



Conceptual Metaphor of the Plant Domain in Vietnamese Folk Songs and Proverbs

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Abstract

Original Research Article

In Vietnamese folklore, folk songs and proverbs play a vital role in both productive labor activities and the cultural and spiritual life of the Vietnamese people across generations. They serve as a repository for preserving and sustaining the cultural values of the nation throughout its long history. Particularly, within the rich treasury of Vietnamese folk songs and proverbs, conceptual metaphors related to the “plant domain” appear in considerable numbers. Therefore, analyzing the system of conceptual metaphors from the plant domain in Vietnamese folk songs and proverbs helps to shed light on the Vietnamese worldview and their vivid, engaging way of perceiving the surrounding world.

Keywords: *Conceptual Metaphor, Plants, Folk Songs, Proverbs, Source Domain, Target Domain*

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1. INTRODUCTION

As a mental mapping mechanism, metaphor permeates all aspects of daily life—not only in language but also in thought and behavior—affecting how people think and act in everyday situations. Cognitive linguistics has shown that metaphor is formed through conceptual transformation. Accordingly, “a conceptual metaphor is a transfer or a mapping of structures and internal relations from a source domain or cognitive model onto a target domain or cognitive model” [20, p. 25]. By nature, a conceptual metaphor is a cognitive mechanism consisting of a source domain and a target domain, aimed at generating and clarifying new concepts.

In Vietnamese folklore, folk songs and proverbs play an essential role in both productive labor and the cultural and spiritual life of the Vietnamese people across generations. They serve as a repository for preserving and transmitting the cultural values of the nation throughout its long history. Particularly, in the rich trove of Vietnamese folk songs and proverbs, conceptual metaphors from the plant domain appear in

considerable numbers. Therefore, analyzing the system of conceptual metaphors related to the plant domain in Vietnamese folk songs and proverbs contributes to clarifying the Vietnamese people's vivid and engaging perception of the world around them.

2. RESEARCH CONTENT

2.1. Humans and Human Body Parts as “Plants”

“Plants” are natural products formed through the combination of various natural elements such as soil, water, nutrients, temperature, weather, and living environment. However, under human influence—through activities like cultivation, care, hybridization, grafting, harvesting, or even cutting—plants have become familiar and play an important role in many aspects of human life, from production and daily activities to culture and spirituality. The element of “plants” has penetrated various domains, including language.

From the perspective of humans and their body parts, Vietnamese people have incorporated certain plant-related

concepts to refer to human organs and body parts. Vietnamese dictionaries record the existence of terms such as *quả tim* (literally “fruit of the heart” – heart), *quả thận* (kidney), *lá gan* (liver), *lá phổi* (lung), and *lá lách* (spleen). These expressions are widely used in everyday communication and exist in various text forms, for example:

- “Công viên là lá phổi xanh của thành phố”
(*The park is the green lung of the city*)
- “Chiến dịch vì một trái tim khỏe”
(*Campaign for a healthy heart*)
- “Một quả thận của anh ấy đã bị hỏng, nếu như chúng ta không tiến hành phẫu thuật ngay thì sẽ rất nguy hiểm”
(*One of his kidneys is damaged; if we don't perform surgery immediately, it will be very dangerous*)

Vietnamese folk songs and proverbs contain a few verses where body parts are metaphorically framed within the “plant domain,” although the frequency is limited and not highly significant. One notable example includes:

Đàn ông một trăm lá gan
Lá ở cùng vợ, lá toan cùng người
(*A man has a hundred livers / Some stay with the wife, some stray with another*)

Besides being used to refer to human body parts, “plants” are also employed to metaphorically describe human beings themselves, particularly their nature and character. Subjected to the forces of nature, many plants exhibit the ability to adapt and survive in various environments, whether gentle or harsh. This adaptability and resilience are reflected in trees such as pine, bamboo, and cypress.

