



Time Is Water: A Metaphorical Conceptualization of Time in Chinese

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Abstract

A conceptualization of abstract time in Chinese can be instantiated by “Time is Water”. Time is universally important in a human being’s daily life, yet it is conceptually abstract. This abstraction of time can be understood through the concept of metaphor. Although the English and Chinese languages share many metaphorical conceptions of time, there is one particular metaphor in China that is not as commonly instantiated in English – Time Is Water. Three reasons can be provided for the conceptualization of this metaphor and will be discussed in this paper: water is one of the five basic elements in Chinese philosophy; conceptualization of time as water in Chinese is quite systematic and time and water share many similarities; Confucius’ words have a great effect for the metaphor of time as water to be pervasive in Chinese. Cultural understandings of the Chinese people will be shown to impact their language production through metaphorical conceptualization.

Key words: Time; Metaphorical conceptualization; Water

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INTRODUCTION

Two important concepts of the world we live in dealing with space and time. Time plays a vital role in our daily life. Time, however, is an abstract concept. We can not touch it, smell it, taste it, hear it, and see it, although we can talk about it. It can not be felt by people, although everyone has sense of time. “Time is perhaps the only feature of our existence which we all agree exists despite the fact that we have absolutely no direct evidence of its existence. We have no sensory perception of time whatsoever, we cannot see or hear or touch it nor measure it directly. If time exists at all, it exists purely as an epiphenomenon of effects on ourselves and the things around us” (Janda, 2002, p.3).

We can experience time. What we know about time is exactly the moment, just now, compared with the past and the future. We can experience time through observation of changes around us. We can experience time through the events gone and the events coming. We can experience time through the appearance and disappearance of objects. “We, observers, experience continuous unidirectional change that may be marked by appearance and disappearance of objects and events.” (Li, 2006, p.12).

So how exactly do people understand time? Cognitive linguistics have made a lot of studies concerning with that. We have made a good assumption that metaphorical conceptualization of time is a better way for people to understand time, and studies on the function of metaphor in the conceptualization of time are quite extensive. The common claim of these studies focuses on one topic, time as an abstract concept, is mostly understood through metaphor.

Languages of the world provide rich data on the use of spatial metaphors to understand time (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Zhao, 2001; Janda, 2002, Jing, 2003; Radden & Hamburg, 2003; Hu, 2004; Chen & Huang, 2006). “The impact of spatial orientation for human thought and,

in particular, our understanding of time has often been noted.” (Radden & Hamburg, 2003, p.1).

In English, metaphor of time is widely studied. Besides conceptualization of time as space, there are other metaphorical conceptualizations of time. Lakoff and Johnson (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, Lakoff, 1993) have talked a lot about the metaphors of time and they suggest that TIME IS MONEY; TIME IS MOVING OBJECTS.

“Ontology: time is understood in terms of things (i.e., entities and locations) and motions.

Times are things.

The passing of time is motion.

Future times are in front of the observer; past times are behind the observer.

One thing is moving, the other is stationary; the stationary entity is the deictic center.” (Lakoff, 1992, p.212).

It is true that in Chinese, we find all metaphors for time mentioned above. For example:

TIME IS SPACE

a. 在八点以前把作业做完。

Zai ba dian yiqian ba zuoye zuo wan.

Eight o'clock before homework finish

Homework should be finished before 8.

b. 3月以后天气慢慢转暖。

San yue yihou tianqi manman zhuan nuan.

March after weather gradually turn warm

After March, the weather turns warmer and warmer gradually.

c. 比赛在晚上7点举行。

Bisan zai Wanshang Qi Dian Juxing.

Game at night 7 hold

The game will begin at 7pm.

d. 这个工作要求一周内完成。

Zhege gongzuo yaoqiu yi zhou nei wancheng.

This work require one week within finish

This work is required to be finished within one week.

e. 八小时之外，你爱干啥干啥。

Ba xiaoshi zhiwai, ni ai gan sha gan sha.

Eight hours outside, you love do what do what

You can do what you want to do out of eight hours.

f. 上周连续下了几天雨。

Shang zhou lianxu xia le ji tian yu.

Up week continuously rain PRT a few days

Last week it rained continuously for a few days.

g. 我下个月要去北京开会。

Wo xia ge yue yao qu Beijing kaihui.

I Down month go to Beijing have a meeting

Next month I will go to Beijing to have a meeting.

TIME IS MONEY

a. 时间就是金钱，效益就是生命。

Shijian jiu shi jinqian, xiaoyi jiu shi shengming.

Time be money, efficiency be life

Time is money and efficiency is survival.

b. 我花了两个小时。

Wo hua le liang ge xiaoshi.

