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Semiotic rhetoric of gift giving in ancient China

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Abstract: This paper examines the signifying mechanism of gift-giving in ancient China from the perspective of semiotic rhetoric, aiming to answer the question of what can be regarded as *li* (roughly meaning ceremony, rite, courtesy, or gift) or, in other words, how the social meaning of gifts is constructed in giving semiosis. It describes four dominant rhetorical devices that existed in ritual and non-ritual gift exchanges in ancient China. The ritual gift tended to adopt simile and conceit as its meaning-construction device, becoming a symbolic good beyond 'thingness' and thus fulfilling the sociocultural function of ritual. Non-ritual giving activity made use of semiotic metonymy and synecdoche as a strategy of 'indirectness' to maintain the relationship between the giver and receiver in daily communications.

Keywords: gift-giving; semiotic rhetoric; dominant; ancient China

1 Gifts in ancient China

Gift-giving in China is closely related to the concept of *li* 礼, which has multiple simultaneous meanings indicating ritual, favor, folkways, institution, and social norms, and is regarded as the core of ancient Chinese culture. The character *li* is directly reflected in the compound word for gift, *liwu* 礼物, which comprises both *li* and *wu* 物 [thing].

The multiple meanings of *li* imbue gifts with complicated symbolic and social meanings. Fei Xiaotong argues that traditional Chinese society can be characterised as a 'pattern of difference sequences', affirming that favors, *guanxi* 关系 [relationships] and obligations are the three most important elements in interpersonal communication, all of which can be ascribed to *li* (Fei 2007, 23–290).

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Many ancient works centered on *li*, among which the most representative are *Li Ji* 礼记 [*The Book of Rites*], *Li Yi* 礼仪 [*Etiquettes*] and *Zhou Li* 周礼 [*The Rites of Zhou*]. The three books all belong to the 'Thirteen Classics', the most important canon of the Confucians, with wider influence in ancient Chinese society. Their core function was to illustrate ritual norms, from person-to-person to nation-to-nation communication.

Importantly, those norms always related to the gifts, such as the occasion, type, value, and quantity of gift-giving. This suggests that *li* in ancient society could to some extent be gauged by the gifts given. Therefore, on most occasions in gift giving, people constructed the meaning of *li* in advance and then found or created the gift or the object to match this meaning, with the aim of maintaining social norms, institutions and obligations.

Furthermore, a gift could be exchanged at different levels of society to fulfil the function of *li*. For instance, a gift could serve as a sacrifice, tribute or award in national rituals to maintain the power of the monarchy in ancient China. In that context, *li* refers to an institution or regulation. Gifts could also be exchanged by ordinary people in everyday life – for instance, in rites of passage or in daily communications – as a social custom or folkway. *Li Ji* or *The Book of Rites* records,

> 礼尚往来。往而不来, 非礼也; 来而不往, 亦非礼也。[*Li* (propriety) suggests reciprocity. It is not *li* to not give out but to receive, or vice versa.] (Yang 2004, 3)

This shows that *li* as reciprocity or social obligation could be embodied in the gifts in everyday life. This paper considers the ancient Chinese giving phenomena in social customs and folkways, but not in national or governmental rituals. A study of the gifts exchanged by ordinary people can provide a perspective on how the concept of *li* shaped the social habits and customs in ancient China. This logic is similar to Li Anzhai's comments on the relation between *li* and culture. He was one of the first sociologists and anthropologists of China in the early 20th century, and he summarised this relation as follows:

> The concept *li* in China contains the things in everyday life (e.g. propriety between human and the thing, human and human, or human and supernature) as well as institution and attitudes. Then, although it has never been said before, we may conclude that *li* is the 'culture' in anthropology, containing both material and spiritual sides. Moreover, culture as mentioned above, is the totality of superorganic phenomena. Hence, *li* recorded by the classics is not only about the norms, institution or attitude but also about all aspects around this totality … and they go through the 'universal pattern' of the culture. (Li 2005, 5)

The current paper examines the signifying mechanism of the gift-giving in ancient China from the perspective of semiotic rhetoric, aiming to answer the question of what can be regarded as *li* or, in other words, how the social meaning of gifts is constructed in giving semiosis.

2 Towards a semiotic rhetoric in gift studies

As semiotics is the study of meanings carried by signs, the study of gifts should embrace a semiotic approach. A gift is a sign because its essence is a thing-sign. In practice, most things we perceive are neither pure signs nor pure things (or a thing-in-itself), but a mixture of both. However, the meaning of each thing-sign changes according to a specific interpreter's interpretation in a specific context. Thus, even a functional thing with few signifying factors can be 'semiotised' (Zhao 2016, 33) into a sign by the addition of meaning. Conversely, a pure sign without any practical functions in our daily life can be 'desemiotised' to reduce its signifying factors.

