



# A Semantic Analysis of “Peach” in Chinese and Japanese

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## Abstract

This paper presents a comparative semantic analysis of the concept of “peach” as manifested in Chinese and Japanese four-character idioms and proverbs. Drawing on authoritative lexicographical sources, the study examines both shared and divergent cultural perceptions associated with peaches in the two languages. Guided by theories from cognitive linguistics—specifically metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche—the paper analyzes the mechanisms through which semantic extensions develop from the core meaning of “peach” as a plant to a range of abstract meanings. The findings reveal that while many semantic extensions are shared due to historical transmission from China to Japan, each language has also developed culturally specific interpretations shaped by local social experience.

## Subject Areas

Culture

## Keywords

Semantic Extension, Idioms and Proverbs, Cultural Semantics, Cognitive Semantics

## 1. Introduction

Peaches have been cultivated in China for more than three thousand years and have long been closely associated with everyday life. Beyond their material function as food, peaches gradually accumulated rich symbolic meanings, giving rise to a distinctive cultural system. Idioms and proverbs, as conventionalized linguistic expressions, preserve traces of collective cognition, social values, and cultural beliefs. Through the analysis of such expressions, it is possible to gain insight into how speakers conceptualize the world and encode experience into language.

This study focuses on four-character idioms and proverbs related to “peach” in Chinese and Japanese. By comparing the two languages, the paper aims to clarify both commonalities and differences in cultural perception. Furthermore, adopting a cognitive linguistic framework grounded in conceptual metaphor theory and usage-based semantics [1]-[4], this study examines how metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche operate in the process of semantic extension. In this view, meaning is not a fixed correspondence between words and objects, but an emergent structure shaped by embodied experience, recurrent usage, and cultural convention.

## 2. Previous Studies

Previous research on peach symbolism has primarily approached the topic from cultural, folkloric, or literary perspectives. Bi investigated the folk semantic meanings of “peach” and “willow” in Chinese culture, identifying multiple semantic domains such as spring, feminine beauty, love, virtue, longevity, and ideal society [5]. Qu conducted a systematic study of peach imagery in ancient Chinese literature, focusing on its literary symbolism and cultural implications [6]. However, comparative analyses of Chinese and Japanese idiomatic usage remain relatively limited, which this study seeks to address.

While existing studies have richly documented the symbolic and literary meanings of peach in Chinese culture, relatively little attention has been paid to how these meanings are structured and extended through cognitive mechanisms such as metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche. Moreover, few studies apply core frameworks of cognitive semantics to a cross-linguistic comparison of idiomatic expressions. This study seeks to fill this gap by analyzing how shared cultural material is reorganized through distinct cognitive and usage-based processes in Chinese and Japanese.

In recent years (2021-2025), cognitive-semantic approaches to idioms and proverbs have increasingly emphasized 1) the interaction between metaphor and metonymy in meaning construction, 2) culturally grounded conceptualization in idiomatic systems, and 3) embodiment and contextual responsiveness in proverb interpretation. For example, Wen and Chen demonstrate how culturally specific conceptualizations motivate metaphorical networks in Chinese idioms [7], while Xi proposes a typology for metaphorical and metonymic Chinese idioms that highlights processing-related factors [8]. Complementary evidence from translation and figurative-language studies also shows that metaphor-metonymy interaction (“metaphonymy”) is analytically relevant for cross-linguistic meaning transfer [9]. Moreover, recent proverb studies grounded in conceptual metaphor theory and image-schema/embodiment frameworks further support usage-based explanations of figurative meaning [10]. Building on these developments, the present study applies metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche as explicit cognitive mechanisms to a targeted cross-linguistic comparison of “peach”-related idioms and proverbs in Chinese and Japanese.

### 3. Methodology

This study adopts a usage-based and corpus-oriented approach to examine the semantic extension of “peach” (桃/momo) in Chinese and Japanese four-character idioms and proverbs. The dataset was constructed from authoritative lexicographical sources in both languages in order to ensure representativeness, stability of meaning, and reproducibility.

For Chinese, idioms and proverbs were collected primarily from *Comprehensive Dictionary of Chinese Idioms* [11] and *Comprehensive Collection of Chinese Proverbs* [12]. For Japanese, data were drawn from *Shinmeikai Four-Character Idiom Dictionary* [13] and *Goshi Zokushin Kotowaza Daijiten* [14]. These sources were selected because they provide standardized entries with definitions and conventional usage, making them suitable for semantic comparison.