In the treasure trove of Vietnamese folk songs and proverbs, the concept of “bamboo” appears more frequently than other elements in the “plant domain,” due to its deep-rooted connection with farmers and the Vietnamese countryside. Folklore has recorded numerous compositions in which “bamboo” symbolizes the noble qualities of individuals and of the Vietnamese nation as a whole. “Bamboo” represents love, solidarity, as well as the intergenerational inheritance of values and traditions:

- Tre già măng mọc (*Old bamboo gives rise to young shoots*)
- Tre non dễ uốn (*Young bamboo is easy to bend*)

Bamboo is a familiar plant in rural Vietnam and is known for its latent vitality and robust reproduction over time. It is a plant that endures harsh conditions, which mirrors the Vietnamese people's qualities: industriousness, resilience, a loving and united spirit. The proverb “Tre già măng mọc” not only affirms bamboo's capacity for continuous regeneration but also metaphorically reflects the enduring vitality and legacy of the Vietnamese people from generation to generation,

regardless of the era, always carrying forward the values of their ancestors.

In addition to trees, ancient people also used flowers as metaphors for human beings. Those likened to flowers are often people of talent and beauty—virtuous individuals whose charm and grace are comparable to flowers radiating fragrance and vibrant color. For example:

Nhân tài như thể bách hoa
Hoa sen thơm ngát, hoa trà đẹp tươi
(*Talents are like a hundred blooming flowers / The lotus is fragrant, the camellia is bright and beautiful*)

In the body of folk literature, there are many lamenting folk songs expressing the sorrows of those at the bottom of society, especially women. These songs often feature a recurring motif: “*Thân em...*” (“My body is like...”), followed by a simile or metaphor reflecting the physical appearance or fate of the speaker. The “plant” concept is also present in many of these lamenting folk verses:

Thân em như thể cánh bèo
Ngược xuôi xuôi ngược theo chiều nước trôi
(*My body is like a duckweed leaf / Drifting back and forth with the current*)

Thân em như cỏ giữa đồng
Buồn thì anh nhổ, anh trồng rau răm
(*My body is like grass in the field / When bored, you pluck it up and plant coriander instead*)

By using plant imagery as metaphor, folk authors highlight the fate of the individuals being referenced. Here, plants are not elevated or pure like “lotus,” “chrysanthemum,” “apricot,” or “peach blossom”; nor are they strong and enduring like “pine,” “cypress,” or “bamboo.” Instead, they are fragile, insignificant plants shaped by their environment—like *duckweed* or *field grass*. The duckweed evokes a small, delicate plant; the field grass suggests a lonely, uncertain existence. Moreover, their fate depends on external forces: the duckweed is at the mercy of the water's current; the field grass is subject to someone's whim—“when bored, you pluck it up and plant coriander instead.” These metaphors reflect the condition of women in the old feudal society, who could not determine their future or fate, always subject to the control and decisions of others. Their lives were small and humble in a world filled with injustice and inequality.

Yet, above all, there remains a pure beauty of the soul, as expressed in this verse:

Thân em như củ ấu gai
Ruột trong thì trắng, vỏ ngoài thì đen
Ai ơi nếm thử mà xem
Nếm ra mới biết rằng em ngọt bùi
(*My body is like a water caltrop / Black and spiky outside, but*)

white inside / Oh please, give it a try / Only then will you know how sweet I am)

Here, the folk author speaks of a woman's fate through the image of the water caltrop—a plant that grows in deep, muddy waters, with a rough, spiky exterior but a soft, white, and sweet interior. The use of this image conveys an intended message: to praise the inner beauty of a woman—her virtues and spirit. Despite enduring the hardship of farm work or the struggle for livelihood, despite living a humble and constrained life, she still preserves a simple, pure beauty—a beauty untouched by external influences. Just like the water caltrop, rough on the outside, but only when opened does one see the white core; only when tasted does one discover its sweetness. This folk verse highlights the character and soulful beauty of women, affirming their noble value.

2.2. Human Activities, Moods, and Emotions as “Plants”

Plants hold a significant place in human life. Beyond being used to express or represent parts of the human body, they also serve as metaphors for human moods and emotions. One recurring motif that conveys emotional expression is “*Thương thay...*” (“Alas for...” or “How sorrowful...”), a phrase commonly used in folk poetry to express sympathy or lamentation:

*Thương thay con cuốc giữa trời
Dầu kêu ra máu có người nào nghe
(Alas for the coucal bird under the sky / Though it cries until it bleeds, who will hear it?)
Thương thay thân phận con tằm
Kiếm ăn được mấy phải nằm nhà tơ
(Alas for the fate of the silkworm / Earning barely enough to live, yet must spin silk)*

