

Symbolism of the Phytonym “Willow” in Russian and Chinese Linguocultures

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Abstract: This paper is devoted to the study of the image of willow in Russian and Chinese cultures. Since ancient times, plants have been closely connected with human activities, so people have special feelings for them. China and Russia are countries with a large number of plants, and in literature and everyday communication many of them acquire certain symbolism. What symbols does the willow tree have in Russian and Chinese cultures? This is the question we want to discuss in this paper.

Keywords: Symbolism willow poetry image Russian and Chinese

1. Study of plant names in Russian and Chinese languages

For thousands of years, people have not only used plants as a material basis for their existence, but also expressed their thoughts and opinions, moods and ideals with their help. Thus plant culture with aesthetic and artistic values was formed. In the culture of Russian and Chinese peoples, plants are often regarded as living beings similar to humans. Therefore, the attitude to plants, metaphorical and symbolic meanings they are endowed with, constitute the main cultural content of plant symbolism in the culture of these people. Plant symbolism embodies many aspects of national culture, such as moral feelings, national spirit, life attitudes, aesthetic ideals, etc., reflecting the social and cultural background, psychological and cultural characteristics of the nation.

The difference in the meanings of plants in Russian and Chinese is a reflection of the differences in natural environment, climatic conditions, and historical and cultural differences. The ancient Chinese land and the long history of Chinese civilisation have produced a plant culture represented by peonies, plum blossoms, pine trees, cypresses, etc. Russians use birch trees, olive branches, etc. as a metaphor for people's social qualities. The plant culture of the Russian people represented by birch, cherry, rowan, oak, plum, lily of the valley, etc. is the result of the influence of ancient Greek and Roman cultures, as well as Western religious culture.

In Russian folklore, plants are often considered to be living, feeling, breathing and communicating with each other, just like people. They should not be beaten, cut and humiliated, so folklore has developed many taboos, customs and beliefs related to plants and flowers. People endow plants with symbolic meanings that reflect national cultural peculiarities. For example, in Russia you can give chrysanthemums of any colour, but in China chrysanthemums, especially white and yellow, are brought only for funerals, they decorate funeral hearse. But chrysanthemum in China is not only a symbol of sadness. Chrysanthemum in Chinese culture is a symbol of strength, because this flower resists the cold, autumn wind. Therefore, if a person is compared to a chrysanthemum, it means that he is steadfast, strong, honest.

The differences and similarities between Russian and Chinese cultures reflect both their commonalities and individuality. Comparison with plant symbolism allows a deeper and fuller understanding of such cultural factors as the way of thinking, customs, values, ethics, folklore and mythology of Russian and Chinese peoples [Wang, Chenghui 2011: 52].

2. Phytonym “willow” in Russian and Chinese cultures

2.1 Willow symbolism in Chinese poetry

In our country's first poetry collection “The Book of Songs” there is a poem “I remember the time when we went on a hike, There was a green, green outfit on the willows; Now we're going back to the house - Only snow flakes fly and fly...” (Translated by A.A. Shtukin). “The Song Book” appeared during the Zhou Dynasty. It was so long ago that researchers cannot determine the exact year of its publication. We can only determine the centuries: XI-VI B.C. However, already in that distant era, willow became an important

image in people's poetic chants. In later works, poets often referred to the image of the willow tree.

The characters “willow” and “stay” are pronounced the same. “Willow” means “tree for resting.” Back in the Han Dynasty, people had the custom of breaking a willow branch during send-offs. During the Han Dynasty, the people of Chang'an would see their friends and relatives off to Ba Bridge, where they would break willow branches and give them to each other to express their deep feelings about saying goodbye. Over time, the tradition of breaking a willow branch and giving it as a parting gift turned into a unique custom, and the broken willow branch became synonymous with goodbye. The poet Li Bo wrote the poem “Yiqin'e (Thoughts of a Beauty from Qin)”: “Once again the willow blossoms, And parting in Balin, The heart of the lover languishes” (Translation by M.I. Besmanova).