I spend ASP two hour

I have spent two hours.

c. 你在浪费我的时间。

Ni zai langfei wo de shijian.

You PRT waste my time

You are wasting my time.

d. 节省时间的妙方。

Jiesheng shijian de miaofang.

Save time MOD tips

Tips for saving time.

e. 我没有多少时间。

Wo meiyou duoshao shijian.

I not have much time

I don't have much time left.

TIME IS MOVING OBJECTS

a. 开会的时间还没到。

Kaihui de shijian hai mei dao.

Meeting MOD time yet not come

The time for the meeting has not come yet.

b. 时间飞逝。

Shijian feishi.

Time fly by

Time flies by.

c. 收卷的时间已经过了10分钟了。

Shou juan de shijian yijing guo le shi fenzhong le.

Paper collect MOD time already pass PRT 10 minute

The time for collecting papers passed ten minutes ago.

d. 流淌的岁月给了我美好的记忆。

Liutand de suiyue geile wo meihao de jiyi.

Flow MOD time give me sweet memory

Past time left me sweet memory.

e. 2007年就这样溜走了。

2007 nian jiu zheyang liu zou le.

2007 year this way slip away

2007 passed by like this.

f. 有谁能让时间停止？

You shui neng rang shijian tingzhi?

Who can let time stop

Who can stop time?

From the sentences above, we find that in English and Chinese we have some similar conceptualizations of time, which indicates that people speaking different languages can share the same pattern of metaphorical cognition.

1. TIME IS WATER

Although English and Chinese share some metaphorical conceptions of time, we assume, for the sake of different cultures, that there should be some metaphorical conceptions of time in Chinese which are quite different from that of English. In this paper, I try to argue that although Chinese and English share most metaphorical conceptions of time, there is one very important metaphorical conceptualization of time, which is quite overwhelming in Chinese: Time Is Water.

For Time Is Water, we can find many metaphorical expressions in Chinese. The following are some examples:

1) a. 随着时间的流逝, 他的心情渐渐恢复了平静。

Sui zhe shijian de liushi, ta de xinqing jianjian hui fu le pingjing.

With time MOD flow away, his mind gradually recover calm

As time passed, his mind gradually calmed down.

b. 那些流淌而过的岁月都是什么样子?

Naxie liutang er guo de suiyue dou shi shenme yangzi?
Those flow pass MOD age all be what manner
What is my past story like?

c. 只觉百年流于一瞬。

Zhi jue bai nian liu yu yishun.
Only feel hundred year flow in a instance
I only feel a hundred years flying by instantly.

d. 当岁月流失, 到了生命的尽头, 你将什么都带不走, 除了那份美好和温馨的回忆。时光流淌过的地方, 一定有一些什么被遗忘在我们来时的路上, 只是, 走过的时候我们没有意识。

Dang suiyue liushi, dao le shenming de jintou, ni jiang shenme dou dai bu zou, chule na fen meihao he wenxin de jiyi. Shiguang liutang guo de difang, yiding you yixie shenme bei yiwang zai women lai shi de lushang, zhishi, zou guo de shihou women meiyou yisi.

When time flow loss, to life MOD end, you will what all bring not away, except that sweet and cozy memory. Time flow MOD place, surely have some what forgot on we come MOD road, but walk past MOD when we no conscious.

When time passes by, to the end of life, you won't be able to bring with you anything, except that sweet and cozy memory. Where time passes through, there is surely something we forget on the way, but we are unconscious of that when we walk through.

e. 面对时光流逝, 作者无限留恋和伤感。我觉得没有为什么, 去了就去了嘛, 就是流走了, 流走就不可能再流回来。

Miandui shiguang liushi, zuozhe wuxian liulian he shanggan. Wo jue de meiyou weishenme, qu le jiu qu le ma, jiushi liu zou le, liu zou le jiu bu keneng zai liu huilai.

Face time flow, author terribly reluctant let go and sad. I feel no reason, go be go, be flow away, flow away impossible again flow back.

Facing the passing by of time, the author is terribly reluctant to let it go and feels sad for its absence. I think there is no reason for what has gone. It is not possible for what has gone to come back.

2) a. 追忆水样年华。

Zhuiyi si shui nianhua.
Recall the watery time
Recall the past times.

b. 挤出时间。

Jichu shijian.
Squeeze out time
Save time.

c. 岁月冲淡了他的仇恨。

Suiyue chongdan le ta de chouhen.
Age water down his hate
Time faded his hate away.

d. 在默默里算着, 八千多日子已经从我手中溜去; 像针尖上一滴水滴在大海里, 我的日子滴在时间的流里, 没有声音, 也没有影子。

Zai momo li suanzhe, ba qian duo rizi yijing cong wo shou zhong liu qu; xiang zhenjian shang yidi shui di zai dahai li, wo de rizi di zai shijian de liu li, meiyou shengyin, ye meiyou yinzi.

