

Non-Literal Use of “Jade”: A Study on “玉” (Yu) in Chinese Idioms

Tianqi Robyn Yang
University of Oregon

Among all common vehicles of Chinese metaphors, “jade” deserves some special attention. The concept of jade has vastly appeared in various contexts of Chinese poetry and idioms. The different references often correlate with specific jade-related characters and tend to appear in a set of jade-X combinations that are entrenched in four-word-idioms. I believe the correlations are not arbitrary. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), whenever we form a metaphorical concept, we automatically highlight some aspects of the experience while hiding others. Here I aim at exploring the semantic motivations of the “jade-X” combinations and how they highlight the characteristics of each different tenor. Are the connections naturally developed, which is to say, do the similarities between jade and different “good features” physically exist or are they solely cultural-based? This article will draw data from both literary texts and conventional idioms and analyze the data from a cultural and historical perspective.

1. Introduction

What is the definition of a metaphor and how it is applied in literary Chinese culture? There have been claims in the academia, remarkably proposed by Pauline Yu, that “metaphor,” as understood in the West, does not exist in traditional Chinese literature, for unlike Western poetics that uses metaphor to construct a new relationship by asserting an affinity between previously unrelated things, the Chinese imagery operates along lines of categorical affinity and correspondence (Yu 1981: 205-224). This theory later received much refutation, being criticized as “sophistical” by Stephen Bokenkamp (1989) from University of Tennessee. Yu cited and defined metaphors in Western notions as “matter for much speculation and disagreement”, while Bokenkamp quoted from Soskice that “Metaphor is that figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another.” (Preminger 1974: 490; Soskice 1985: 15-23) Soskice’s definition has pretty much coherence with Raymond Gibbs’s “understanding A in terms of B, where A and B come from different conceptual domains, but share similarity”. According to the Soskice definition, metaphors flourish in Chinese literature as well as conventional expressions.

Among all common vehicles of Chinese metaphors, “jade” deserves some special

attention. It is said in the Book of Rites, one of the Chinese Five Classics of the Confucian canon, that “since ancient time, all gentlemen wear pendants of jade-stones,” and that they should “never be without them unless there is sufficient reason” (禮記·玉藻). Jade has played a very important role in traditional Chinese culture. Beside the basic character 玉 itself, there are hundreds of jade-related characters that take the 王/玉 radical. Most of those characters have prototypical meanings of some specific kind of jade (瑾, 瑜, 琦, etc.), while the rest get more extended concepts such as the knocking sound of, the color of or even the stains on a jade (琤, 璫, 瑕 respectively). The concept of jade has vastly appeared in various contexts of Chinese poetry and idioms, referring to luxury (象箸玉杯), beauty (香溫玉軟), talent (握瑜懷玉), virtue (懷瑾握瑜), fortune (瑞雪兆豐年), peace (化干戈為玉帛), uniqueness (瑰意琦行), etc. Those different references often correlate with specific jade-related characters and tend to appear in a set of jade-X combinations that are entrenched in four-word-idioms. I believe the correlations are not arbitrary. Back to the Book of Rites, it was recorded that Confucius commented that a gentleman should behave like the jade, and therefore listed eleven virtues (humanity 仁, intelligence 智, justice 義, rite 禮, music 樂, loyalty 忠, sincerity 信, heaven 天, earth 地, chastity 德, and truth 道) of the jade, which was commonly used in rituals by his time. Many of the connections that jade bears with the abstract virtues might have come from this context, with extension, elaboration and highlighting. According to Lakoff and Johnson, whenever we form a metaphorical concept, we automatically highlight some aspects of the experience while hiding others. Here I aim at exploring the semantic motivations of the combination (which is previously described as “jade-X”) and how the combinations highlight the characteristics of each different tenor. Are the connections naturally developed, which is to say, do the similarities between jade and different “good features” physically exist or are they solely cultural-based? How do people from different cultural and religious background perceive this connection? These are all questions to be further researched on and discussed.

This article will draw data from both literary texts and conventional idioms and analyze the data from a cultural and historical perspective. Regarding frequent combinations of jade’s in conventionalized four-word-idioms, I picked gold/metal 金, pearl/bead 珠, scent 香, flower 花, and ice 冰. I will base on the prototypes of all these entities to elaborate how these words extend the core characteristic of “jade” 玉.

