

Stylistic Analysis Of The Gastronomic Metaphors “烫手山芋” And “陈谷子烂芝麻” In Chinese Economic Discourse

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Abstract: This article presents a stylistic analysis of the gastronomic metaphors “烫手山芋” (tàng shǒu shān yù) and “陈谷子烂芝麻” (chén gǔzi làn zhīma). It explores their meanings in economic texts, their usage, emotional coloring, and both positive and negative connotations. The study also examines the literal meanings of these expressions and how they have undergone metaphorical transformation.

Keywords: Metaphor, source domain, target domain, gastronomic metaphor, “烫手山芋”, “陈谷子烂芝麻”.

Introduction: The term conceptual metaphor was first introduced by George Lakoff in his 1980 work “Metaphors We Live By”. In this book, he argues that a conceptual metaphor is not merely a stylistic device, but a fundamental mechanism of thought and reasoning.

A conceptual metaphor involves two cognitive domains: the source domain and the target domain. The mapping between these domains allows us to understand the target domain in terms of the source domain.

In the following sections, we will examine the stylistic analysis of the two gastronomic metaphors in question.

(1) “烫手山芋” 还是潜力股？水发燃气欲 “零元” 拿下兴瑞能源65%股权 · 标的项目已停工一年多”

(<https://www.nbd.com.cn/articles/2025-04-22/3842067.html>. 2025-04-22)

“ “Hot potato” or potential stocks? Shui Fa Gas Company intends to acquire a 65% stake in Xingshui Energy Company for “zero value,” but the project has been suspended for over a year.”

(2) “一波三折，收购标的从香饽饽变成 “烫手山芋”

田中精机奇葩年报事件续集上演.”

(<https://www.nbd.com.cn/articles/2019-07-20/1355.html> 2019-07-20)

“Several changes occurred, and the acquisition target transformed from a highly sought-after asset into a ‘hot potato.’ The strange continuation of Tianzhong Precision Machine Company’s annual report saga has now come to light.”

“烫手山芋” (Tàng shǒu shān yù) literally translates as “hot sweet potato that burns the hand.” This expression conveys the idea that holding or dealing with something is very difficult and risky. This gastronomic metaphor is often used to describe a problematic issue or a risky entrepreneurial venture.

For example:

(1) Here, the stake or project of Xingshui Energy Company is called a “烫手山芋” because it represents a potential danger or inconvenience for Shui Fa Gas Company. It implies that the company may face difficulties in acquiring the stake.

(2) In another case, an acquisition target (a company or stake) that was initially considered highly beneficial has

now turned into a “烫手山芋” — a risky and uncomfortable situation.

In both texts, the metaphor is used to express a negative and hazardous state. “烫手山芋” is commonly applied to difficult, responsible situations. For instance, nobody wants to “hold the hot potato” because it implies an unresolved or complicated issue. The phrase is typically used with ironic, critical, or complaining tones.

“演得太真实了，村子这么美，人心也要美呢，那些“陈谷子烂芝麻”的老观念要转变，咱也要做个开明丈母娘。”

(<https://www.gsib.com/system/2025/04/17/031169925.shtml> 2025-04-17)

“It’s very close to reality — the village is beautiful, and people’s hearts should be beautiful too. Those outdated views must be changed; we, too, must become modern and open-minded mothers-in-law.”

In this context, the gastronomic metaphor “陈谷子烂芝麻” (chén gǔzi làn zhīma) — literally “old millet and rotten sesame” — is used to refer to old and outdated things or obsolete and no longer useful ideas from the past. As the statement suggests, the metaphor criticizes outdated social views, traditional economic systems, or long-standing societal practices that have lost relevance.

These old ideas are seen as having lost their value over time and are considered ineffective or unproductive in the context of modern economic or social development. The metaphor may also imply economic costs — outdated practices that continue to consume resources without providing benefit.

If such outdated methods and perspectives are not revised, they will no longer be effective in the future. For instance, traditional ceremonies such as weddings — when tied to excessive and costly customs — may be economically wasteful or impractical in today’s world.

The imagery of spoiled grains or inedible food evokes strong negative emotions and highlights the need to let go of what is unnecessary or no longer beneficial.

Gastronomic metaphors often interact with linguistic expressions and serve as essential conceptual tools for understanding deeper meaning.

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