The idea of a gift as a thing-sign can be clarified by combining the concepts of *li* and *wu*. *Li* can be regarded as the symbolic meaning of the gift, while *wu* is its practical meaning. Hence, the tension of gift-giving semiosis mainly resides in the way that the giver and receiver interpret the interactions between the two types of meaning in the gift. In other words, the semiosis of giving activities is constructed by how a thing is embodied with *li* or how *li* can be represented by the practical meaning of a thing.

On the above basis, a gift can be viewed as a tie-sign whose major function is to express the meaning of relationships, whether human to human, human to god, human to nature, or nation to nation. Thus, gift exchange is a social semiosis in which the giver sends a gift to communicate meaning to the receiver with the anticipation that this relationship is reciprocal.

Rhetoric is one of the most important parts of any semiosis. It can help the sender to organise all the signifying items into one specific semiosis to ensure that the meaning of the sign reaches the interpreter. C. S. Peirce considers speculative rhetoric to be the third but 'highest and most living' branch of his sign theories (CP 2.333). He defines it as 'the doctrine of the general conditions of the reference of symbols and other signs to the interpretants which they determine' (CP 2.93).

Following Peirce's logic of a semiotic trivium, the first branch, semiotic grammar, focuses on the relation between signs, and the second branch, critical logic, deals with the sign and its object. Semiotic rhetoric delves into the relation between a sign and its interpretant. In other words, it is the doctrine of how the meaning of a sign is determined by its interpreters in a specific context. Thus, rhetoric is not just the tactics that modify words or signs, but it acts as the signifying function with a 'physic result' (MS 774: 5) – that is, 'the transmission of meaning by signs from mind to mind, and from one state of mind to another' (CP 1.444). Charles W. Morris followed Peirce and renamed this branch 'pragmatics', indicating the importance of studying a sign's meaning in use. (Morris 1938, 29–33)

In terms of gift-giving research, the semiotic rhetorical approach is of significance, although few previous studies have focused on this area. The meaning of a gift is not determined by its sender but by the context or the interpretive community. Here, we adopt van Leeuwen's concepts of semiotic resources and semiotic potential to avoid a situation in which '"what a sign stands for" is somehow pre-given, and not affected by its use' (van Leeuwen 2005, 3). Thus, a given type of material artefact constitutes a semiotic resource, and it becomes possible to describe its semiotic potential for being a gift and its potential for making meaning, that is, a thing we choose to convey communicative meaning to the gift receiver. The present study further indicates that these semiotic resources could not be used for communication without rhetoric strategies in a specific context. Rhetoric, as a cohesive strategy, selects and organises semiotic recourses to construct the social meaning of the gift. Thus, studying the semiotic rhetoric in gift giving semiosis is studying how such resources can be used to construct the signifying function of the gift.

Compared with linguistic rhetoric, semiotic rhetoric is much more complicated because it deals with rhetorical phenomena carried by non-verbal media. We can easily find the indicator in linguistic rhetoric such as 'like', 'similar', 'as … as …' etc., or in a metaphor between the lines. However, such indicators cannot be found in the non-verbal signs carried by vehicles such as images, video, audio and crafts. Furthermore, the semiotic rhetoric in gift exchange is even more challenging because we cannot find a closed text, as traditional rhetorical studies do, to analyse different figures of speech. Gift giving is always conducted in a specific context with multiple signifying factors. In other words, if there is a text in gift exchanging, it should be the whole process, including the context, giver, receiver, etc., not just the gift in itself.

This paper therefore adopts the context instead of the text as the entryway to the study. Gift studies in anthropology and sociology agree that context – especially the ritual context – is the basic standard of gift classification. For instance, pioneers such as Mauss (1962) and Malinowski (1984) consider that different forms of gift exchange mainly belong to ritual activities and played an important role in social reproduction in ancient society.

Following the above tradition, this paper classifies gifts in human society into two major types: ritual and non-ritual. Ritual gifts include those gifts sent in a ritual context, namely, rites of passage, religious rites, traditional customs, national ceremonies, etc. Non-ritual gifts are often sent in everyday life, often without any formal rites. They are sent by family members, friends, colleagues, commercial partners, etc., for the purposes of daily communication, building and maintaining friendship or constructing reciprocal relationships.

In terms of semiotic rhetoric, the differences between the above two types of gift can be represented by their dominant figures of speech. The concept of 'dominant' in

this paper is adopted from Roman Jakobson. It is 'the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of the structure' (Jakobson 1978, 87). The dominant figures of speech in ritual and communicative contexts determine not only the selection of a gift, but most importantly, the sociocultural meaning of the gift.