All entries containing the lexical item 桃 in Chinese or 桃 (momo) in Japanese, as well as conventionalized compounds in which peach constitutes a core semantic element (e.g., 桃李, 桃色, 桃木), were extracted. Expressions that were obsolete, highly technical, or lacking stable idiomatic meaning were excluded. After filtering, the final data set consisted of 20 Chinese expressions and 20 Japanese expressions, which served as the empirical basis of the analysis.

Each expression was then coded along two dimensions: semantic domain and cognitive mechanism. Semantic domains include, for example, life stages, social cultivation, emotional relations, protection, and idealized space. Cognitive mechanisms were identified following established frameworks in cognitive semantics: metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche. Metaphor refers to cross-domain mapping, such as when plant growth is used to conceptualize human life. Metonymy captures within-domain association, for example, when peaches stand for students, romance, or emotional states. Synecdoche involves part-whole relations, such as when peach or peach wood represents a broader protective function.

To improve reproducibility and comparability with recent cognitive-semantic idiom research, the identification of metaphor/metonymy patterns and their interaction was cross-checked against recent typological and empirical discussions in the field. For proverb-level figurativity and embodied motivation, the analysis also aligns with recent cognitive-linguistic treatments of proverbs employing image schemas and conceptual metaphor theory.

### 4. Comparative Overview of Chinese and Japanese Idioms and Proverbs

In Japanese, idioms involving peaches are almost entirely derived from classical Chinese sources. While their meanings are often similar to their Chinese counterparts, semantic shifts have occurred during transmission. Proverbs in both languages share themes such as spring imagery, feminine beauty, moral virtue, agricultural labor, and the short-lived nature of blossoms. At the same time, Chinese uniquely associates peaches with health, longevity, romantic fortune, and youth, whereas Japanese has developed expressions emphasizing physical instability, im-

permanence, and erotic imagery.

In this study, shared and divergent semantic domains of “peach” are analyzed through three core cognitive mechanisms. Metaphor refers to cross-domain mapping, such as when biological growth is mapped onto human life stages. Metonymy operates within a single conceptual domain, for example, when peaches stand for students or emotional states. Synecdoche captures part-whole relations, as when a material object, such as a peach or peach wood, stands for a broader protective function. The shared and divergent semantic domains of “peach” in Chinese and Japanese are summarized in **Table 1**, which provides the analytical framework for the detailed discussions in Sections 5 and 6.

**Table 1.** Shared and divergent semantic domains of “peach” in Chinese and Japanese.

Shared Cognitive Base	Chinese Development	Japanese Development	Cognitive Mechanism
Life and vitality	桃李年华 (youth as life stage) → life as long-term growth	桃色の恋 (fleeting love) → life as momentary affect	Metaphor (LIFE AS GROWTH vs LIFE AS MOMENT)
Attraction and emotion	桃花运 (romantic fortune within life trajectory)	桃色の雰囲気 (immediate emotional atmosphere)	Metonymy (FRUIT → DESIRE)
Protection and good fortune	桃木辟邪 (ritual protection through material)	桃太郎 (narrative protection through action)	Synecdoche (OBJECT → PROTECTIVE FORCE)
Social evaluation	桃李满天下, 桃李不言 (social recognition through cultivation)	-	Metonymy (RESULT → MORAL VALUE)
Idealized space	世外桃源 (utopian social order)	-	Metaphor (SPACE → SOCIETY)
Embodied perception	-	桃尻 (bodily softness), 桃色 (sensory tone)	Embodied metaphor

## 5. Semantic Extension of “Peach” in Chinese

In Chinese linguistic usage, the semantic value of peach (桃) is shaped less by isolated symbolic equivalence than by its repeated appearance in culturally stabilized communicative contexts. Rather than functioning as a fixed metaphor, peach operates as a flexible cultural sign whose meaning is activated according to social practices, narrative traditions, and evaluative needs. This is evident in expressions such as tao-li nian-hua (桃李年华, “the age of peaches and plums”), where peach does not simply symbolize beauty but indexes a specific phase of human life through a metaphorical mapping between botanical maturation and human life stages. Here, life stages are conceptualized as organic processes rather than static attributes.

A salient feature of Chinese peach-related expressions is therefore their strong orientation toward life cycles and temporal progression. This processual orientation also appears in educational and social discourse, most clearly in tao-li man-tian-xia (桃李满天下, “peaches and plums fill the world”), a proverb referring to

a teacher whose students are widespread. In this usage, peaches do not denote results alone but the long-term accumulation of cultivation, through a metonymic extension whereby agricultural cultivation stands for educational and moral formation. The semantic emphasis lies on continuity across generations rather than on individual success.

