

## **Cultural Effects As Seen in Chinese Metaphors\***

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### **Abstract**

The way in which people use a language very often reveals their thinking and culture. The use of metaphor best illustrates this cultural effect on language. The purpose of this paper is to study the cultural effects that are found on the use of Chinese metaphors so as to manifest the close relationship between language and culture. The discussion of Chinese metaphors shows that they bear a strong feature of the cultural heritage of the Chinese nation, i.e. the ideological and philosophical thinking, the understanding of the world, the social values, as well as the mythical and superstitious beliefs. Though the discussion of Chinese metaphors is such a large topic that it is hardly possible for a paper of a few thousand words to cover all the aspects that relate to the discussion, we hope to shed some light on the subject.

### **INTRODUCTION**

As we know, Chinese is one of the most profuse languages in the world, full of witty comparisons and metaphors. Besides, its large collections of metaphorical four-character idioms are unique in their way of expressing ideological and philosophical thinking and beliefs, a fact which makes the language even more vivid and colorful. This paper discusses the cultural effects on metaphors in Chinese in four aspects: the ideological and philosophical thinking and metaphor; the culture-bound idioms and metaphor; the superstitious beliefs and metaphor; the social customs and metaphor.

### **THE IDEOLOGICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL THINKING AND METAPHOR**

The cultural effects on language can be best shown in Chinese by looking at some uses of Chinese metaphors. As China is an ancient country with over five thousand years of civilization, it has given birth to versatile philosophical schools and a great heritage of philosophical thinking. The most widely known schools of Chinese philosophy include the Confucian school represented by the most famous Chinese philosophers Confucius (Kongzi 551-479 BC) and Mencius (Mengzi 385-304 BC), and Daoism represented by famous Chinese philosophers Laozi (571-472 BC) and Zhuangzi (369-286 BC). Their doctrines and ideas have dominated the people's thinking for thousands of years and therefore have great influence on the people's ideology and behavior. For many centuries in Chinese history, these philosophies were overwhelmingly prevalent, were esteemed and even worshiped by the ruling classes, and were once regarded by many lords and emperors as the moral standards of

the society and norms of social behavior and social conduct. No one living in Chinese society can evade such an influence. As a result, a great many of the sayings from the teachings and preachings of these philosophies have become mottos of social behavior, and have entered the Chinese language as metaphors. The most popular of these many sayings include 己欲立而立人, 己欲达而达人 [ji yu li er li ren, ji yu da er da ren (to give what one wants to obtain also to others)] and 己所不欲, 勿施于人 [ji suo bu yu, wu shi yu ren (do not impose what yourself do not desire)] (论语-颜渊), two of which are directly quoted from Confucius and used as metaphors expressing a person's positive attitude towards the social relationships among human beings, and as a virtue and moral standard for how one treats others. These sayings are actually the reflection of the idea of "benevolence", the quintessence of the doctrine advocated more than two thousand years ago by the most famous Chinese philosopher, Confucius. Confucius used to advocate the doctrine of benevolence by saying that 仁者爱人 [ren zhe ai ren (one should love and respect others)], and that the only way to achieve this is to "share what you want to obtain with others" and to "do not onto others as you would not have them do onto you". Because of Confucius' philosophical thinking, these two sayings have long been introduced into the Chinese language as metaphors denoting the correct path to follow in social relations. Even today, these sayings are still widely quoted as metaphors in setting up a good model for the younger generation.

The other famous philosophical sayings from Confucius relating to the idea of 'benevolence' which are used as metaphors include 言必言, 行必果 [yan bi yan, xing bi guo (insist on keeping one's word and seeing one's actions through to the end)] (from 论语-子路); 知之为知之, 不知为不知, 是知也 [zhi zhi wei zhi zhi, bu zhi wei bu zhi, shi zhi ye (to say you know when you know, and to say you do not when you do not, that is knowledge)], and 人而无信, 不知其可 [ren er wu xin bu zhi qi ke (How can a man go without trust)] (from 论语-为政)

All the metaphorical sayings above express the idea of loyalty and trust in social activities, the doctrine derived from the Confucian philosophy of 'benevolence'.

One can easily pick up a saying of Confucius, and use it as a metaphor in writing and speaking. For example, Chinese people usually use 三人行必有我师 [san ren xing bi you wo shi (where there are three men walking together, one of them is bound to be able to teach me something)] and 三思而后行 [san si er hou xing (think thrice before you act)] (from 论语-公冶长) as metaphors to remind people to be modest and prudent.