3 Simile and conceits in ritual gift giving

Rituality has been the focus of gift studies since Mauss. Many scholars (e.g., Bataille 1997; Granet 1982) hold that rite is a fundamental element of the gift, and the sacredness of the rite should be represented by the gift in context. From the perspective of semiotic rhetoric, simile and conceits are dominant figures of speech that play a significant role in ritual gift giving. They connect the gift with the ritual context so that the gift surpasses the attribute of the thing and becomes a symbolic good in the rite.

It is necessary to distinguish the sign from the semiotic rhetoric to avoid confusion in analysis. A sign can refer to its object because the object is absent in the text, so the former can take place of the latter. However, the form of a rhetorical figure is different from a sign because its tenor and vehicle coexist in one text. For instance, when we see a man wear an Armani suit, we can interpret this luxury suit as an index of his wealth because we cannot see his fortune; when we see him in his villa, we can say this suit is the synecdoche of his fortune, because his fortune (here indicated by this villa) exits in the same text. Hence, the sign indicates a meaning that is currently absent, while the semiotic rhetoric connects the two signs or semiosis in the same text.

3.1 Simile

In simile, two elements are connected in such a way that the interpreter cannot ignore their metaphorical relationships. For instance, the sentence 'she runs like a deer' is a simile because the girl ('she') is compared with a deer due to the introduction of the indicator 'like'. In gifting, the indicator is not in the form of words but in the context. The latter forcefully connects the gift and its symbolic meaning or tensor. The ritual context, as an indicator of resemblance, determines the signifying function of the gift in the ritual: the gift then turns out to be an inseparable part of the ritual and cannot be interpreted as having other meanings besides those of the rite.

The function of simile in ritual gifts is fully represented by the Chinese custom of burning paper money. Over the past millennium, Chinese people have been burning

paper money (replicas of cash) to send to their deceased family members, ancestors and myriad spiritual beings. This tradition is maintained today. For instance, a report in the *Chengdu Commercial News* (Xiao et al. 2008) stated that residents of Chengdu (in Sichuan province) burned 100 tons of paper during the 2008 spring equinox or the Qingming Festival for sweeping the tombs. Paper money, as a ritual offering, undergoes complete immolation by fire. The paper destined for immolation is made ready by a series of consecrations that realise its use value by turning its exchange value and sign value (Baudrillard 1981) into spiritual value (Blake 2011, 1–3).

The above description shows how simile works in the paper money custom. The present study examines funerals because they are a typical ritual context in which people burn paper money for the deceased. In a traditional Chinese funeral, mourners may burn paper money throughout the ritual according to a belief that paper money will be transferred to the deceased in the afterworld if it is burned into ashes. Therefore, this money relates to the afterworld that the funeral decorations represent to living people, and thus becomes a clear simile: the more paper money the relatives and friends burn, the more abundant the deceased's life in the afterworld will be. In other words, a simile linking paper money with an affluent afterworld exists in the funeral. Only in this way can the replicas of money function as an indispensable element in the rite and the living people obtain consolation.

Georges Bataille emphasises the importance of gifts in sacrifice, one of the most important gifting contexts in nearly all cultural communities. He holds that the thing exchanged in sacrifice 'was not a thing' and 'was not reduced to the inertia, the lifelessness of the profane world', but 'was a sign of glory' (Bataille 1997, 200–201). By sacrificing gifts in rituals, humans liberate the thing from the materialised instrumental world and relocate it to a sacred world from the profane one. Following this logic, gifts can function as a symbolic sign in sacrifice or other rituals that bridge the profane and sacred worlds because the ritual itself lets the gift become a simile of the sacred world. Thus, the giver can satisfy their emotional or cathartic needs by giving gifts because the simile determines that the giver regards the gift as a medium between two worlds.

Besides rituals connected with the sacred world, the semiotic simile of gifts also dominates in secular ceremonies such as weddings. In ancient China, the wedding custom was composed of six grand rites known as *Liu Li* 六礼, or the Six Etiquettes, from the proposal to the final wedding ceremony. The rites were *nacai* 纳采 [proposing], *wenming* 问名 [birthdate matching], *naji* 纳吉 [presenting betrothal gifts], *nazheng* 纳征 [presenting wedding gifts], *qingqi* 请期 [picking a wedding date] and *yingqin* 亲迎 [wedding ceremony]. The detailed processes involved in each step were recorded in the book *Etiquettes* [*Li Yi*, 礼仪].

All six wedding rituals were accompanied by gift-giving activities with unique rhetorical functions. Among these, the gift most representative of its function as a

simile in wedding semiosis was the live wild geese that were sent in five of the six rituals. For instance, *Li Yi* records that the first step of marriage is proposing, or *na cai*: '下达。纳采。用雁' ['Asking for the willingness of the girl's family; proposing; sending wild geese as gift'; (Zheng and Jia 1999, 60)]. The second step was '宾执雁, 请问名。主人许, 宾入, 授' ['The matchmaker takes wild geese as a gift at the gate and asks for the girl's name and birthdate. The host accepts the guest's request and welcomes her to the house, then performs the ritual of giving geese'; (Zheng and Jia 1999, 60)]. Wild geese were also a part of the wedding date picking ritual.