2. Database Description

TABLE 1 gives a chart for the data collected on common “jade-X” combination, as appeared in conventionalized idioms and their sources.

TABLE 1

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Specific Vehicle	Tenor	Conventionalized idiom	Source	
玉+帛 <i>Yu+bo</i> (jade silk)	Peace	化干戈為玉帛	“禹知天下之叛也，乃壞城平池，散財物，焚甲兵，施之以德，海外賓服，四夷納職，合諸侯于塗山，執玉帛者萬國。”	《淮南子·原道訓》
	Wealth	子女玉帛		
	Ritual	玉帛鐘鼓	“禮云禮云，玉帛云乎哉？”	《論語·陽貨》
玉+金 <i>Yu+jin</i> (jade gold/metal)	Unchangeability	金玉君子	“傅侍郎清直一節，終始不變，金玉君子也。”	《宋史·傅尧愈傳》
		金科玉律	“懿律嘉量，金科玉條。”	漢·揚雄《劇秦美新》
	Fortune, physical property	金玉滿堂	“金玉滿堂，莫之能守。”	《老子·第九章》
	Perfection (of an article)	金相玉質	“所謂金相玉質，百世無匹，名垂罔極，永不刊滅者矣。”	漢·王逸《離騷序》
玉+珠 <i>Yu+zhu</i> (jade, pearl/bead)	Indirectness (as a writing technic)	珠圓玉潤	“珠圓玉潤，四面玲瓏”	周濟《司辯》
	People with virtue and talent	珠玉在側	“珠玉在側，自慚形穢”	宋·劉義慶《世說新語·容止》
玉+瓊 <i>Yu+qiong</i> (jade, red/white jade)	Wine	瓊漿玉液	“吮玉液兮止渴，齧芝華兮療饑。”	漢·王逸《九思·疾世》
	Magnificence (of a building)	瓊樓玉宇	“俄見瓊樓玉宇爛然。”	晉·王嘉《拾遺記》
玉+香 <i>Yu+xiang</i>	Beauty (of a woman)	憐香惜玉	“嘲風詠月，惜玉憐香，則參政不如學	《三國志·馬良傳》

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(jade, scent/aroma)			士。”	
玉+花 <i>Yu+hua</i> (jade, flower)	Beauty (of a woman)	玉慘花愁	“玉慘花愁，追思傅粉，巾袖與枕頭都是淚痕。”	金·董解元《西廂記諸宮調》
玉+冰 <i>Yu+bing</i> (jade, ice)	Nobleness/rightousness (of a person)	冰清玉潔	“冰清玉潔；不以細行。”	漢·司馬遷《與摯伯陵書》
		N/A	“一片冰心在玉壺”	王昌齡《芙蓉樓送辛漸》

(Li 2001: 98-300)

3. Methods

Most part of the database I draw comes from Chinese *chengyu* idioms. Idioms are often described as “dead metaphors”, which are lexicalized and wouldn’t be comprehended in terms of individual parts. They are thought to have once been metaphorical because we can often “trace a phrase back to its fully metaphorical use in an earlier stage of the language” (Gibbs 1994). To be specific in approaching the data above, reconstructing the original attempted meaning from this “earlier stage” is needed. Approach: Present four types of non-literal uses: metaphor, metonymy, irony, and hyperbole. Let’s take a look at the definitions before moving on to further analysis.

1. Metaphor: understand oneself and the world through the conceptual mapping of knowledge from one domain onto another. (Gibbs 1994)
2. Metonymy: take one well-understood or easily perceived aspect of something to represent or stand for the thing as a whole.
3. Irony: say something but intend opposite meaning.
4. Hyperbole: use exaggeration to create emphasis or effect.

What I expect to present in this article is how these conventionalized idioms are relevant to the mutual prototype (jade), and how this prototype extend its semantic meaning into different fields, from a cultural and historical perspective.

4. Analysis and Results

4.1. Metaphor

Metaphor is the most common use among all figurative languages in *chengyu* idioms. I identified 10 metaphorical matches of “jade” with tenors that are targeted in the actual meanings, from people to very abstract ideas. They are listed on TABLE 2, on

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which I highlighted the common jade-combining characters as I mentioned in the introduction section.

