

Women in Chinese and Romanian proverbs— a cross-cultural analysis from the perspective of conceptual metaphor

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This study employs Conceptual Metaphor Theory to conduct a cross-cultural analysis of gendered proverbs in Chinese and Romanian societies. It argues that while both cultures utilize the Great Chain Metaphor to ontologically downgrade women, the specific source domains reflect distinct cultural imperatives. Chinese proverbs, profoundly shaped by Confucian ethics, emphasize internal virtue, chastity, and hierarchical loyalty. In contrast, Romanian proverbs, driven by agrarian pragmatism, focus on labor utility, physical control, and economic burden. This research demonstrates that despite divergent metaphorical imagery, both linguistic systems function identically to rationalize and cement the subordination of women within the patriarchal order.

Keywords: *conceptual metaphor theory, gendered proverbs, cross-cultural analysis*

1. Introduction

Proverbs constitute a vital component of a community's ethnology, serving as linguistic archives that reflect the deep-seated traditions, values, and cumulative experiences of a nation or cultural group (Yankah 1989). Therefore, these sayings provide invaluable material for researchers seeking a profound understanding of the prevailing cultural mentality and social structure.

The inherent, historically entrenched difference between the social positions of men and women is indisputably reflected in this collective wisdom. Robin Lakoff (1973), in her seminal work in feminist linguistics, identified that gender differences are manifested in two ways: "the way they (women) are taught to use language" and "the way general language use treats them." She argues that both mechanisms function to demote women to a submissive social position. Consequently, Lakoff views gendered language as a direct expression of the different roles men and women occupy in society.

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Within this linguistic framework, proverbs act as potent linguistic tools that encode and enforce these power relations. They do not just reflect society but actively shape and reinforce patriarchal norms by presenting them as neutral wisdom, making the hierarchy seem natural and unquestionable (Mensah 2024). The efficiency and resonance of their meaning allow them to act as potent mechanisms for transmitting and normalizing entrenched societal norms, particularly those concerning gender hierarchy (Lomotey 2020). This high degree of conventionalization indicates that the underlying gender concepts are deeply embodied and culturally resistant to significant, rapid change (Ciesielkiewicz 2019).

However, the cognitive mechanism that gives proverbs their resonance is frequently metaphorical. As suggested by Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), human thought is fundamentally metaphorical; we understand abstract concepts through concrete domains. In the context of proverbs, metaphors serve as the vehicle through which complex gender ideologies are simplified and internalized.

Thus, the study of gendered proverbs requires not only a sociological analysis but a cognitive one. The ethnological significance of proverbs lies in their ability to mirror a nation's deep-seated traditions. China and Romania—one located at the core of East Asian civilization, steeped in Confucian ethics; the other in the Balkan region of Southeast Europe, bearing deep Daco-Roman traditions and memories of agrarian civilization—share a striking historical parallel. Despite vast differences in geography, linguistic lineage, and religion, both possess long histories of agrarian societies upon which stable patriarchal structures were built. This historical parallel provides an excellent sample for cross-cultural research. In the proverbial treasuries of these two cultures, descriptions of women are not only voluminous but also exhibit striking similarities and differences in cognitive structure. By systematically investigating the proverbs dedicated to women in both Chinese and Romanian cultures, we can obtain an overview of the historical roles and social status assigned to women.

This article aims to construct a holistic image of womanhood by analyzing these proverbs through the lens of conceptual metaphor, revealing how distinct cultures utilize similar or divergent imagery to encode the same social hierarchies.

2. Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), which posits that metaphor is not merely a linguistic ornamentation but a fundamental mechanism of human cognition. According to CMT, conceptual metaphors are rooted in shared

basic embodied experience (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). In this framework, understanding involves a cross-domain mapping where the structure of a concrete Source Domain is projected onto an abstract Target Domain. Consequently, the abstract target is understood through the logic and constraints of the concrete source. Contemporary cognitive linguistics emphasizes that while the capacity for metaphorical projection is universal, the specific selection of source domains is culturally determined. As Kövecses (2005) argues, these conventionalized mappings emerge from the interaction between universal embodiment and specific socio-historical contexts, acting as a filter through which a culture interprets reality.