The ancient Chinese believed that the wild goose symbolised loyalty in a marriage because it would not find another partner after the death of its spouse. Geese are also migratory and never miss a season, and this quality symbolised the couple's unswerving faithfulness to each other. In relation to these specific wedding rituals, wild geese are a simile for the newly married couple, indicating that they would have a loyal and long-lasting marriage.

One may argue that the wild goose is a metaphor rather than a simile for the marriage because it does not refer to the marriage in a direct way. However, the symbolic relation between wild geese and marriage was widely accepted by ancient Chinese people. For instance, Jia Gongyan, who annotated *Li Yi* during the Tang Dynasty, commented on the image of wild geese in wedding rituals (Zheng and Jia 1999, 61): '用雁为挚者, 取其顺阴阳往来' ['Taking wild geese as the gift indicates the mutual communication between Yin and Yang.']. Here, yin and yang are the traditional image of man and woman. He also noted that this image could be traced back to *Shi Jing* 诗经, or the *Book of Songs*, the earliest collection of ancient Chinese poems, which records 311 poems from the Zhou Dynasty to the Spring and Autumn period (11th to 6th centuries B.C.). A poem in this book titled 'The Gourds Having Their Bitter Leaves' 匏有苦叶 shows how wild geese are used as the symbol of marriage:

雝雝鸣雁,	Harmoniously sounding are the singing wild geese,
旭日始旦。	the warm sun is just rising at dawn.
士如归妻,	If a nobleman brings home his new wife,
迨冰未泮。	it should be at the time when the ice has not yet melted.

(Zhou 2002, 49)

This poem describes a young lady waiting impatiently for a nobleman, her beloved, to come and take her home as his wife. She watches the wayfarers at the ford, from where he is to come. He should have come early in the year before the ice melted, but the year is already well advanced: the gourds are in full leaf, the ford is full of water and the wild geese are calling to their mates.

Hence, wild geese as the image of marriage could date back to an earlier age, although it has lost this meaning in contemporary society. However, in ancient times,

its symbolic meaning was clear and direct, and needed no further explanation. This is why geese were used as gifts in several wedding rituals, gradually becoming a simile for a loyal couple getting married.

3.2 Conceit

Conceit (曲喻) is a specific rhetorical term used in Chinese academics. It is an extended form of metaphor: If A is like B and therefore has the extended quality of B, then A could be B1, B2, etc. (Zhao 2016, 192). In other words, if something resembles the sound or the physical form of the referred object, then it acquires the quality of the object. This figure of speech is commonly used in ritual gift exchanges in which so-called 'lucky things' or good wishes are needed. For instance, if a gift's name is homophonic with or its shape is plesiomorphic with a propitious concept, then this gift is or functions as that concept.

The first type of conceit in gift giving can be categorised as follows: A is B because they have similar or identical pronunciation, no matter how different their original meanings are. In traditional Chinese rituals and customs, gifts have always been associated with auspicious words. It is commonly believed that these gifts have *hao caitou* 好彩头, literally translated as 'good colorful head', indicating that the receiver will have a wonderful start or good luck. For instance, on a happy occasion (such as a wedding, birthday, etc.), Chinese people prefer to send a gift that has a pattern of bats on its wrap because the pronunciation of 'bat' in Chinese is the same as *fu* 福, which means 'good fortune'. Hence, to send a gift with a bat decoration equals sending good fortune to the receiver.

In a traditional wedding ceremony, the bride will receive jujubes, peanuts, longans and melon seeds, which share similar sounds with *zao* 早 [early], *sheng* 生 [giving birth] *gui* 贵 [precious] and *zi* 子 [child], respectively, indicating wishes that the newlyweds will have a healthy baby soon. Such gift-signs are essentially usages of a semiotic conceit. A gift has a figurative relationship with the auspicious object just because they share similar pronunciation. Thus, the gift becomes an auspicious object itself. Both the gift giver and receiver in this situation focus on the auspicious meaning of the gift instead of its practical value.

Even in funeral rites, gifts make use of this semiotic metaphor. For instance, there is an age-old custom in northern China that one should send a pair of cotton trousers to the deceased as the shroud. The word 'cotton' in Chinese is pronounced *mian* 棉, which is the same as another word pronounced *mian* 眠 [sleep]. Hence, the cotton trousers as the gift in this context have lost their original meaning as trousers and acquired a new meaning, namely, '以眠为安' ['It is always good to have a sound sleep'], which carries the sender's good wish that the deceased will have a peaceful

and calm afterlife (Jiao 1998, 120). The gift can be regarded as another thing, and has this thing's signifying quality, because they share the same pronunciation. Hence, the figurative relation between them is not as direct as a simile, but is more indirect than a metaphor. Therefore, conceit as a figure of speech is an extended form of metaphor.