In silent count, eight thousand days already from my hand slip away; as needlepoint one drop of water drop in the sea, my day drop in time MOD flow, no sound, and no trace.

In silent counting, eight thousand days passed by from my hands. As a drop of water on a needlepoint dropped in the sea, my days dropped in the flow of time, with no sound and no trace.

e. 过去的日子如轻烟, 被微风吹散了, 如薄雾, 被初阳蒸融了。

Guoqu de rizi ru qing yan, bei weifeng chui san le, ru bao wu, bei chu yang zheng rong le.

Pass MOD day as light smoke, be wind blown away, as thin fog, be morning sun evaporate away

Past days, as light smoke, are blown away by the wind, as thin fog, are evaporated away by the morning sun.

f. 时间凝固了。

Shijiang Ninggu le
Time freeze
Time stops.

3) a. 大江东去，浪淘尽，千古风流人物
Dajiang dong qu,
Lang tao jin,
Qiangufengliu renwu.
Great river east flow, wave wash away, all age gallant
heroes
Great river east flows, heavy waves wash away, gallant
heroes all the ages.

b. 东去逝水，流逝的是历史的沧桑与悲凉，流来的是历史的幸运与重任。

Dong qu shi shui, liushi de shi lishi de cangsang yu beiliang, liu lai de shi lishi de xingyun yu zhongren.

East go pass water, flow away MOD be historical change and sadness, flow come MOD be historical luck and burden

Flowing water east goes. With it, are the historical changes and sadness, but the coming flowing water will give us luck and responsibility.

In the first group of sentences above, we can find the words such as 流逝, flow away; 流淌, flow; 流于, flow; 流失, flows lost; and 流走了, flow away. These words are generally used to describe water. But here they are conceptualized at that time flows, which definitely profiles that time passes. Hence we can get Time Flows Is Time Passes.

In the second group of sentences, we can find words such as 似水, watery; 挤出, squeeze out; 冲淡, water down; 滴在时间的流里, drop in time flow; 被蒸融, be evaporated away and 凝固了 freeze. These words all have their original connection with water, but here they are used to conceptualize time to profile past time, to save time, time fades something away, time is absent, time is lost and time stops, respectively. Hence we can get Time Is Water.

In the third group of sentences, such words as *Great river east flows* and *East goes passing water* in fact imply that water flows for time passes. For these two sentences, we have to say that for the sake of geography, west is higher than east in China, so almost all rivers in China flow from west to east. When we talk about *Great river east flows* or *East goes passing water*, it is of the function to conceptualize time passing.

From the three groups of sentences, we can say that conceptualization of time as water is quite common in Chinese.

Why a conceptualization of abstract time in Chinese can be instantiated by 'Time is Water'? From my point of view, there are three reasons for metaphorical expressions of time as water.

First, water is one of the five basic elements in Chinese philosophy.

In China, one of the oldest philosophies is about Five Elements. Five Elements theory is an ancient outlook for the composition of the external world. This philosophy was found in the book *Shangshu. Hongfan*, which was

about three thousand years ago. Developed by many philosophers through history, it becomes one of the most important philosophies in China. Modern people in China still use this theory for prediction of their future, for management, and for arrangement of big events, etc.

In this philosophy, it is supposed that everything of the world is composed of five basic elements and the five elements will move and change to produce different substances. The five elements are Metal, Wood, Water, Fire and Earth (Liu, 2004).

In the Five Elements theory, the Five Elements have the function of mutual promotion and restraint. The promotion and restraint of each other will motive the world to change, affect the life of human being and make the universe to circulate.

Water is one of the basic elements. So water plays an important role in Chinese sense of philosophy. Lakoff and Johnson state that "To get an idea of how metaphorical expressions in everyday language can give us insight into the metaphorical nature of the concepts that structure our everyday activities." (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p.7).

We argue that water is used to conceptualize time because water is one of the basic elements and it is also a common, concrete, easy to understand concept. "Specifically, we tend to structure the less concrete and inherently vaguer concepts (like those for the emotions) in terms of more concrete concepts, which are more clearly delineated in our experience." (Inid., p.113).

In Chinese, water is one of the most popular images for the conceptualization of some abstract things. We can find many metaphors by water for other concepts besides time.

1) For the conceptualization of tenderness or gentleness

In Chinese, when we describe a person, we use water to describe his gentleness or her tenderness.