Within this broader cognitive framework, the specific hierarchical organization of gender is best explained by the Great Chain Metaphor (GCM) (Lakoff and Turner 1989). The GCM provides a framework for understanding how entities in the world are organized hierarchically based on ontological scale, ranging from humans down through animals, plants, and inanimate objects. The application of the GCM often functions symmetrically when comparing humans to entities higher on the chain, for example, man is a star. However, when applied to women in traditional proverbs, the GCM frequently exhibits a pervasive asymmetry. Applying source domains from the lower ranks, such as animals, tools, or stones, to the human target domain of woman is a deeply rooted mechanism of linguistic derogation and cognitive demotion. This selective application of lower-level source domains serves to conceptually diminish women, placing them beneath men on the social hierarchy. For instance, while a man may be mapped onto an entity signifying power or abstract virtue, a woman is often mapped onto an entity signifying utility, possession, or base instincts, thereby consistently structuring the understanding of womanhood around concepts that justify her subordination within the patriarchal order. This reveals how language actively maintains gender inequality through cognitive structures.

3. Discussion on Different Types of Conceptual Metaphors

In this chapter, three main types of metaphors regarding women identified from Chinese and Romanian proverbs, in which women are mapped as animal, objects and nature, will be placed under discussion provided with examples.

3.1. Woman is Animal

“Woman is animal” is one of the most productive and universal derogatory metaphors globally. However, the specific animal choices and mapped

characteristics accurately sketch the expectations and fears regarding female roles in different cultures.

3.1.1. *Woman is Horse*

The Horse, as a strategically valuable animal in traditional societies, integrates transportation, war, and agriculture. In both cultures, the horse is closely linked to masculinity, but when mapped to women, the two cultures show distinct focuses.

In the Chinese context, the horse metaphor is intricately linked to the Confucian moral framework of fidelity and chastity:

- (1) a. 好马不备双鞍，烈女不更二夫
 ‘A good horse doesn’t have two saddles, a strong woman doesn’t change her husband’
- b. 他妻莫爱，他马莫骑
 ‘Don’t love other’s wife, don’t ride other’s horse’

In the first conceptual metaphor, the highlighted feature of the source domain (horse) is not speed or strength, but its singular attachment to a master. “Two saddles” symbolizes diversified service, which is a defect in a quality horse. Mapped to the target domain (women), this logic validates the moral imperative of fidelity to one. By equating “remarriage” with “saddling twice”, the proverb uses a physical attribute of the natural world to argue for the inviolability of social morality.

The second proverb also indicates similar idea. It directly equates the wife with the horse, reinforcing the concept of proprietary ownership and the strict taboo against interference with another man’s chattel.

In Romanian, the horse also signifies ownership, but often alongside other symbols of male domain and control:

- (2) *Pușca, calul și femeia nu se împrumută*
 ‘The rifle, the horse, and the woman are not borrowed’

The horse is placed in equivalence with the rifle and the woman, establishing all three as non-fungible, personal objects of male possession. These three are defined as private property that cannot be lent out. The core of the mapping is Non-shareability. Unlike the Chinese emphasis on the woman's subjective will, the Romanian proverb objectifies the woman as an “asset” of equal status to the inanimate gun and horse. The woman’s agency is erased, her existence is defined by the man who owns her.

3.1.2. *Woman Is Hen*

The Hen, due to its role in laying eggs and hatching in agrarian households, becomes the most ubiquitous source domain for women, especially in mother or wife roles. This metaphor universally points to the Domestic Sphere and Reproductive Function.

Romanian proverbs use the hen's biological habits to argue that women cannot transcend their biological instincts.

- (3) a. *Femeia este ca găina, oricât de fudulă ar fi tot se așază pe ouă.*
 'A woman is like a hen; no matter how vain, she still sits on her eggs'
- b. *Nevasta adulteră e tot atât de bună la casa omului ca și găina care ouă prin vecini.*
 'The adulterous wife is as useful to a man's house as a hen that lays eggs for the neighbors'

The first proverb denies the possibility of women pursuing other social roles or expressing individuality by mapping the biological compulsion of brooding. No matter how vain (*fudulă*), implying an attempt to rise above one's station, she must ultimately return to her biological destiny—reproduction.