Another type of type of conceit in gift giving occurs when A is B just because they share similar physical shapes or status. For instance, the wedding ceremony was the last etiquette in the ancient Chinese wedding custom. On that day, the groom was to place three types of animal meat outside the bedroom (pork, fish, and smoked rabbit) as a sacrifice to his ancestors.

Li Yi has clear, even rigid, rules about these meats. In terms of fish, '鱼用鲋, 必肴全' ['It must be crucian, and it should have whole and unbroken bones'; (Zheng and Jia 1999, 95)]. 'Crucian' in ancient Chinese was pronounced as fu 鲋, with the same sound as another word '附' [*fu*, dependence], symbolising that new couple will depend on each other mutually; this belongs to the first type of conceit. However, the wholeness of fish bones belongs to the second type, as the shape refers to the completeness of marriage. *Li Yi* also notes that '腊必用鲜' ['The smoked rabbit meat must be fresh'; (Zheng and Jia 1999, 95)]. Here, the newly cooked rabbit is connected to marriage, because the cooked rabbit and marriage share a physical status: they are 'fresh'. It indicates that the couple's life will progress with each passing day.

There are some differences between simile and conceit in terms of the signifying function in ritual gifting. The simile promises the definiteness and directness of ritual giving semiosis because the ritual context itself determines that the gift could only be interpreted as one specific cultural image or concept. Therefore, once paper money or wild geese lose their ritual context, they will lose their metaphorical meaning immediately.

However, the two ends of the conceit in ritual gift giving are indirectly connected, such as through their sound or physical forms. Accordingly, this type of gift needs more meta-language or cultural memories to fulfil its cultural function. In this situation, the giver will always describe the symbolic meaning of the conceit-gift in the ritual, whether it is sound-likeness or form-likeness, because it will help the guest to connect the gift with its auspicious meaning. In other words, those gifts are to some extent 'pronounced' as the gift. Increasingly, this action (speaking out loud) also becomes a necessary part of the ritual.

The semiotic simile and conceit are regarded as the two dominant figures of speech in ritual gift exchange because their signifying features determine the symbolic meaning of the gift in the rites. As the essential element of a ritual, a gift can help rituals to achieve their social functions to create, arouse or maintain the sociocultural meaning of the community. Through the effect of simile and conceit, ritual gifts can fix their meaning as symbolic goods accepted by community members. This is similar to Peirce's notion of 'symbol' as the third type of sign trichotomy:

> Any ordinary word, such as 'give', 'bird', or 'marriage', is an example of a symbol. It is applicable to whatever may be found to realize the idea connected with the word; it does not, in itself, identify those things. It does not show us a bird, nor enact before our eyes a giving or a marriage, but supposes that we are able to imagine those things, and have associated the word with them. (CP. 2.298)

Hence, gifts as symbolic good in a ritual are just like Peirce's explanation of the symbol: when we look at them during the ritual, we can associate them with the cultural memories that the ritual conveys.

However, a ritual gift could not fulfil this function without the help of simile and conceit because a gift as a thing-sign could be interpreted in many ways. Simile and conceit are largely involved in sociocultural meta-languages in the interpretive process. For instance, the wild geese could be the simile of the marriage, not because they resemble the couple, but because the culture determined them to be the image of a loyal marriage. Also, the relation between jujube and *zao* (early) is not natural because we can find more homophones similar to the former; it is social convention that fixes their linkage. Hence, these two figures of speech help ritual gifts to determine their symbolic meanings in rites. This echoes the aim of Peirce's speculative rhetoric: 'It is the doctrine of the general conditions of the reference of Symbols and other Signs to the Interpretants which they aim to determine' (CP 2.93).

Hence, the cultural community in ritual gift giving makes the gift the symbol by the extensive and repetitive use of symbolic simile and conceit. Here, the purpose of giving is not only to maintain social communication, but, most importantly, to perform the cultural function of ritual. This could also be reflected in the physical form of the gift: a ritual gift is mainly inclined to its symbolic meaning rather that its practical value, which is quite different from non-ritual gifts.

4 Metonymy and synecdoche in non-ritual gift giving

Non-ritual exchange in everyday life is different from ritual exchange. As mentioned above, the meaning of a ritual gift is clear and definite because it is fixed by the ritual context. However, the meaning of a non-ritual gift in daily communication is relatively more indirect or implied because its aim is mainly to maintain the social relationship between the giver and receiver. If the gift's meaning is too straightforward, the receiver may infer that the giver has some utilitarian purpose besides the social contact. And it will violate the communication norms determined by *li*.