TABLE 2

Tenor	Sample idiom	Pin-yin	Literal meaning	Actual meaning
People with talent	珠玉在侧	Zhu-yu-zai-ce	Pearl and jades are beside/around	There are people with talents (above me) around
People with higher social status	兼葭倚玉	Jian-jia-yi-yu	Reeds depend on/lean on jade	People of lower status approaches those of higher status for benefit
Valuable opinions	抛砖引玉	Pao-zhuan-yin-yu	Casting a brick to attract jade	Offer a few commonplace remarks by way of introduction so that others may come up with valuable opinions
	不吝珠玉	Bu-lin-zhu-yu	Being not stint to give pearls and jade	Being generous to give valuable opinions
(Polished) writing	珠圆玉润	Zhu-yuan-yu-run	Round as pearls and smooth as jade	Excellent singing or polished writing
Talent	握瑜怀玉	Huai-yu-wo-yu	Holding jade	Having talents
Virtue	冰清玉润	Bing-qing-yu-run	As clear as ice, and as smooth as jade	Nobly virtuous
	怀瑾握瑜	Huai-jin-wo-yu	Holding jade	Having virtues
	金玉其质	Jin-yu-qi-zhi	Gold and jade is its quality	Having virtues
Beauty (of a woman)	怜香惜玉	Lian-xiang-xi-yu	Caring for scent and cherishing jade	Cherishing (a specific) beautiful woman
	冰肌玉骨	Bing-ji-yu-gu	Ice-like flesh and jade-like bones	A woman is fair-skinned and beautiful.
	玉碎珠沉	Yu-sui-zhu-chen	Jade being crashed and pearl sinking into bottom	A beautiful woman dies.
	玉惨花愁	Yu-can-hua-chou	Jade being miserable and flower distressed	A beautiful woman is unhappy.
Truth	鬲山觅玉	Mi-shan-mi-yu	Going to the Mi Mountain to seek jade	Seeking persistently for truth

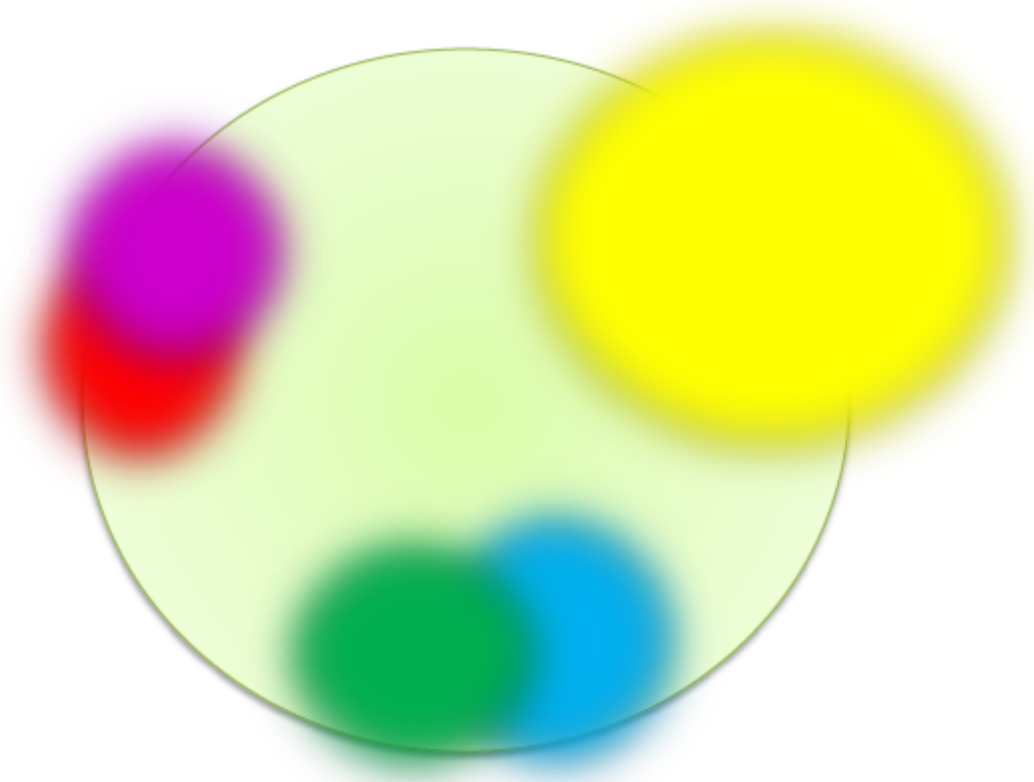
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Unchangeable	金科玉律	Jin-ke-yu-lu	Law made of gold and jade	Unchangeable law and rules
Wine	琼浆玉液	Qiong-jiang-yu-ye	Syrup that looks like white jade and fluid that looks like jade	Wine
Moon	玉走金飞 ¹	Yu-zou-jin-fei	Jade runs and gold flies*	Time passes very fast