In folk songs with the “*thương thay*” motif, the concept of “plant domain” appears less frequently. However, within the scope of our research, we have also recorded instances such as:

Thương thay cây quế giữa rừng

*Cay nồng ai biết, ngát lòng ai hay
(Alas for the cinnamon tree deep in the forest / Who knows its spicy scent, who notices its fragrance?)*

In addition to creations born out of the daily life of the Vietnamese people over generations, folk poetry also reflects real historical events and figures, simultaneously expressing the people's emotions, attitudes, and perspectives toward these events and individuals. For example:

Tiếc thay cây quế giữa rừng

*Để cho thằng Mán, thằng Mường nó leo
(Alas for the cinnamon tree in the forest / Left to be climbed by the Mán and Mường)*

Variant:

*Tiếc thay cây quế Châu Thương
Để cho thằng Mán, thằng Mường nó leo
(Alas for the cinnamon tree of Chau Thuong / Left to be climbed by the Mán and Mường)*

These folk verses refer to actual historical events. According to historical records, during the Lý Dynasty, the king often married off princesses to minority chieftains in remote border regions as part of a political strategy to pacify these communities and prevent uprisings against the central plains. This was also a method to “transform frontier people into loyal subjects and strengthen national borders.” Subsequent dynasties continued this policy as a means of asserting influence and securing diplomacy with neighboring regions.

Folk poets composed and passed down such verses to reflect these historical truths and convey their sentiments—particularly sorrow and pity—for individuals of royal blood who had to sacrifice their lives and personal happiness for national interests. The princess is likened to a “cinnamon tree”—a plant known for its delicate fragrance and noble symbolism. Yet here, the tree stands isolated in the forest, fated to be climbed and used by the *Mán* and *Mường*. While *Mán* and *Mường* refer to ethnic minority groups in northern Vietnam, the terms can also carry derogatory implications depending on context—implying inferiority or backwardness. As such, in that environment, the “cinnamon tree” cannot radiate its inherent value and beauty, but instead must endure the actions of those deemed lesser. This expresses the grief and regret the folk people embedded in these verses to comment on history.

Later, during the Trần Dynasty, when King Trần Nhân Tông arranged for Princess Huyền Trân to marry King Chế Mân of Champa, a similar variant of the folk lament emerged:

*Tiếc thay hạt gạo trắng ngần
Đã vo nước đục, lại vằn lửa rơm
(Alas for the pure white rice grain / Washed in muddy water, then cooked over straw fire)*

Alongside the “*than thân*” (self-lamenting) folk songs, Vietnamese folk literature also includes verses that portray human separation, where plant-related imagery serves as a metaphor for human subjects. In these verses, the reader can sense the emotional states of the characters, for example:

*Gió đưa cây cải về trời
Rau răm ở lại chịu đời đắng cay
(The wind lifts the mustard green to the sky / The coriander remains, enduring life's bitterness)
Gió đưa cây cải lý hương
Hai người hai họ mà thương nhau cùng
(The wind carries away the fragrant mustard / Two from different families, yet still they love each other)*

In these examples, “mustard green” and “coriander” are not merely plants—they are symbolic representations of human beings, of emotional bonds strained or broken by separation or fate. The use of the plant domain here serves to evoke emotional depth, highlighting sorrow, longing, and the hardships of love and life, especially when faced with societal constraints or class divisions.

In folk proverbs and sayings about romantic love and family affection, plants are often used as metaphors to express human emotions and sentiments. For example:

Khi yêu củ ấu cũng tròn, ghét nhau bồ hòn cũng méo

*(When in love, even a water caltrop seems round;
when in hate, even a soapberry looks misshapen)*

Or:

Thương nhau củ ấu cũng tròn

*Ghét nhau đến quả bồ hòn cũng vuông
(When in love, the water caltrop appears round / When
in hate, even the round soapberry looks square)*

Using the imagery of the water caltrop (*củ ấu*) and the soapberry (*bồ hòn*), folk poets vividly portray the dynamics of love and hate in traditional romantic relationships.