To achieve the above aim, the giver will have more strategies to send non-ritual gifts or communicative gifts than ritual gifts. On the one hand, as suggested by the

Chinese idiom '投其所好' ['catering to another's interest'], the giver tends to consider the receiver's characteristics, knowledge and hobbies, as well as social status, when they choose the gift. On the other hand, the gift can also represent the giver him/herself, and to send the gift may indicate the giver's commitment to the relationship. Hence, the most frequently adopted figures of speech in non-ritual gifting semiosis are metonymy and synecdoche. Accordingly, those types of gifts mainly focus on the symbolic value instead of the practical or material value.

4.1 Metonymy

Metonymy is the use of one thing to stand for another of which it is an attribute or with which it is associated. The main function of metonymy is to 'point out' (Zhao 2016, 190) a quality relating to an object. For instance, we can use a demonstrative such as 'this' or 'that' to indicate a metonymic relation. In non-ritual gift giving, metonymy is often adopted to indicate the receiver's cultural taste, interest, ambition, etc., in an indirect and implicit way.

In the above sense, we can categorise such gifts as expressive gifts because their main aim is to express respect, gratitude or admiration to the receiver. Therefore, this type of gift is often elaborately prepared according to the receivers' traits. Receivers are willing to accept the gift because to accept means they comprehend its metonym, and they associate themselves with the implied meaning the gift conveys (such as graceful taste, noble character, good education, etc.).

Gifts as metonymy were widely used in ancient Chinese society. One example is the plants as the gift. It is not rare to send a bouquet of flowers as the gift whether in China or other countries. However, there are four types of plants playing a considerable role in Chinese culture, namely, wintersweet, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum. They were also known as "four gentlemen" in ancient China since they could represent the qualities of the good man. For instance, Lu You, the famous poet in Song Dynasty, had a poem entitled '卜算子·咏梅' ['Pu Suan Zi: To the wintersweet'] to praise the quality of the wintersweet:

无意苦争春,	You have no heart to vie with spring hues.
一任群芳妒。	Their envying you affects you not.
零落成泥碾作尘,	Anon ground to dust, You shall vanish in the earth.
只有香如故。	Yet you won't scent forever lives.

(Jiang 2005, 173)

Wintersweet often blooms in winter. Thus, it could be used as the metonymy of a noble man: He/she can still stick to his/her good virtues even in tough times. Also, Confucius once wrote that '芝兰生于深林, 不以无人而不芳' ['The orchid grows in

deep forests, always fragrant for no one'; (Wang 1997, 57)], advocating that man should have the quality of cautiousness and self-controlment as the orchid does. And the similar logic could be found in the metaphorical usages of bamboo and chrysanthemum. These four types of plants are the popular gifts exchanged by ancient Chinese people, since the givers take them as the metonymy to express their admirations to noble qualities of the receivers.

Another unique and representative gift is the 'poem gift' exchanged by intellectuals. As one of the most popular types of giving between ancient Chinese intellectuals, the trend of gifting poems arose in the Han Dynasty (202 B.C. to 220 A.D.) and reached its peak during the Tang and Song Dynasties (618 A.D. to 907 A.D.). Poem gifts belong to metonymy because the giver transfers the qualities of poetry, such as wisdom or nobility, to the receiver. In other words, to give a poem indicates the receiver is well-educated or knowledgeable.

A poem used as a gift should follow the reciprocal principle, as material gifts do. For instance, Bai Juyi and Liu Yuxi were both great poets of the Tang Dynasty: they wrote and gave dozens of poems to each other to forge and strengthen their friendship. The most representative is 'To Liu Yuxi While Drinking' 醉赠刘二十八使君, written by Bai. In this poem, Bai contrasts Liu's 23-year banishment with the opulent lives of officials at that time, expressing his sympathy for Liu's suffering:

为我引杯添酒饮,	You take my cup, fill it with wine,
与君把箸击盘歌。	knock chopsticks on the plate and we sing to it.
诗称国手徒为尔,	Though you are a grand master of poetry,
命压人头不奈何。	not destined to rise and there is no way.

(Bai 2004, 2759)

In return to Bai, Liu composed the following echo poem '酬乐天扬州初逢席上见赠' ['A Response to Bai Juyi at Dinner for the First Meeting in Yangzhou']:

巴山楚水凄凉地,	The remote south has now remained a land of pain,
二十三年弃置身。	Twenty-three idle years an outcast I did idly spend.
怀旧空吟闻笛赋,	To no avail did I chant *On Hearing Nostalgic Flute*,
到乡翻似烂柯人。	I return only to find the world greatly changed.