Some characters, like 珠 ‘*pearl/bead*’, have rather broad distributions in targeting different tenors, while others, like 花 ‘*flower*’, have particular and specific targets. The combination of *pearl & jade* could be understood as talented people, valuable opinions, written articles, women, and so on. Moreover, since the basis of understanding of a metaphor is the perception of similarity, one specific metaphor based on *pearl & jade* should only activate some mutual aspects of the two objects that are relevant to the context. This explains why the combination of *pearl & jade* never refers to the moon, which is a metaphor activating the color of jade that is perceived as similar to that of the moon. The character 珠 which I refer as ‘*pearl*’ (but described as “*pearl/bead*” more specifically in the introduction section) does little in revealing its color, but instead, tells more about its shape and gloss. According to Lakoff and Johnson, the use of metaphors highlights some aspect of an illustrated concept and hides others. Here we see the highlighting-hiding rule also applies the other way round. When referred as *talented people*, say, the aspect of *hardness* which reflects into *unchangeable* is hidden, and all our focus is drawn to those attributes that make us perceive jade as a ‘spokesperson’ of *talented people*. Therefore more mutual aspects between pearl and jade are perceived and activated, compared to those between flower and jade. Figure 1 provides a more straightforward illustration of the relationship.

¹ “玉走金飞” is not coherent with other “金-玉” (gold-jade) combinations. Here the jade is understood as jade-bunny which is a metonymy of the moon. However, I believe jade-bunny itself is a metaphor by activating the color of the jade as an essential similarity. “金” is short for “金乌” which is a metonymy of the sun.

FIGURE 1



The area of the main circle (light green) represents all aspects of jade, which could be elaborated by activating any point within the circle. In correspondence with the highlighted characters, yellow circle stands for all characteristics of a pearl/bead, and purple, red, green, blue for scent, flower, gold, ice respectively. The overlap of the main circle with each glowing circle represents the mutual attributes of the two that can be used to perceive similarity in a metaphor. Red and purple circle overlap almost the same area of the main circle which means the jade-flower and jade-scent metaphors target at almost the same attributes in the process of listeners perceiving similarity.

4. 2. Metonymy

Metonymy is another common non-literal use of jade in *chengyu* idioms. Most of them are the type of token-for-type with a few part-for-whole. TABLE 3 gives examples.

TABLE 3

Type	Sample idiom	Pin-yin	Literal meaning (token)	Actual meaning
Ritual	玉帛钟鼓	Yu-bo-zhong-gu	Jade, silk, bell and drum	Ritual service

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Peace	化干戈为玉帛	Hua-gan-ge-wei-yu-bo	Converting weapons into jade and silk	Turn war into peace
Wealth/property	子女玉帛	Zi-nu-yu-bo	Son, daughter, jade and silk	One's family and property
Dynasty/regime	改步改玉	Gai-bu-gai-yu	Change measurement and jade (seals)	The change of dynasty/regime
(The luxurious clothing of a rich government official)	鸣玉曳组	Ming-yu-ye-zu	Make sound of one's jade pendants and swing one's official seals	The image of a rich government official
	蟒袍玉带	Mang-pao-yu-dai	Cloak with snake skin and belt with jade	
	横金拖玉	Heng-jin-tuo-yu	Decorated with gold and jade (on one's body)	

These metonymic references are closely related to the functions of jade in ancient Chinese traditions. There are basically five common functions:

1. As ritual objects
2. As one of the most expensive gifts between nations
3. As ornaments worn by people of high social status
4. As carved sculptures found in rich families (Jones 2004: 3-5)
5. As material of seals of significant figures of a country (the empire and officials)

In the first three functions, silk often shows its appearance alongside jade, both of which were the utmost treasure of those days.