Wang Wei, a Chinese poet who lived during the Tang Dynasty, wrote a farewell poem, “Seeing off Yuan the Second Appointed to Anxi”:

In Weicheng in the morning rain.
The grey dust is watered.
The willows outside the window
The foliage has adorned the spring.
I propose we drain
Another glass of wine:
On a long journey, maybe,
You won't meet any friends.
Drink up! ”.

(Translated by Gitovich A.I.)

The poem seems to be a short play set against the backdrop of a willow tree: after a spring rain, new green leaves have blossomed on the willow tree at the old post station, and a cherished friend is about to embark on a long journey. The poet holds a bowl of wine prepared by the villagers and bids him farewell.

Willow is a representative of spring, spring has just set foot on the ground, its first steps are visible. Soft willow branches are blown by the spring wind, the first tender green buds are breaking through. Therefore, the strong vitality of willow always gives people a feeling of prosperity, and the ancients have willow expressed not only the meaning of “stay”, but also a kind of good wishes to people who will soon be away from them. By conveying wishes to those leaving, people hoped that they could quickly find a firm footing in a new place, like willow branches - a symbol of spring. Standing firmly, like willow branches, people can live anywhere, spring colours will always be with them. There are also songs that simply praise the beauty of spring and the vitality of nature, such as He Zhizhan's poem “Singing the Willow”.

Made of jasper green, the dress hides the figure down to the heels,
And a thousand branches elastic as ribbons of silk hang.
Who carved the fine leaf patterns with a skilful hand?
It seems that the spring wind was this skilful tailor!”

(Translated by G.V. Struchalina)

Because of the willow's beautiful shape, poets also often associate it with beauty, using it to describe a woman's figure, thin waist, weakness and fragility. With the narrow willow leaves, for example, poets have compared the beauty of a woman's long eyebrows. In the above excerpt from He Zhizhang's poem “Singing the Willow”, the poet not only praises spring but also depicts chaste and graceful beauty.

Things don't always go smoothly in life. Sometimes a career is unsuccessful, a person either dies young, or there is something troubling in his heart. And so it was with the poets of past generations. Willow seeds covered with white fluff, freely carried by the wind over any distance, were associated with sadness, which was just as quickly transmitted to others. And this association of flying fluffy willow seeds with sadness and sorrow was reflected in many poetic works. The most famous work where the image of willow is used to convey a sad mood is Liu Yong's poem “Yuilinling”.

“The rain has tinged off and the sunset has finished,
The gazebo is silent in the twilight,
Only the cry of cicadas shivering in the rain.
By the walls of the capital we drink wine in silence,
It's time for us to part

And the boat at the quay is waiting for us.
 Hand in hand and tears in hand,
 We have much to say to each other! ...
 And as the autumn days come and go.
 The separation is even harder to bear.
 What dreams I'll have tonight,
 And where will I wake up when I'm no longer drunk? –
 In the coastal willows, under the horn of the moon?
 And so will the year go by, year after year.
 And maybe there'll be happy days,
 And the feeling in my heart will blossom again.
 What's the use of that? It's no use
 There's a spring of feeling, but to whom shall I pour it out?"

(Translated by M.I. Basmanov)

Thus, in Chinese culture, the willow tree has a rich symbolic meaning meaning: it can not only symbolise spring, beauty and other beautiful things, but also to express the sadness and sorrow of parting. Although the willow don't have feelings, people do. Willow tree as an element of natural landscape, reflects people's behaviour and moods, becomes trustworthy the bearer of their feelings. Now, in the hearts of the Chinese, these symbols are still inseparable from the willow, a plant that the Chinese love and praise.

2.2 Willow symbolism in Russian poetry

In Russian culture, willow has mystical and religious colouring.

In ancient times, Slavs venerated willow in connection with cosmological ideas about it as the World Tree/Tree of Life. Russian folk myth says that the willow tree is the embodiment in the Bible of Eve, the founder of mankind. God placed a willow branch next to Adam while he was sleeping, after which the willow branch transformed into Eve. The name "Eve" comes specifically from the word "willow". As we can see from this myth there is an association by similarity between a woman and a willow as a continuation of a sort: a woman gives birth to children, a willow scatters its seeds in the wind, falling to the ground, they sprout new shoots. Eve was expelled from the Garden of Eden for violating God's command. The plot of the Ukrainian myth is considered interesting: God turned Eve into a willow again, then he created Adam a new wife from his rib. Willow trees are often planted around Christian cemeteries, as they are easy to propagate (just stick a branch into the ground) but difficult to destroy, which makes them a symbol of eternity and rebirth [Rongrong Guo, Haiyun Yan 2019: 579-582].