(Liu 2004, 2202)

The first three lines of the response tell Bai that Liu holds an optimistic and open-minded attitude towards his rough times. Although no lines directly show Liu's appreciation of Bai's emotional support, we can tell that the communicative intention has been achieved in an implicit way. Thus, this pair of giving and echo poems represents how metonymy works in poem gift exchanges between ancient Chinese intellectuals. Firstly, the character of the poem itself contains images such as culture, knowledge, decency and, most importantly, *li.* For these intellectuals, *li* firstly meant

that you should be well-educated, and accordingly, you could communicate with others in an appropriate way. Thus, a poem gift is the metonymy of the receiver, indicating he is as decent as the poems. It also indicates that the communication between the giver and receiver follows the principle of *li*, the highest moral standard of the intellectuals.

4.2 Synecdoche

In metonymy, as mentioned above, something that is associated with another thing is used to refer to that thing. In synecdoche, a part of something is substituted for the whole. Their differences can be reflected in non-ritual gift-giving semiosis: a gift as synecdoche functions as a part of the giver or receiver, and therefore, it is usually sent as to represent their personality, social status, or social identity, whereas a gift as metonymy often indicates some qualities affiliated with the individuals, such as their hobbies, interests, etc. Synecdoche is also widely adopted in the gift exchanges for daily communication. For instance, gifts such as jewels and handkerchiefs are often exchanged between men and women and are regarded as the synecdoche of the latter. The following cases show how synecdoche works in non-ritual giving semiosis:

One of the most representative examples is the gifting of jade. Ancient Chinese people considered jade to represent human virtues, especially of gentlemen. For instance, *Li Ji* emphasises that '古之君子必佩玉' ['A gentlemen must wear jade'], and '君子无故, 玉不去身' ['The gentlemen should not take off the jade from his body without a specific reason']. In this sense, jade is an obvious synecdoche for man in ancient China, signifying that the man is as good and noble as jade. Thus, tying a jade pendant to his girdle was almost essential for an ancient Chinese gentleman. This could also be reflected in gift giving: a man giving a jade pendant to a girl he admires is proposing to her. There are many lines on jade pendants as gifts to the beloved in *The Book of Songs*:

丘中有李, 彼留之子。	On the mound stands a plum tree, who's there detaining thee?
彼留之子, 贻我佩玖。	Who's there detaining thee, from giving girdle jade to me?

(Zhou 2002, 106)

知子之来之, 杂佩以赠之。	If I know that you will come to me, I will endow you with mixed jade pendants.
知子之顺之, 杂佩以问之。	If I know that you will agree to my wish, I will attend upon you with mixed jade pendants.
知子之好之, 杂佩以报之。	If I know that you love me, I will requite you with mixed jade pendants.

(Zhou 2002, 118)

The above songs show the jade pendant as the synecdoche of the young man. Hence, if the girl accepts this pendant, it means that she will accept this man and his proposal. Interestingly, in this case, the gift refers to the giver but not the receiver, indicating the giver's commitment to their relationship.

A similar logic could be found in handkerchief giving between young lovers in ancient China. A poem in the *Book of Songs* records this giving activity as follows:

林有朴樕, 野有死鹿。	With white rushes well bound, there was a lady fair as jade.
白茅纯束, 有女如玉。	Hey, not so hasty, not so rough;
舒而脱脱兮, 无感我帨兮, 无使龙也吠。	Hey, don't touch my handkerchief; Take care, or the dog will bark.

(Zhou 2002, 31)

In this song, a man encounters a jade-like lady in the woods and pays court to her, but the lady is too shy to let the man touch her handkerchief, let alone accept his wooing. The handkerchief was always regarded as a most private and personal item for woman in ancient China. Here, it is adopted as synecdoche to represent the lady herself. So her agreement to a simple touch of her handkerchief by a man indicates her acceptance of his wooing.

The receiver of a handkerchief could be a man, but could also be a woman's confidantes. The term '手帕交', or handkerchief friends, is used to describe best female friends, who exchange handkerchiefs to forge tight bonds of friendship. With the development of synecdoche, the identity of the handkerchief giver was expanded from female to male, and the exchange of this specific sign between a man and a woman carried a fixed meaning as a token of love.

Non-ritual gifts as the synecdoche could also be used to construct the receiver's cultural identity. 'Every sign has its textual identity that indicates its social or cultural significance'. (Zhao 2016, 353) Thus, gift as a sign, can also refer to receiver's cultural or social identities. One interesting example is the "literary name" as the gift. In ancient China, people usually owned several names: Besides surname and given name given by parents, they also have *zi* 字 or courtesy name given by themselves, and *hao* 号 or literary name often given by their friends or peers in social circles.