In the second proverb, adultery is not viewed primarily as a stain on patriarchal bloodlines as in China, but as a misallocation of resources. A hen laying eggs at a neighbor's house means a loss of wealth for the owner; similarly, a wife's sexuality and reproductive capacity belong to the house, the husband's economic unit. This reflects the pragmatic, household-economy-centered values of Romanian agrarian society.

The hen image in Chinese proverbs carries more educational function, consistent with the Confucian tradition of valuing family education.

- (4) 懒鸡婆带不出勤鸡仔
 'A lazy hen can't raise diligent chicks'

Although this still downgrades women to poultry, it emphasizes the agency of motherhood. The features of the source domain, hen raising chicks, are projected onto the target domain, mother educating children, stressing that the mother's diligence determines the quality of the offspring. While this grants women a core status in family education, it simultaneously imposes immense moral pressure—children's mediocrity or laziness is directly blamed on the mother's failure.

3.1.3. *Woman is Goose*

In Romanian proverbs, the Goose is one of the most common metaphorical vehicles for female groups, with the core mapping feature being noise.

- (5) a. *Când trei femei se întâlnesc, mai mult decât o sută de găște gârâlesc.*
 ‘When three women meet, they gabble more than a hundred geese’
 b. *Femeile, când se adună, parcă-s găște la pârâu.*
 ‘Women, when they gather, are like geese at the stream’

Goose calls are typically considered shrill, meaningless, and contagious. Comparing women’s gatherings to a “gaggle of geese” not only devalues the content of female communication by defining it as meaningless “gabbling” but also expresses a fear of female alliances. Women gathering at the stream, a public labor space, is viewed as low efficiency and disorder. This metaphor enforces verbal discipline: women should work silently like “diligent hens” rather than making noise like “geese” in public spaces.

3.1.4. *Woman is Aggressive Animal*

Chinese proverbs tend to use ferocious beasts to describe women who lose temper.

- (6) *世间三件休轻惹，黄蜂老虎狠家婆。*
 ‘There are three things in the world you cannot provoke: wasps, tigers, and fierce wives’

Here, women are compared with deadly predators and aggressive insects. This mapping is not just degradation; it is demonization. It implies that destructive forces lie dormant within women. If un-tamed by rites (礼), these forces, for example, temper, jealousy, fierceness, will cause devastation to the family. While Romanians worry women might talk like geese, Chinese culture worries women might destroy order. This metaphor enforces emotional and moral discipline.

3.2. *Woman is Object*

Descending further down the Great Chain, we encounter metaphors that completely de-animate women.

3.2.1. *Woman is Tool*

Romanian proverbs contain violence metaphors that rationalize domestic violence as tool of maintenance. This type of metaphor is not identified in Chinese proverbs.

- (7) a. *Muirea e ca coasa, dacă n-o bați, nu ascultă.*
 ‘The woman is like the scythe; if you don't beat her, she won't listen.’
- b. *Femeia nebătută e ca moara neferecată.*
 ‘An unbattered woman is like an unbolted mill’
- c. *Femeie bună e plug de aur în casa omului.*
 ‘A good woman is a golden plow in a man's house.’

In the proverbs (7), The scythe, mill and plow are core tools of agricultural production. The scythe's characteristic is that its blade must be sharpened by hammering. This proverb uses a cruel mapping to equate beating a woman with maintaining a scythe. It implies women are naturally lazy or dull, and only physical coercion can keep them obedient, which means both submissive and functional.

Similarly, example (7) b. suggests that without the bolt, representing violence, the mill, representing women, will spin out of control and cause damage. Violence is thus reconstructed not as a sin, but as a necessary management technology for women.

The classic metaphor in Chinese culture is clothing, which implies replaceability and surface utility.

- (8) *兄弟如手足，女人如衣服。*
 ‘Brothers are like hands and feet, women are like clothes’

In this body metaphor system, male blood relations are mapped as body parts, which are essential and indivisible, while marital relations are mapped as clothing, which is external and replaceable. Like clothes, old ones can be discarded, torn ones can be changed. In this proverb, two metaphors are compared, which stresses the lower value of women. While less physically violent than the tool metaphor, the clothing metaphor psychologically strips women of ontological status in the family, considering them perpetually replaceable.