Besides Confucius, other master philosophers' sayings are also frequently quoted as metaphors in Chinese. For example, the famous saying of Laozi 祸兮福所依, 福兮祸所伏 [huo xi fu suo yi, fu xi huo suo fu (good fortune lieth within bad, bad fortune lurketh within good)] (语出老子五十八章) also serves as a popular metaphor among scholars and the ordinary folks alike.

In fact, both the positive and the negative sayings of the great philosophers are used as metaphors in Chinese. Besides the positive ones mentioned above which usually encourage people to behave well and do good, there are also some negative ones which bring people the social bondage such as 温良恭俭让 [wen liang gong jian rang (temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous)] and 三从四德 [san cong si de] (the three obediences and four virtues (for a women according to Confucius ethics) – obedience to father before marriage, to husband after marriage, to son after husband's death; morality, popular speech, modest

manner and diligent work)], which are good on the one hand, but on the other hand greatly bind people's thinking and originality and prevent people from active performance and participation in social activities.

However, from all the above examples we can see how the great philosophers' preaching has influenced the Chinese language, and how their sayings have become popular quotations and metaphors in Chinese.

### **Culture-bound fables and idioms and metaphor**

A large number of metaphors are derived from the idioms that once described or illustrated a popular or known historical event. These idioms (which are usually in four Chinese characters) are later on quoted and cited as allusions and metaphors. These metaphorical uses of language are no doubt unique in Chinese and not supposed to be found in any other cultures. The best ones contain: 刻舟求剑 [ke zhou qiu jian (nick the boat to seek the sword—the measures without regard to changes in circumstances)]; 叶公好龙 [ye gong hao long (Lord Ye's love of dragons—professed love of what one really fears)]; 三顾茅庐 [san gu mao lu (repeatedly request of someone to take up a responsible position)]; 卧薪尝胆 [wo xin chang dan (sleep on brushwood and taste gall—undergo self-imposed hardship)]; 围魏救赵 [wei wei jiu zhao (besiege Wei to rescue Zhao—relieve the besieged by besieging the besiegers)]; 网开一面 [wang kai yi mian (leave one side of the net open—give the wrong deer a way out)]; 铸成大错 [zhu cheng da cuo (make a gross error)]; 胸有成竹 [xiong you cheng zhu (have a well-thought-out plan)]. Each of these idioms refers to a particular historical event. For example, “三顾茅庐 san gu mao lu” refers to a story of the Three Kingdoms period in Han Dynasty (220-265 AD) when the exiled ex-emperor's uncle Liu Bei made three calls at the thatched cottage of Zhugeliang, a master strategist then living in seclusion, in order to persuade Zhugeliang to come to his assistance in building up a military force to regain the old glory of the Han Dynasty and wipe out the rebellious forces headed by Cao Cao whose power greatly threatened the throne. Liu Bei's persistence and honesty in persuading Zhugeliang, a master strategist to come to his assistance was later on used by people as a metaphor referring to a leader's repeatedly request of someone with ability to take up a responsible position in his leading body.

Some of the metaphors in Chinese are derived from Chinese fables. Take the Chinese metaphor “守株待兔 shou zhu dai tu (stood by the stump waiting for a hare to come and dash itself against it; trust to chance and strokes of luck)”. This metaphor actually comes from a fable of the Warring States period (475-221BC), telling of a story of peasant in the Kingdom called Song who one day saw a hare dash into a tree stump and kill itself while working in the field. He took the hare back home happily for he got the prey without taking the least of effort. After this, he gave up working in the field and just stood by the same tree stump waiting for another hare come and dash itself against it. Later on, people just use this fable to describe someone's unrealistic wish in trying obtain something by chance and strokes of luck, and the metaphor is also used by people to mean ‘the person who does not know how to adjust the situation by solely depending on one's experience’.

As a matter of fact, all the above given metaphorical idioms have a historical story behind them and have been used as metaphors with a particular connotation. In other words, the words in the idioms could be meaningless for a person who has no knowledge of the particular historical events that are behind them. That is why we say these metaphors are

culture-bound. Only when people get familiar with the Chinese culture can they really understand what the metaphors or idioms refer to.