For instance, Xu Xiake, a famous geographer and traveller in Ming Dynasty, has his original name 'Hongzhu'. As he is interested in travelling and spending the night outdoors to savour the dew and enjoy the morning rays, his friend Chen Jiru gives him a literary name 'Xiake' 霞客 [the guest of the morning ray]. Since then, Xiake became his most popular name instead of the original one. In this case, Xu's personal interest and profession are the unique traits of him and can be regarded as a representitive part of his social identiy. Thus, literary name is formed through adopting the partial features of a man, and then is given to the man as a gift. It is a typical practice of synecdoche used by ancient people to establish the receiver's social identity.

To sum up, metonymy and synecdoche dominated non-ritual gifting semiosis in ancient China because both helped the giver and receiver to achieve their communicative ends in an implied and moderate way. Compared with ritual gifts with simile and conceit, those with metonymy and synecdoche in daily communication involved more effort for the receiver's interpretation. This trend accords with the traditional culture of *li*, which demands that communication to another should be appropriate, decent and moderate, and should not go straight to the concrete aims of gift-giving.

5 Conclusion: gift, *li* and semiotic rhetoric

The above analysis elaborates the difference on semiotic rhetorical devices between ritual and non-ritual gift-giving contexts in ancient China. It finds that simile and conceit dominate in ritual gifting semiosis since both promise the meaning of rites could be conveyed directly and accurately. Metonymy and Synecdoche prevail in non-ritual gift exchanges because they help the giver and receiver to build or maintain their relationships in an indirect and moderate way. It needs to be further explained that why there exist two different styles of giving (e.g. directness vs. indirectness) with preferred rhetorical strategies. To answer this question, we may return to the concept of *Li*, the essence of Chinese culture.

Firstly, the rites and ritual gift-giving. One of the essential attributes of *li* is moralization and cultivation. At the opening chapter of *Li Ji* or *Book of Rites*, the aim of *li* is defined as the following:

> 是故圣人作, 为礼以教人, 使人以有礼, 知自别于禽兽 [Therefore, when the sages arose, they framed the rules of propriety (*li*) in order to teach men, and cause them, by their possession of them, to make a distinction between themselves and brutes.] (Yang 2004, 3)

According to Confucians, the best way to cultivate people is to persuade them to follow the rules or principles of *Li*. Among those rules, the most common ones are the rules of rites which cover from birth to death, the whole process of individual's life. *Li Ji* emphasizes that '凡人之所以为人者, 礼义也' ['That which makes man man is the meaning of ceremonial usages or *Liyi*'; (Yang 2004, 812)]. And that is the reason why the meaning of rituals should be conveyed directly and clearly, since each step of the ritual is intertwined with the concept of *li.* Similarly, gift-giving as the indispensable part of the rituals also plays an important role to achieve the above aim. By adopting simile and conceit as its signifying mechanism, ritual gifts can successfully fulfil the symbolic function in the rituals, thus promising the meaning of *li* could not be misinterpreted.

Secondly, social communications and non-ritual gifts. *Li* does not only exist in rituals, but also in daily life, because the method of propriety and rightness 'does not come down from heaven, nor come forth from the earth; it is simply an expression of human feelings' ['非从天降也, 非从地出也, 人情而已矣'; (Yang 2004, 760)]. It indicates that *li* originates from our everyday life: To be a man with propriety means we may behave good and appropriately in daily communications.

In the some sense, *Zhongyong* 中庸 or the doctrine of 'the mean' is regarded as the general norm of *Li* that guides ancient people's conducts of daily life. *Zhongyong*, literally translated as "the central ordinary", indicates that everything has its principle and boundary, therefore, to go beyond is as wrong as to fall short. Confucius has written a book with the same tile to emphasize the importance of 'be ordinary'. This idea has been used to guide the communicative actions for a long time. For instance, in *Li Ji*:

> 敖不可长, 欲不可纵, 志不可满, 乐不可极. [Pride should not be allowed to grow; the desire should not be indulged; the will should not be gratified to the full; pleasure should not be carried to excess.] (Yang 2004, 1)

> 礼, 不妄说人, 不辞费。礼, 不逾节, 不侵侮, 不好狎。[According those rules, one should not seek to please others in an improper way, nor lavish of his words; One does not go beyond the definite measure, nor encroach on or despise others, nor is fond of presuming familiarities.] (Yang 2004, 2)

The above principle of the mean is fully reflected in the non-ritual gift-giving as mentioned before. It determines that the gifts should be exchanged in daily life in a moderate and appreciate way. Hence, those gifts do not focus on the material value or its unitarian purpose but on its symbolic value, because the first two violate the principle of the mean. And this is the reason why metonymy or synecdoche dominates in non-ritual gifts since they decently help the giver decorate the intention of the giving, and achieve the end of social communications by following the principle of *li*.

To sum up, the semiotic rhetoric plays an important role in gift-giving activities in ancient China. The rhetorical devices dominate in ritual and non-ritual giving context, make gifts fulfil both ritual and communicative aims guided by the concept of *li*.

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