3.2.2. *Woman is Treasure*

The metaphor *Women is Treasure* frames women as entities of high value. Romanian proverbs often use terms related to ceremonial status, such as the crown:

- (9) *O femeie vrednică e coroana casei*
 ‘A worthy woman is the crown of the house’

In this mapping, the woman is perceived as valuable, but her value is passive and symbolic. She grants honor, distinction, and high status to the man or the household, functioning as an ornament or support for the structure she inhabits.

Chinese proverbs tend to link the treasure metaphor more explicitly to economic or material value:

- (10) a. 女大三，抱金砖
 ‘A woman three years older [than her husband] brings a golden brick’
 b. 人老珠黄
 ‘A woman growing old, a pearl getting yellow’

The golden brick explicitly frames the woman as an economic asset or investment. Conversely, the yellowed pearl metaphor captures the sad reality that a woman’s intrinsic worth is often tied to external factors, particularly her youth and appearance, which decline with age. Conversely, men in Chinese proverbs are often compared to ginger, which gets spicier with age, or wine, which gets better with age.

Although seemingly positive, the treasure metaphor fundamentally structures the woman as an object that is owned and whose worth is determined by external valuation, rather than internal agency or herself.

3.3. *Woman is Nature*

Nature is both fascinating and terrifying. Thus, this type of metaphor often projects ideas of beauty, transience, instability, or danger.

3.3.1. *Woman is Flower*

The flower metaphor is nearly universal, representing beauty and aesthetic value while simultaneously conveying fragility, ephemerality, and passive ornamental status.

Romanian proverbs often use the flower to emphasize that beauty is insufficient without substance, or that it is easily corrupted:

- (11) a. *Casa fără muiere, ca o floare fără miros.*
 ‘A house without a woman is like a flower without scent’
 b. *Frumusețea fără înțelepciune e ca o floare în tină.*
 ‘Beauty without wisdom is like a flower in mud’

The flower’s value is tied to its functional output within the domestic setting. Beauty is superficial, without scent (utility) or wisdom (virtue), it is worthless.

Likewise, similar mapping can also be identified in Chinese proverbs.

- (12) a. 家花没有野花香
 ‘Wild flowers smell better than domestic ones’
 b. 路边的野花不要采
 ‘Don't pick up wild flowers’

In this metaphor, spouse of a man is compared to domestic flower, while lover is compared as wild flower. These proverbs use the woman is flower metaphor to rationalize infidelity by framing it as a natural preference for the wild (novel) over the domestic (familiar).

3.3.2. *Woman is Weather*

The source domain of weather is utilized to conceptualize stability or its opposite, instability:

- (13) a. *Nimic mai schimbăcios ca vremea și ca muierele.*
 ‘Nothing is more changeable than the weather and women’

The weather metaphor projects instability and unpredictability onto the female character.

Similar mapping can also be identified in Chinese proverbs.

- (14) 少女的心，秋天的云
'A young girl's heart is the autumn cloud'

This proverb also shares this theme of transience and emotional changeability of woman using the woman is weather metaphor.

3.3.3. *Woman is Stone*

The Romanian corpus also contains specific metaphors linking women to stone, emphasizing static nature and labor burden:

- (15) a. *Fata mare, piatră-n casă.*
'Big girl, stone in the house'
b. *Fetele, la casa omului, îs pietre de moară.*
'Girls are millstones in a man's house'

Stone symbolizes heaviness and stasis. Unmarried adult daughters are considered economic burdens, occupying space and consuming resources without generating flow, which requires marriage. The stone metaphor projects the qualities of being heavy, static, and necessary for repetitive, grinding labor onto the young woman, emphasizing the economic burden of an unmarried daughter or the constant, grinding nature of female domestic work.

3.3.4. *Woman is Wine*

This metaphor, also identified in Romanian proverbs, using wine as source domain, frames the woman as an irresistible yet destructive temptation.

- (16) a. *Vinul bun, nevasta frumoasa sunt două veninuri dulci.*
'Good wine and a beautiful wife are two sweet poisons'
b. *Muierea tânără, ca vinul nou fierbe.*
'The young woman ferments like new wine'

Wine is intoxicating, causes loss of control. The projection of this metaphor is clear: women, like wine, are sources of uncontrollable temptation and inherent danger to a man's stability and virtue.