The water caltrop is black, with a rough, spiky shell and irregular shapes—it is never perfectly round. On the other hand, the soapberry is small, naturally round, and has a sweet fragrance but a bitter taste. This bitterness is commonly referenced in folk sayings, such as:

*Đắng cay ngậm quả bồ hòn
(To endure bitterness is to bite into a soapberry)*

*Ngậm bồ hòn làm ngọt
(Biting into a soapberry and pretending it's sweet)*

Or:

*Có con phải khổ vì con
Có chồng phải ngậm bồ hòn đắng cay
(To have children is to suffer for them / To have a husband is to
swallow the bitterness of a soapberry)*

In these examples, the soapberry symbolizes suffering and emotional hardship, particularly in marriage or family life.

Despite the ugly, coarse appearance of the water caltrop, when two people are in love, even such a misshapen fruit becomes beautiful and perfect. Conversely, when love turns to resentment, even a round and appealing fruit like the soapberry

seems flawed and unpleasant. This reflects a deeper truth: when people are in love, everything seems beautiful, but once affection fades, even the most perfect things become unappealing.

Furthermore, through the contrast between the sweet, nutty flavor of the water caltrop and the bitter taste of the soapberry, the folk poet metaphorically comments on the nature of human speech and communication. When people are in love, their words are sweet and affectionate; but when hatred arises, their speech becomes bitter and hurtful.

By using these plant metaphors, Vietnamese folk literature conveys not only the transformative power of love and hate but also a keen insight into the emotional complexity of human relationships.

2.3. Abstract Concepts of Human Social and Spiritual Life Represented as Plants

In addition to being used to represent human body parts, activities, moods, and emotions, the concept of “plants” also penetrates more abstract domains of human social and spiritual life. Some plant species, due to their characteristics and flavors, are used metaphorically to describe human personality traits. For example:

“The older the ginger, the spicier it is.”

This is a common proverb that metaphorically refers to human character and nature. “Ginger” is a root plant known for its pungent, hot flavor, and “older” refers to its growth stage. The longer ginger is cultivated, the higher its quality and the spicier its flavor becomes, thanks to favorable growing conditions and its ability to withstand external challenges. Here, the idea of “ginger” is a metaphor for people in society—those who have gone through more life experiences, learned from them, and encountered various realities, becoming more mature and seasoned in life and work. The word “spicy” here does not merely refer to taste but is used figuratively to describe a person’s strength of character and resilience. Similar ideas appear in folk verses such as:

Variants:

*Any chili is bound to be hot,
Any woman is bound to be jealous of her husband.*

*Every rose has its thorns,
Every woman, too, has her jealous ways.*

In later periods, particularly during the resistance war against the French, plant metaphors in folk songs began to include industrial crops introduced by the colonial government, most notably rubber. Some representative folk verses include:

*Rubber is easy to go to, hard to return from.
One leaves a young man, returns emaciated and old.*

*The rubber trees are strangely lush—
Each tree is nourished by the body of a laborer.*

These verses were based on real historical events. After completely crushing uprisings associated with the Cần Vương movement and establishing a puppet feudal regime, the French colonialists launched their so-called “civilizing mission.” Their first step was turning Vietnam into a colony, exploiting its human labor, wealth, and resources to serve the needs of the “mother country.” During this time, plant metaphors in folk songs expanded beyond the familiar notions of “rice, corn, bamboo, apricot, peach, rose,” to include newly introduced species like “rubber, castor, jute, peanut.” Although these metaphors appeared less frequently, they carried a strong sense of realism, reflecting the cruel exploitation by the French and the suffering of innocent, hardworking Vietnamese under colonial rule.

Behind the strangely lush rubber plantations was a toll of human lives and suffering—laborers forced to work to exhaustion in deadly, disease-ridden forests, enduring both harsh nature and brutal treatment from plantation owners. More than ever, rubber plantations became a “hell on earth,” and the notion of “rubber” a powerful symbol condemning the crimes of the colonial and semi-feudal regime:

*Unlucky to end up in the rubber lands—
If not imprisoned, it’s like a life sentence.*

Love between men and women is a recurring theme in proverbs and folk poetry. In the past, influenced by Confucian values, romantic feelings could not be expressed directly. Instead, metaphors were used as intermediaries to convey love. Alongside familiar rural images like wells and village communal yards, plant-related metaphors appeared frequently. For instance:

*Under the moonlit night I ask you, my dear,
The young bamboo has enough leaves—shall we weave a mat?*

This folk verse is a tender whisper from a man to the woman he loves. In the setting of a moonlit night—an ideal time for romantic meetings—he confesses his feelings. However, rather than speaking directly, he cleverly borrows the metaphor of “bamboo,” “leaves,” and the act of “weaving a mat” to indirectly express his affection. Using “bamboo” demonstrates his subtlety, as bamboo is a familiar image in Vietnamese folklore and deeply connected to Vietnamese life.