Interestingly, the majority of Culture-bound metaphors (or historical idioms) are written in the form of four characters. This is probably another important feature of the culture effect that is found in regard to Chinese metaphors. If one browses through a Chinese idiom dictionary, one can easily pick up an idiom with four characters. Take Pocket Chinese Idioms Dictionary (2001 商务印书馆) for example, ninety-percent of the idioms in the dictionary are in the form of four characters, which include hundreds of historical idioms as we mentioned in the previous discussion. This once again shows us the fact that Chinese metaphorical idioms are part and parcel of Chinese culture, as, so far as one knows, no similar formation of idioms or metaphors can be found in any language in the world.

Of course, not all Chinese idioms bear the four-character feature. There are some idioms such as, 项公舞剑, 意在沛公 [xiang gong wu jian, yi zai pei gong (performs the sword dance as a cover for his attempt on Liu Bang's life—act with a hidden motive)], and 王故左右而言他 [wang gu zuo you er yan ta (the king looked right and left, and spoke of other things)], which are quotations of some particular historical events, and are recorded by using more characters. However, compared with the ninety-percent of four-character idioms, these uses are only the rare cases.

## **SUPERSTITIOUS AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND METAPHOR**

Another obvious cultural effect on the use of metaphor in Chinese can be seen from the metaphors that derive directly from the superstitious and religious beliefs of the Chinese people. In ancient China, many gods were worshiped by the ancient Chinese peasants due to the primitive agricultural production and limited understanding of the disasters and misfortunes that were caused by natural forces. So in times of disasters and mishaps, they just turned to various gods for help. As a result, the metaphorical sayings related to the superstitious beliefs naturally became part of the language that they spoke. Even today, one can still hear the metaphors 八仙过海, 各显神通 [ba xian guo hai, ge xian shen tong (like the eight immortals crossing the sea, each showing his or her special powers)]; 道高一尺, 魔高一丈 [dao gao yi chi, mo gao yi zhang (as virtue rises one foot, vice rises ten-the more illumination, the more temptation)]; 鬼使神差 [gui shi shen chai (doings of ghosts and gods—unexpected happenings)]; 牛鬼蛇神 [niu gui she shen (monsters and demons—forces of evil)]; 鬼斧神工 [gui fu shen gong (uncanny workmanship)]; 神出鬼没 [shen chu gui mo (come and go like a shadow, appear and disappear mysteriously)]; 神通广大 [shen tong guang da (have vast magic powers)]; 神机妙算 [shen ji miao suan (a superb strategy)]; 小巫见大巫 [xiao wu jian da wu (a minor magician in the presence of a great one)]; 兴妖作怪 [xing yao zuo guai (conjure up demons to make trouble)]; 牛郎织女 [niu lang zhi nu (the cowherd and the weaver)] etc.

Beside the god worships and superstitious beliefs, the other important cultural effect on the use of metaphors in Chinese comes from the religious beliefs of Buddhism. Ever since the introduction of Buddhism to China, a lot of metaphors had been coined in the Chinese language. The well cited ones include 苦海无边, 回头是岸 [ku hai wu bian, hui tou shi an (the sea of bitterness has no bounds, repent and shore is at hand)]; 放下屠刀, 立地成佛 [fang xia tu dao, li di cheng fo (drop one's cleaver and become a Buddha)]; 心心相印 xin xin

xiang yin (have mutual affinity)]; 想入非非 [xiang ru fei fei (indulge in fantasy)]; 恍然大悟 [huang ran da wu (suddenly see the light or suddenly realize what has happened)]; 清规戒律 [qing gui jie lu (regulations, taboos and commandments for Buddhists or Taoists)]; 现身说法 [xian shen shuo fa (advise sb. or explain sth. by citing one's own experience)]; 头头是道 [tou tou shi dao (clear and logical)]; 火烧眉毛 [huo shao mei mao (the fire is singeing the eye—a desperate situation)]; 菩萨心肠 [pu sa xin chang (the heart of Buddhists)] (1989, p.114). These metaphors are all fixed to a particular religious belief and practice relating to Buddhism. They are then borrowed from these religious beliefs and practices and used as metaphors with distinct connotations. Other popular Buddhism-related metaphors include: 丈二和尚摸不着头脑 [zhang er heshang mo bu zhao tou nao (You can't touch the head of ten-foot monk—You can't make head or tail of it. )]; and 临时抱佛脚 [lin shi bao fo jiao (embrace Buddha's feet in one's hour of need)].