4. Findings

The analysis above shows that both Romanian and Chinese cultures use the Great Chain to downgrade women. However, the mapping procedure and source domains differs due to different cultural and historical background.

4.1. Major findings

As it is shown in **Table 1**, while both cultures share broad metaphorical categories, the specific attributes assigned to women differ significantly, reflecting distinct cultural values regarding duty, family structure, and social status.

Across both cultures, the overarching theme is the dehumanization of women through metaphors that equate them with property, animals, or useful items. Both cultures view women as assets to be owned, as the horse metaphor and the treasure metaphor show. Under the metaphor woman is object, specifically the tool metaphor, both cultures strip away human identity from women. Romanian focuses on “labor” and “control”, while Chinese focuses on the woman being “replaceable”.

Even when both languages use the same source domain (the same animal or object), the cultural interpretation shifts: In Chinese proverbial context, the horse represents high moral virtues: loyalty, chastity and allegiance. It frames the woman’s role as a noble, albeit subservient, commitment to a husband or the family. The hen is viewed through a lens of responsibility—specifically maternity and labor education. This aligns with the cultural importance of the mother's role in a child's academic and moral upbringing. The focus of the flower metaphor is almost entirely aesthetic and functional: ornamentation, pleasure, and replicability. In Romanian proverbial context, the horse represents power: “subordination” and “possession”. The hen is viewed more biologically and functionally. Referring to flower metaphor, the Romanian mapping emphasizes a need for internal virtue and substance, suggesting beauty is a trap without moral fiber.

The metaphors that exist in one culture but not the other reveal specific cultural anxieties or stereotypes. Specific to Romanian proverbs, the goose associates women with excessive talking and noise. This reflects a specific stereotype about women’s speech patterns not present in the Chinese column. The stone defines a woman as a burden. This is a metaphor regarding the economic problem that of supporting a woman. Wine represents temptation and danger. This frames the woman as a seductress who threatens male stability. Specific to Chinese

proverbs, fierce animal represents ferocity and danger. While the Romanian wine metaphor also suggests danger, the Chinese “fierce animal” suggests danger through power or temperament.

To summarize, Romanian mapping tends to focus heavily on, function, burden and control. Women are viewed as valuable property (treasure) but also potential liabilities (stone, wine) or annoyances (goose) that require subordination (horse). Chinese Mapping tends to focus on morality, aesthetics, and hierarchy. Women are viewed as essential for lineage and education (hen), or as ornamental assets (flower).

Table 1. Mapping in Chinese and Romanian women-related proverbs

Conceptual Metaphor	Source Domain	Conceptual Mapping in Romanian	Conceptual Mapping in Chinese
woman is animal	horse	possession, subordination, non-shareability	loyalty, chastity, singular allegiance
	hen	fertility, domestic utility, infidelity	maternity, nurturing role, responsibility for labor education
	goose	garrulousness, noise, lack of composure	N/A
	fierce animal	N/A	ferocity, danger
woman is object	tool	utility, labor, requires control	replaceable, external
	treasure	value, honor, status, Support	value, possession, economic asset
woman is nature	flower	ephemeral beauty, requires internal virtue, substance	ornamentation, pleasure, replicability
	weather	instability	changeability
	stone	burden	N/A
	wine	temptation, danger	N/A

4.2. Historical and cultural causes

The selection of specific source domains is not random, it is deeply rooted in the historical economic structure and moral framework of each society. Understanding these traditional gender roles is essential for interpreting the metaphorical divergences.

Traditional Chinese gender roles are profoundly shaped by Confucianism, prioritizing social harmony through strict hierarchical structure (Yu 2009). The behavior of women was historically codified by the Three Obediences and Four Virtues of Feminine (三从四德), a moral framework from Confucianism outlining the expected conduct for women in ancient China.

The Chinese proverbial focus, deeply influenced by Confucianism, utilizes source domains reflecting obedience, internal moral composure and allegiance. Derogation centers on the failure of moral virtue or the woman acting as a destabilizing external force, represented by overwhelming beauty or financial burden. This structure reflects a culture where a woman's greatest value is her moral integrity and her unwavering support for the patriarchal hierarchy.