This relational logic further underlies expressions of indirect social influence, such as *tao-li bu yan, xia zi cheng qi* (桃李不言，下自成蹊, “peaches and plums do not speak, yet a path forms beneath them”). The peach here encodes a metonymic construal of authority in which social recognition stands for moral legitimacy rather than explicit assertion, reflecting a culturally embedded preference for implicit efficacy. Meaning is not derived from visual analogy but from recurrent social evaluation practices.

In ritual discourse, peach likewise functions through usage rather than symbolism. The practice captured by *tao-mu bi-xie* (桃木辟邪, “peach wood wards off evil”) involves a synecdochic extension in which peach wood, as a part of the peach domain, stands for protective function between safety and danger. This role is neither abstract nor arbitrary; it is grounded in the repeated deployment of peach objects in liminal situations such as doorways, festivals, and exorcistic rites. Finally, in spatial imagination, peach appears in expressions like *shi-wai tao-yuan* (世外桃源, “a peach-blossom land beyond the world”), where it anchors an idealized alternative society. Here, peach functions as a cognitive contrast to lived reality rather than a mere fantasy symbol. Taken together, these usages show that in Chinese, peach acquires meaning through processes of cultivation, relational influence, and functional deployment within social life.

## 6. Semantic Extension of “Peach” in Japanese

In Japanese, the semantic development of peach (桃, *momo*) reflects a different set of priorities, emphasizing embodied experience, emotional nuance, and situational evaluation. While many peach-related terms originate in Chinese, their meanings are reorganized through locally dominant modes of perception. For example, the word *momojiri* (桃尻, “peach-shaped buttocks”) derives from an embodied metaphor mapping the tactile and visual qualities of the fruit onto the human body, using peach to describe bodily softness and instability rather than moral or social processes. Meaning here emerges from sensory experience rather than from symbolic tradition.

This embodied orientation also extends to interpersonal communication. In expressions such as *momoiro no fun'iki* (桃色の雰囲気, “a peach-colored atmosphere”) or *momoiro no koi* (桃色の恋, “a peach-colored love”), peach indexes subtle emotional states through a metonymic association between color and affect—romantic tension, fleeting desire, or gentle intimacy. These expressions do not refer to enduring virtues or moral cultivation but to temporary affective conditions, aligning with a communicative preference for indirectness and situational sensitivity.

Within this semantic system, the protective function of peach is most clearly articulated through the myth of Momotarō (桃太郎, “Peach Boy”). In this narrative, the peach does not symbolize abstract spiritual power but operates as a concrete agent of protection and transformation: it gives birth to the hero and equips him to defeat demons threatening the community. This narrative logic directly underlies later idiomatic and cultural uses of peach as a protective medium. When peach-related expressions evoke safety, intimacy, or emotional buffering, they echo the Momotarō schema in which peach intervenes at moments of vulnerability. The peach protects not by representing transcendence but by acting within a specific situation, whether in the face of external threat or interpersonal vulnerability.

Thus, Japanese peach semantics is structured around immediacy and efficacy rather than continuity and cultivation. Borrowed from Chinese culture, the peach is resemanticized as a context-sensitive device for managing bodily states, emotional relations, and narrative risk. This shift from symbolic accumulation to situational responsiveness illustrates how imported cultural materials are reorganized according to local modes of perception and interaction.

## 7. Conclusion

This study has investigated the semantic configurations of peach (桃) in Chinese and Japanese four-character idioms and proverbs from a comparative and usage-oriented perspective. The analysis shows that, despite sharing a common historical source, the two languages have developed distinct semantic patterns shaped by different cultural priorities. Chinese usages tend to conceptualize peach through process-oriented and relational frameworks, emphasizing life cycles, social cultivation, indirect influence, and idealized spaces, whereas Japanese usages foreground embodied experience, affective nuance, situational evaluation, and narrative immediacy. By shifting the analytical focus from fixed symbolic correspondences to functional usage and contextual activation, this study demonstrates that semantic extension is not merely a cognitive mapping between domains, but an adaptive process grounded in social practice. These findings highlight how culturally shared lexical materials can diverge semantically through localized reinterpretation, contributing to a deeper understanding of cross-linguistic semantic variation in idiomatic language.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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