Here, “young bamboo” symbolizes not old or newly sprouted shoots, but a state full of potential and vigor. “Young bamboo with enough leaves” implies that the girl has reached the age of maturity—ready for love and marriage. The metaphor reveals the young man’s sophistication in expressing

affection—indirect, but sufficiently meaningful for the girl to understand his intentions. This reflects the cleverness with which metaphorical images, especially those from the plant domain, were woven into Vietnamese folk songs about romantic love.

In addition to “bamboo,” another common plant metaphor in Vietnamese folklore is the “banyan tree” (*đa*). The banyan is deeply rooted in Vietnamese culture and strongly associated with rural village life. This plant grows throughout the northern countryside, often tied to village landscapes. Its unique growing environment—temples, pagodas, and communal courtyards—links it to Vietnamese spiritual and communal life. In many villages, the banyan tree is cared for, worshipped, and revered like a village tutelary god, serving as a living witness to the village’s formation, development, and even its demise. Proverbs and folk songs reflect this with lines such as:

“The banyan tree harbors the god, the kapok tree the ghost, the fig tree the owl.”

“Live in proper order—

The banyan tree relies on the god, the god relies on the banyan tree.”

Beyond religious and spiritual meanings, the banyan is also associated with romantic folk verses. Tied to riverbanks and village courtyards, the banyan becomes a site of daily activity and romantic encounters, as in:

*Yesterday, I bailed water at the temple gate,
Forgot my shirt on the lotus branch.
If it suits you, please give it back—
Or keep it as a token of our love.*

In romantic encounters, the banyan often symbolizes beginnings, developments, and even endings. In the scope of this study, one verse reflects this:

*A hundred years, a broken promise,
The old banyan tree, the old dock, but another boat now comes.*

This verse captures both the beauty and sorrow of a romantic love story. In traditional folk songs, the metaphor of boat and dock often represents lovers. The dock and the banyan—stationary and passive—stand for the woman, while the boat, moving freely, represents the man. For some reason, the man is forced to “break the promise,” expressing sadness and regret. Though the “old banyan, old dock” remain, they now belong to another boat, turning the once-familiar scene into something unfamiliar and estranged. Perhaps due to time and distance, the woman had no choice but to accept a different “boat,” risking being seen as unfaithful. Using these familiar images, the verse reveals the irony and sorrow of lovers

separated by social circumstances—still in love, yet unable to be together.

2.4. The Plant Collective: “Plants” as a Metaphor for Social Organization

As previously discussed, “plants” have a profound impact on the lives of the Vietnamese people, influencing everything from daily living to cultural, spiritual, and religious life. Along with the formation, evolution, and development of the Vietnamese language, plant-related concepts have transcended their original symbolic meanings and become integrated into language and literature. Vietnamese recognizes a wide array of polysemous words within the conceptual domain of “plants,” whose meanings have expanded and been reorganized in relation to communicative elements, forming diverse and distinctive ideas.

For example, the original meaning of “cây” (tree/plant) is “a type of vegetation with roots, stems, and leaves, growing and developing due to natural factors or human care.” However, as the Vietnamese language evolved, the meaning of “cây” broadened. In addition to denoting plant species, “cây” is also used to refer to tall, straight objects resembling the form of plants (e.g., *cây cột điện* – electric pole, *cây sào* – pole, *cây nến* – candle, *cây thước* – ruler), to express distance or length (e.g., *cây số* – kilometer), and even to denote people with expertise or prominence in certain fields (e.g., *cây toán* – math expert, *cây văn nghệ* – performance artist, *cây hài* – comedian). Clearly, the concept of “plants” has evolved in meaning and become associated with other conceptual domains related to humans, objects, and social life. This contributes to the semantic expansion of plant-related words and enriches the expressive capacity of the Vietnamese language.

