or bronze, they are made a male and a female with the male on the left and female on the right. The male has his right paw resting on a ball (shown in picture 8). The ball played by the male lion symbolized the unity of the empire. The lioness on the right side has her left paw fondling a cub. The cub symbolized the thriving offspring.

The use of the lion was not the exclusive privilege of the royal court. Other personages of rank could also have them in front of the main entrances to their houses. However, their ranks were indicated by the number of lumps representing the curly hair on the head of the animal. Lions with 13 lumps, the highest number, guarded the houses of officials of the first grade, and the number of these lumps decreased by one as the rank of the official went down each grade. Officials below the seventh grade were not allowed to have stone lions. Therefore passersby can easily tell the official ranking of the owner of the house by looking at the lions in front of the gate. As for the original existence of stone lions there are various legendary stories. It is believed that the earliest stone lions were sculpted at the beginning of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220 AD) with the introduction of Buddhism into China. Sakyamuni (founder of the faith) was seen after his death “to point to Heaven with one hand and to Earth with another, roaring like a lion, ‘Between Heaven and Earth I alone am supreme.’” Elsewhere it is widely believed by ordinary Chinese that lion is the king among all animals. It has demonstrated a perfect combination of power and swiftness. For the same reason it is customary to use pictures of the lion to decorate structures, especially stone bridges. A prominent example is the Marco Polo Bridge at the suburb of Beijing (Du, 2002, p. 82-83).

The Bronze Tripod or Cauldron. The bronze tripod, Chinese name of *ding* as shown in picture 9, a cooking utensil in remote times, was used like a cauldron for boiling fish and meat. About 5,000 to 6,000 years ago, the *ding* was made of fired clay, usually with three legs. It eventually became four legs to make it stand steadily, but in English they are still loosely referred to as a “tripod”. With the advent of the slavery system, China entered the Bronze Age (21 BC-220 AD) and the clay *ding* was gradually replaced by the bronze one. In time, it assumed the role of an important sacrificial vessel used by the slave-owning aristocrats at ceremonies of worship. Towards the end of the slave society, the *ding* became a vessel which, by its size and numbers, indicated the power and status of its aristocrat owner. At rites, the emperor used a series of nine *ding*, the dukes and barons seven, senior officials five, and scholarly gentlemen three. From the number of *ding* yielded by an ancient tomb, one can tell the status of its dead occupant. Today visitors to palaces, imperial gardens, and temples of the Ming and Qing courts can still see beautiful arrays of bronze tripods which were, in their times, both decorations and status symbols. In the Buddhist temples the *ding* was also used as a religious incense-burner. In Yonghe Palace, the famous Beijing Tibetan lamasery, there is a large bronze *ding* with an overall height of 4.2 meters, cast with the inscription “made in the

12th year of Qianlong” (1747). Bronze tripods and cauldrons have always fascinated people with their hierarchical associations and their simple but stately forms (Du, 2002, p. 3-4). Many Chinese businessmen would like to have them placed in front of the building or in their offices as a symbol of majesty and fortune.

Stele on the Back of Stone Tortoise. A stele (see picture 10) usually consists of three parts: the crown, the body, and the pedestal. The crown is usually carved with a pattern of *chi*, a mythological animal supposed to be one of the nine sons of Dragon. It has often been taken as a dragon’s head, which it resembles. The body is a piece of high-grade smooth stone and bears inscriptions engraved in elegant calligraphy. The pedestal is an animal that looks like tortoise but actually is not. Its name is *Bixi*, the ninth son of the mythological dragon. It was born with such unparalleled strength that it could move the mountains and used to play havoc in the seas. Somehow it was tamed by the Great Yu, the legendary hero who fought the Flood, and helped him move obstacles and dig canals, contributing much to the conquest of the rampant waters. After the Flood had subsided, Yu was afraid that *Bixi* might slip back to his old ways and, to prevent this, made it carry a mammoth stone with an inscription praising its meritorious feats. This forever cost *Bixi* its freedom, as the heavy weight proved too cumbersome. In time, its image was confused with that of the mundane tortoise. Many a stone stele on the back of tortoise can be seen in temples, parks, and mausoleums. One can judge the historical importance of the person or event from the height, weight, and quality of the stone, as well as from the engraved decorations on the stele. The important steles invariably bear an inscription written by an emperor and are sheltered by pavilions from weathering. Tortoise-borne steles are now regarded as important cultural relics, valued for the historical events recounted and inscriptions of calligraphic art (Du, 2002, p. 19-22).

Zoomorphic Ornaments. Chinese palaces, temples, and mansions have on their roofs a special kind of ornaments called *wenshou*, or zoomorphic ornaments (see picture 11), some on the main ridges and others on the sloping and branch ridges. The monstrous thing at either end of the main ridge, called *chiwen*, appears roughly like the tail of a fish. Fierce and formidable, it looks as if it were ready to devour the whole ridge. It is, according to Chinese mythology, one of the sons of the Dragon King who rules the seas. It is said to be able to stir up waves and change them into rains. So ancient Chinese put a *chiwen* at either end of the main ridge for its magic powers to conjure up a downpour to put out any fires that might break out. At the end of the sloping and branch ridges there are often a string of smaller animals, their sizes and numbers being decided by the status of the owner of the building in the feudal hierarchy. The largest number of zoomorphic ornaments, for example, is found on the Taihedian Throne Hall or the Hall of Supreme Harmony of the Forbidden City. Leading the flock is a god riding a phoenix, followed by a dragon, a phoenix, a lion, a heavenly horse, a sea horse, and five other mythological animals, all with unusual names. Archeological research indicated that installing animal figures on roof-ridges has been an established practice for at least 2,100 years. While this practice can be dismissed as superstition the animals on the ridge do add to the grandeur and magnificence of the imperial buildings (Du, 2002, p. 91-92).

Conclusion

In this paper the author argues that some cultural roots and values can be best understood through “cultural metaphors”, a concept based on visual metaphor theory that has been elaborated by Dr. St. Clair (2004) and has aroused keen interest recently in the academic circles of both art history and cognitive metaphor. The author then explores two unique cultural value orientations in China: hierarchy symbols and status symbols. Through a visual tour around the Forbidden City in Beijing, the author exhibited to the reader how hierarchy and status symbols were visually and vividly embodied in the traditional architectural building designs and eventually became a recognized and established social construct and cultural heritage. Visual objects talk. From the moment you step into the Beijing Forbidden City or the Palace Museum you are embraced by rich cultural metaphors with iconic symbols and deep cultural implications.

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