According to *The Book of Etiquette and Ceremonial*², The Three Feminine Obediences dictate that a woman is obligated to follow and obey: her father before marriage; her husband after marriage; and her sons in widowhood. This structure established a pervasive and lifelong state of dependence and subordination, which logically motivates conceptual metaphors emphasizing ownership and passive acceptance. According to *Rites of Zhou*³, The Four Feminine Virtues emphasize internal and external control: Feminine Conduct (妇德), requiring tranquility, chastity and a sense of shame, ensuring behavior is always in proper measure. Feminine Speech (妇言), demanding carefully chosen words, forbidding slander and speaking only when appropriate to avoid dislike. Feminine Comportment (妇容), focusing on cleanliness and keeping one's body free from disgrace. Feminine Works (妇功), concentrating on domestic tasks like weaving, spinning, and preparing food for guests.

The core value derived from this feminine framework is loyalty and chastity and the core anxiety of Confucianism is “chaos”—the collapse of the hierarchical order. Given this cultural foundation, the cognitive structuring of

² *The Book of Etiquette and Ceremonial* (《仪礼》) is one of the Chinese classic text social behavior and ceremonial ritual.

³ *Rites of Zhou* (《周礼》) is one of the Chinese classics on bureaucracy and organizational theory.

female transgression tends to focus on violations of these moral and internal standards, such as a lack of composure, infidelity or distracting vanity, rather than mere lack of labor.

In Romanian traditional society, shaped by centuries of agricultural life, the division of labor strongly influenced gender norms. While males were concentrated in demanding field labor, females were inclined to devote themselves to the home and family, responsible for household chores and maintaining domestic affairs (Ceașescu, 2023). Within the family, the woman had an essential, central role, particularly in carrying out the customs and rituals associated with life's major biological thresholds, acting as the domestic anchor that restores social balance during times of transition.

The central cultural value for Romanian women was Industriousness. The woman's worth was judged primarily by her functional contribution to the house. This emphasis on utilitarian control and constant labor means that Romanian proverbs frequently select source domains that are domestic, functional, and controllable, such as common farm animals or essential farm instruments. This cultural context fosters metaphorical mappings that justify or explicitly prescribe the management of women to ensure domestic efficiency.

Despite the critical differences in emphasis, Confucian composure versus agrarian utility, both cultures share fundamental patriarchal assumptions. Women are universally conceptualized as subordinate to male authority, subject to possession, and primarily responsible for reproductive duties and essential domestic maintenance. This shared foundation accounts for the persistence of most of the shared metaphors.

5. Conclusion

This article has analyzed the image of womanhood in Chinese and Romanian traditional societies by studying gendered proverbs through the lens of Conceptual Metaphor Theory. The investigation confirms that in both cultures, the Great Chain Metaphor is actively employed to downgrade women, systematically mapping them onto lower ontological levels such as animals, tools and inanimate objects. This cognitive mechanism serves to strip women of human identity and justify their subordination within the patriarchal order.

However, the comparative analysis also reveals cultural divergences regarding the specific source domains selected. In Chinese culture, profoundly shaped by

Confucianism, metaphors are structured around anxiety regarding moral chaos and the maintenance of hierarchical order. Consequently, Chinese proverbs emphasize the woman's internal virtue, chastity, and role in lineage education, considering that woman's value lies in their allegiance to the family unit. In contrast, Romanian proverbs reflect a society driven by agrarian pragmatism and the division of labor. The dominant cultural value is industriousness, leading to metaphors that prioritize function, control, and economic utility. Romanian sayings frequently depict women as assets to be possessed, tools requiring physical maintenance or economic liabilities.

In summary, while the Chinese mapping focuses on morality and aesthetics, and the Romanian mapping focuses on function and burden, the underlying objective remains identical. Both linguistic systems utilize specific cultural filters to conceptualize women as subordinate to male authority and primarily responsible for reproductive and domestic duties. This study highlights that gendered proverbs are not merely neutral observations of reality but are potent cognitive tools that have historically cemented the social marginalization of women in both Chinese and Romanian contexts.

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