GENTLENESS (TENDERNESS) IS WATER

a. 柔情似水。

Rou qing si shui.

Gentleness (tenderness) like water

As gentle (tender) as water.

b. 女人是水做的。

Nv ren shi shui zuo de.

Women be water make

Women are made of water (as tender as water).

2) For the conceptualization of state of mind

Water is used for the description of the state of mind. When we talk about someone is calm or peaceful in mind, we have got a lot of expressions for these.

STATE OF MIND IS WATER

a. 他心平如水。

Ta xin pin ru shui.

He mind peace like water

His mind is as a calm lake.

b. 他的心里翻江倒海。

Ta de xin li fan jiang dao hai.

His mind turn river turn sea

His mind is turning as waves of river and sea (not peaceful).

3) For the conceptualization of people

People are supposed to be something like water. We can find a famous saying from the Chinese history as well as other sayings.

PEOPLE ARE WATER

a. 水能载舟，亦能覆舟。

Shui neng zai zhou, yi neng fu zhou.

Water can float boat, and can turn down boat

Water can float boat, but it can also turn boat down.

(People can support a government but they can also overthrow a government.)

b. 军民鱼水情。

Jun min yu shui qing.

Soldier civilian fish water relationship

A good relationship of soldiers and civilians is like that of fish and water.

Water, we can see, is quite commonly used for various kinds of conceptualization of some abstract concepts. We here would like to emphasize how water is important to the understanding of some abstract concepts in Chinese.

We have another reason for time to be conceptualized as water. From the aspect of cognition, metaphorical conceptualization of time as water in Chinese is quite systematic. The basic principle of metaphor is to use most commonly and easily to understand the concept to conceptualize the abstract and hard to understand concept. Time is so important in human daily life. We have it around us wherever you are and whatever you do. It is natural for human being to try to understand time as much as possible. It is necessary for human beings to have a coherent systematic metaphor to conceptualize time. "There are many possible physical and social bases for metaphor. Coherence within the overall system seems to be part of the reason why one is chosen and not another" (Ibid., p.18). So we have time flows, watery time, squeeze time, time washes down something, time drops, time evaporates, and time washes away etc..

Aspectual metaphor is used only to compare one aspect of two entities. It is a choice when it is hard to find a more proper concrete concept to conceptualize another abstract concept, or sometimes we try to focus on only one aspect of two concepts. For example, in Chinese if we say "He is a monkey", mostly we would think the metaphor is interpreted as "He is smart". As in China, we think monkey is the smartest animal. In this example, "He is a monkey" is not a systematic metaphor, rather an aspectual metaphor: only one prominent aspect of the two entities is implied in the metaphor.

But for time, a comprehensive metaphor is more necessary, since time is so closely related to human being's life. People will try what they can to find a concept to understand the nature of time as fully as possible. This is the quite important for human beings. And when we can find a proper concrete concept to conceptualize the abstract time, to as fully as possible understand the nature of time, it will not be necessary to split time into many aspects and find more than one concepts for the metaphor of time because if we split time into many aspects, when we try to better understand the nature of time, we have to consider all aspects so as to understand the nature of time as fully as possible. We argue that to conceptualize time as a concept as a whole will be economical and easy for people to know exactly what time is. Since we have time all around us and we are so close to time, we can not afford too complex a system to try to understand the abstract concept, time

We also argue that to find a concept which is more like time is very important for human beings to understand time. With more similarities are very important for a successful metaphor of time, since time is so important in human daily life. Water being conceptualized as time is not only systematic. When we look into the similarities of water and time, it is true that we can find they have a lot in common.

- a) *They can be both linear. Water flow can be linear and time passing can be linear*
- b) *They can both have directions. Water moves forward and time passes from the past to the future.*
- c) *They can both move. Water flows and time passes.*
- d) *They both will not come back while they are gone. Flown water cannot flow back and past time cannot come back.*
- e) *They are both hard to be stopped. It is hard for people to stop water flow and it is hard for people to stop time passing.*
- f) *People are passive when talking both time passing and water flowing. Water flows away (in river) whether you like it or not and time passes whether you like it or not.*
- g) *They are both continuous. Water and time seem both keeping going and never stopping.*

Many similarities in both water and time make the metaphorical conceptualization of time as water quite easily acceptable for people. This is one of the exact reasons why time being conceptualized as water is so prevalent in Chinese.

The third reason I would like to mention is that Confucius' words have a great effect for the metaphor of time as water to be pervasive in Chinese.