From all these examples, we can clearly see how the Chinese religious and superstitious beliefs have had an impact on Chinese metaphorical language.

### THE SOCIAL CUSTOMS AND METAPHOR

One other area that merits attention is that of social custom, i.e. the experiences of everyday life and natural environment, the social norms and rituals etc. All these have a great influence on people's use of language to describe things. For example, Chinese people favor the metaphorical sayings with numerals, such as one, three etc. to initiate a metaphorical saying and because of this, we have numerous metaphors in Chinese that begin with the numerals such as, “一(one)”, “三(three)” etc. For instance, we have hundreds of Chinese idioms that begin with the numeral “一(one)”, dozens of idioms that start with numeral “三(three)”, and also dozens of idioms that begin with “千(thousand)” and “万(ten thousand)”. Beside, Chinese people believe that the number 'nine' is the largest number and the most fortunate number. For this reason, we have in Chinese many metaphorical sayings that begin with the number 'nine', such as 九牛一毛 [jiu nu yi mao (a single hair out of nine ox hide—a drop in the ocean)]; 九死一生 [jiu si yi sheng (a narrow escape from death)]; 九牛二虎之力 [jiu nu er hu zhi li (the strength of nine bulls and two tigers—tremendous effects)].

Also, Chinese people tend to use the numbers 'seven' and 'eight' to form a metaphor indicating something that is in disorder, for example, one has in Chinese: 七上八下 [qi shang ba xia (seven buckets coming up and eight buckets going down—be agitated)]; 七嘴八舌 [qi zui ba she (seven mouth and eight tongues—with everybody trying to get a word in)]; 七扭八歪 [qi niu ba wai (crooked and uneven)]; 七手八脚 [qi shou ba jiao (with everyone lending a hand)]; 七颠八倒 [qi dian ba dao (at sixes and sevens; all upside down)], and 七拼八凑 [qi pin ba cou (throw together; piece together)] etc.

As to the use of animals in a metaphorical saying, unlike English, the animal “dog” is usually used in a derogatory sense, such as, 落水狗 [luo shui gou (the running dog)]; 狗胆包天 [gou dan bao tian (monstrously audacious)]; 狗皮膏药 [gou pi gao yao (dogskin plaster—quack medicine)]; 狗屁不通 [gou pi bu tong (rubbish)]; 狗头军师 [gou tou jun shi (a person who offers bad advice)] etc. Also, the animal 'ox' instead of 'horse' is used to describe a person who is robust and strong as in the Chinese saying 壮如牛 [zhuang ru niu (strong as an ox)]. Similarly, in the English culture, we use 'as proud as a peacock' to describe someone

who is too proud of oneself and lofty, whereas, in the Chinese culture, the same meaning is described by using the animal ‘cock’ instead of peacock as in the Chinese metaphor 傲慢的公鸡 [jiao ao de gong ji (as proud as a peacock)].

In terms of color-related metaphors, compared with other cultures, Chinese has its own way of describing images and connotations by using colors in metaphors. For instance, in Chinese, people use ‘to beat somebody black and purple’ to mean ‘to beat somebody black and blue’. Chinese people use the word ‘red’ to denote ‘jealousy’ as in the metaphor 红眼病 [hong yan bing (the symptom of jealousy)], and to denote ‘most popular’ as in 红人 [hong renr (the most favored person)], and 红歌星 [hong ge xing (the most popular singer)]. The term ‘yellow’ is used by Chinese to denote ‘pornographic’, such as 黄书 [huang shu (pornographic books)]; 黄色电影 [huang se dianying (blue films)]; 黄歌 [huang ge (decadent songs)]; 黄货 [huang huo (pornographic things)].

All these usages indicate the influence of culture effect on the uses of language, and because of these differences, the metaphorical images invoked in the metaphors are bound to be different.

## CONCLUSION

By the discussions we have had on the culture effects on the use of metaphors in Chinese, we can see clearly that the use of metaphors in Chinese is culture-bound. The understanding of the metaphors in Chinese depends on the understanding of Chinese ideology, philosophy, history, religion, social value and social custom, and without which the understanding of the metaphors will become senseless. This also reveals that language is a social phenomenon and part of the culture of people who use it

*\* The metaphors discussed in the paper, mainly refer to the metaphorical usages that developed from the fables, idioms, and idiomatical usages that are used metaphorically.*

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