The image of willow takes no less important place in Russian poetry.

The semantics of the willow symbol in Chinese and Russian poetry may be similar. Willow awakens after a long winter, so in Russian poetry it is also a symbol of spring and beauty:

"Loved the sunshine of April. Young and tender willow."

[Annensky 1990].

The famous 19th century Russian poet Fet was a singer of nature all his life. In this poem, the shape and colour of the willow tree are described in beautiful language. Here the willow is a symbol of beauty:

"Let's sit here by this willow tree,
 What marvellous curves
 On the bark around the hollow!
 And beneath the willow tree
 The golden shimmers
 Of shivering glass!
 The succulent branches arched
 Bend over the water,
 Like a green waterfall;
 As alive as a needle,
 As if arguing with each other,

“The leaves are furrowing the water.
In this mirror beneath the willow
My jealous eye has caught
The features of my heart...
Softer is your proud look...
I tremble as I gaze, happy,
As in the water you tremble.”

But for the most part in Russian poetry the willow is more a symbol of loss, sadness and grief. In the Russian language there are such stable word combinations as sad willow and weeping willow. This is probably due to the willow's peculiarities of excreting excess water from its leaves, as it usually grows in wet places, such as at the water's edge, where its roots can sink into the water. Perhaps it is this habit that makes people think it has its own sorrows. In the Russian context, willow is often associated with girls, their love and sadness. Willow is often used to describe a girl, and the image of willow is associated with a sentimental girl.

In Akhmatova's poem “The Memory of the Sun in the Heart is Weakening...” the willow tree becomes an attribute of the autumn landscape, imbued with a premonition of the lovers' impending separation:

“The willow tree in the empty sky spread out
A fan through and through. Perhaps it is better that I did not become your wife.”
[Akhmatova]

In Nekrasov's poem, the willow also appears as an image of separation:

“...Those are the tears of poor mothers! They can't forget their children,
who died in the bloody field, “nor can the weeping willow
...as the weeping willow can't lift its drooping branches...”
[Nekrasov 1855]

In the same sense, the image of willow also acts as a generalisation of national
of fate, marking the sadness and sorrow of the native land.

S. Esenin's:

“I love the motherland. I love my homeland very much!
Though there is a willow rust sadness in it.” [Yesenin's “Confessions of a Hooligan”]

Thus, the image of willow in Russian poetry has different symbolic meanings: in the work of the poet Fet, it is a symbol of goodness, personification of sunlight; in the poems of Akhmatova and Nekrasov, the willow is sad and weeping, it is a symbol of sad premonition or loss; in Esenin, the willow is associated with the fate of the country.

3. Conclusion

The image of the willow tree has a symbolic meaning in both Russia and China. In both Russia and China, willows begin to turn green in spring, so in both cultures they are a symbol of spring. In China, the role of poets is also great in creating willow symbolism, but the perception of Chinese poets is largely based on existing cultural traditions. Russian culture attaches many religious and mystical connotations to the willow tree. Russians believe that the willow tree has some kind of divine power, and festivals are organised and celebrated for this purpose.

“The meanings of the plant code of one of the images of tree symbolism - the image of willow - in Russian and Chinese poetry can be compared, there are both similarities and differences in them, which is based on the national tradition of different peoples” [Shi Han 2012: 113]. In Chinese poetry, willow is a symbol of spring, beauty and sadness. The image of willow arises when someone is persuaded to stay, not to leave, because sadness and sorrow are associated with departure. In Russian poetry, willow is a symbol of spring, a symbol of separation. “The range of willow image in Chinese poetry is wider than in Russian lyrics. In the works of poets of different countries different facets of the phytonym willow are actualised, it is correlated with different emotional mood. Such a comparison allows us to trace once again how the semantics of the floral image is formed in poetry” [Shi Khan 2012: 113]. [Shi Khan 2012: 113].

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