Confucius is one of the greatest philosophers, politicians, and educators in China, and the founder of

Confucianism. Confucius is considered to be one of the greatest sages in Chinese history. His philosophy has had control over the China for about three thousand years. It is generally believed that Confucianism has great effect on the literature of China for later times. Even in modern China, his philosophy is still popular and has great effect on the people's daily behaviors.

One of his famous words are 逝者如斯夫, 不舍昼夜.

For the translation of this sentence, there is more than one version.

- a) *How time flies! It passes like this.*
- b) *Time never returns like the river water flowing ever forward!*
- c) *The passage of time is just like the flow of water, which goes on day and night.*
- d) *Time goes on and on like the flowing water in the river, never ceasing day or night!* e) *Everything flows like this, without ceasing, day and night.*

From the angle of Confucius' philosophy, I prefer the last translation. In fact, the words here reflect a complex thought with concern about, maybe, everything, not only time, as the previous four translations do. In fact, he said this to sign for the fast change of situations and to imply how valuable time is.

But the fact is most people think the words refer to time passing as water flowing away, without ceasing, day and night.

Confucius' philosophy is so overwhelming in China that these words become a pervasive metaphor of time. Metaphorical expressions of time as water are partly due to the words by Confucius.

In fact, Lu Xun, another famous writer in China, said "Time is like water in sponge, the more you squeeze the sponge, the more you can get water". Lu Xun also has a great influence for Time Is Water to be pervasive in China.

For the sake of Chinese culture, the conceptualization of time as water has its own particular expressions in Chinese. For the conceptualization of time as water, some scholars have mentioned that in their papers, but have not systematically studied it.

Gunter Radden & Hamburg mention that

A vertical axis of time is in conformity with the widespread view of time as flowing or the "river model" of time. In China, the cultural importance of the Yangtze River may have reinforced the preference for viewing time as vertical. (Radden & Hamburg, 2003, p.4)

Xu (2001, p.83) argues that there are three notions about time in Chinese: taking time as a linear sequence which can be measured or marked by certain units; taking time as a river flowing from ultimate future to remote past passing through the observer and from the angle of the observer, time extending from the moment of now to the future or past continuously and unboundedly; taking time as connection or relationship between objects or events in time flow. In fact, in English we can also find some metaphorical expressions for time as water. Lakoff

(1993, p.47) talks about the Pharaoh's dream interpreted by Joseph and consider the conceptual metaphor: "A river is a common metaphor for the flow of time and moving past the observer". But in English, we do not find this metaphor as common as in Chinese.

2. THE ENDING

Culture has its affect on the metaphor. When we talk about metaphor, we cannot skirt around culture. Due to different cultures, we can have different metaphors for actually the same concept. Here good examples can be made by comparing the idioms in Chinese and English. The following Chinese idioms have exactly the same implication as their correspondent English idioms.

a. 挥金如土
Hui jin ru tu
Spend money as earth
To spend money like water

b. 一箭双雕
Yi jian shuang diao
One arrow two eagles
To kill two birds with one stone

c. 暗箭伤人
An jian shang ren
Sneak arrow kill man
To stab in the back

For the idioms above, we have different literal expressions for the same concept. So in Chinese, earth is cheapest, while in English, water is cheapest; in Chinese arrow is more popular for killing while in English, it is stone or knife. All these idioms tell us that from culture to culture, even we have the same cognitive patterns, the expressions to show how cognition is reflected are different. Lakoff and Johnson have emphasized the importance of culture in conceptualization. "Such metaphorical orientations are not arbitrary. They have a basis in our physical and cultural experience" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p.14). They also have talked about the different cultures for the different conceptual systems. "But the human aspects of reality are most of what matters to us, and these vary from culture to culture, since different cultures have different conceptual system. Cultures also exist within physical environments, some of them radically different- jungles, deserts, islands, tundra, mountains, cities, etc. In each case there is a physical environment that we interact with, more or less successfully. The conceptual systems of various cultures partly depend on the physical environments they have developed in" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p.146).

SUMMARY

a) Water is one of the basic elements in Chinese culture and metaphor is to use basic, easily understood

concepts to understand some hard to understand concepts. So water, the basic, easily understood concept, is used to conceptualize time, which is abstract and hard to be understood.

b) Aspectual metaphors are not for the systematic understanding of a concept. People tend to use a concept to fully understand another concept, especially for some concept quite important for human beings. This is exactly true for the metaphor of time as water.

c) We can have the same pattern of cognition, but different cultures have their different literal expressions for conceptualization of the same concept. That time is conceptualized as water can be a good example for this.

We know more about different languages, we know more about the cultures conveyed by the correspondent cultures, and we know more about the different cultures, we know more about the world.

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