As we see from the chart, the common non-literal use of *jade & silk* combination often symbolizes ritual, wealth and peace.

The connection between *rituals* (or *wealth, peace*) and *jade+silk* is based on a token-for-type metonymy that attributes to the same conceptual domain. It is like to substitute *the crown* for *royal government*. As is explained above, jade and silk are two of the most common and important elements in ritual ceremonies (Jones 2004: 13-14). Because of the high price value of the two items, they become prototypical property of a family or individual of wealth.

Jade & silk for peace is not as salient as the other two, and requires more imagination for people who are unfamiliar with the culture. *Jade & silk* here plays a role as a token for “best gift” that are presented in international exchange (but mostly from less powerful nations to powerful nations) in showing friendliness to each other. In addition, it takes a further step in “non-literality”—the concept gift-exchange or tribute is again used as a referential token, as a metonymy of peace, which could be understood as a result of such gifting.

The jade in idiom “改步改玉” (Change measurement and jade) symbolizes the seal of the emperor. “步” refers to the units of measurement, of which the change is often accompanied with the change of regime. These two tokens make up the most uncommon changes that could only happen after the shift into a new dynasty, and therefore symbolizes the type.

The last three metonymic idioms are part-for-whole. These are based on the third function of the jade. Jade ornament is part of the image of officials, and is one significant part that symbolizes their high social status and wealth.

4. 3. Irony

Most *chengyu* idoms could be used ironically, but there are a certain ones that tends to be ironic by nature, such as “贵人多忘事” (*Noble people are often forgetful*), which is more commonly used sarcastically in criticism (Norman 1988).

In my research, I find it very interesting that some *chengyu* idioms have lost their ironic nature as time goes by, but others gained sarcasm due to the changes of social structure which make the literal meaning no longer relevant. Here I picked one typical example for each.

“美如冠玉”—*as beautiful as jade on headdress*; the old-fashioned meaning of this idiom is to describe an evil-hearted man—who might look like a gentleman. However, this original meaning is gradually lost, and people now perceive and use it as a complement of a young man who—literally—looks good.

“金口玉言”—*golden mouth, jady speech*; it used to refer to the words of an emperor whose words and orders were unchangeable. However, in the modern society of China, there is no longer any emperor, and therefore this word becomes sarcastic to those who give assertive statements or those who do not keep their promises. Same changes happened to “金枝玉叶” (*golden braches, jady leaves*, which means offspring of the royal family), when there is no such people described.

4. 4. Hyperbole

Hyperbole in *chengyu* idioms is often accompanied by metaphor or metonymy. “鼎铛玉石” (*using luxurious containers as pots, jade as stone*), “堆金迭玉” (*piling gold and jade*), “食玉炊桂” (*eating jade (as food) and burning tea olives (as fuel)*), “象箸玉杯” (*chopsticks made of ivory, cups made of jade*). They often elaborate the high price value of jade and emphasize the luxury of life in a negative way.

5. Conclusion

Jade plays an important role in Chinese ritual and ceremonial events. The ownership of it makes up the upper class and it gradually becomes part of people’s understanding of the world. This research paper looks at people’s perceptive mapping of non-literal use of jade on a historical perceptive. In another word, it is to discover how

those words were understood before they became “near-dead”. I find that metaphors and metonymies are far more common in jade-related idioms than irony, hyperbole, understatement and oxymora, of which the latter two show no evidence at all within my database. This might have correspondence with jade’s common connection with positive images, and will be further studied.

The analysis of the literal meaning, origin and background information shows that the use of jade in idioms is not arbitrary. Instead, the systematicity is witnessed from the more common Jade-X combinations to the less common semantic changes of idioms that are related to irony. Moreover, overlaps of non-literal types are overwhelming, and people’s way of understanding them may vary, particularly under the ambiguity of Chinese syntax and the nature of a conceptual continuum. This research didn’t cover or discuss the denominalization of the “noun jade” into “verbal jade” and “adverbial jade”, but they are interesting topics to be further discovered.

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