Vietnamese proverbs and folk poetry also document the use of plant terms as metaphors for humans. If we imagine human social organization as a plant, then its smaller parts like branches and leaves can be seen as metaphors for individuals within that structure. A popular proverb states:

“Lá lành đùm lá rách”
(The whole leaf wraps the torn one.)

Borrowing the image of a leaf, this proverb encapsulates a timeless moral teaching cherished across generations: the spirit of solidarity, compassion, and mutual support. It advises that those who live in comfort and abundance should show generosity and empathy toward those less fortunate. This is not only a virtuous quality but also a noble tradition passed down by Vietnamese ancestors.

Another folk verse says:

“Bầu ơi thương lấy bí cùng

Tuy rằng khác giống nhưng chung một giàn”
(Oh gourd, love the pumpkin though different the breed;
We share the same trellis, so be kind in deed.)

The “giàn” (trellis) here symbolizes the shared environment or social structure in which plants grow, and metaphorically, it stands for human society. The “gourd” (bầu) and the “pumpkin” (bí) are metaphors for individuals within that society. While “bầu” and “bí” differ in appearance—“bầu” being a vine with soft, wide leaves and round, long fruits, often cinched in the middle; while “bí” bears round, flat, ridged fruits with thick, brownish-yellow skin—they share common traits: both are vines with tendrils and grow on the same trellis. More importantly, they belong to the same botanical family. In this metaphor, the “gourd” and “pumpkin” symbolize the many ethnic groups within Vietnam—each with unique languages, customs, and cultural traits, yet united by shared roots and identity.

Despite regional, ethnic, and cultural differences, all Vietnamese people share the same bloodline, the same heritage, and the same language—Vietnamese, described as “as glossy as bamboo and as soft as silk.” Through the image of “gourd and pumpkin sharing the same trellis,” the folk verse serves as a timeless reminder for all Vietnamese—regardless of religion, class, or geography—to remain united, to love, and to support one another. This spirit of solidarity is a defining trait of the Vietnamese people, a source of strength in the nation’s struggles for independence and in its aspirations for development and global presence.

The natural environments where plants live—as described in Vietnamese proverbs and folk poetry—are diverse and varied. In each unique habitat, we encounter distinct plant collectives. In aquatic environments, for example, a typical folk verse is:

“Lênh đênh nước chảy bèo trôi
Chờ khi nước lụt, bèo ngồi đầu sen”
(Floating along, water flows and duckweed drifts—
Wait for the flood, and duckweed shall sit atop the lotus.)

Here, society is metaphorically encapsulated in an aquatic environment, specifically one with a steady, cyclical water flow (like rivers, streams, canals), conveyed by the reduplicative expression “lênh đênh” (adrift). This setting symbolizes human society, where the “lotus” (sen) represents the ruling class or elite, while the “duckweed” (bèo) symbolizes the lower class or the marginalized.

The word “lênh đênh” evokes the gentle, continuous flow of time, stable and predictable. However, when a disruptive event like a flood occurs, the fragile duckweed suddenly has a chance to rise—“sit atop the lotus”—reversing the social order. The lotus, once dominant, is now overshadowed by duckweed. This folk verse reflects the historical reality of feudal and colonial society, where the ruling class continuously oppressed

and exploited the lower class. Yet, when a significant event or opportunity arises, the oppressed can rise up, demand their rights, and fight for freedom and justice.

This dynamic is clearly reflected in Vietnam's proud 4,000-year history of national struggle and liberation. A variant of this folk verse also exists:

“*Thân chị như cánh hoa sen
Chúng em bèo bọt chẳng chen được vào
Lạy trời cho cả mưa rào
Cho sen chìm xuống, bèo trôi lên trên*”
(*Your beauty is like the lotus bloom,
While we, like duckweed, dare not intrude.
May Heaven send a heavy rain—
So lotus sinks and duckweed reigns.*)

3. CONCLUSION

Analyze the conceptual metaphor of the “plant domain” based on a system of elements related to humans—such as the human figure and body parts, human activities, states of mind, and emotions. Clarify the connections between the organization of plant collectives and human social structures through factors such as growth, decline, and termination. This contributes to affirming metaphorical models that reflect human thought and perception about the world. It also confirms the parallels and clearly hierarchical relationships between human beings and conceptual elements within the “plant domain.” This highlights the Vietnamese people’s cognitive perception of “plants” as expressed in Vietnamese proverbs and folk poetry.

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