

Original Paper

Research on the Communication of Traditional Chinese Medicine Culture Based on Cognitive Metaphor

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Abstract

The article analyzes the deep logic behind the language of traditional Chinese medicine, through concrete examples of entity metaphor, spatial metaphor, and structural metaphor.

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is a profound system with concepts and theories that are replete with cognitive metaphors. In an era of globalization, the dissemination of TCM culture has become a crucial task. While language translation is an essential part, the conveyance of human-centered thinking is equally vital for a comprehensive understanding of TCM.

The purpose of this article is to delve into the deep-seated logic within TCM language by examining concrete examples of entity, spatial, and structural metaphors. This is aimed at enhancing the overseas dissemination of TCM culture.

The research analyzes real-world examples of entity, spatial, and structural metaphors within the language of TCM. These examples are carefully selected from various TCM classics and contemporary TCM literature.

Through the analysis, commonalities in human experience have been identified from the cognitive experience and embodied environment. These commonalities serve as the foundation for a shared understanding.

In conclusion, by leveraging metaphorical thinking, clear and accessible cognitive paradigms have been provided for non-TCM-familiar audiences. This research thus paves the way for the more effective overseas dissemination of TCM culture.

Keywords

Cognition, Metaphor, Traditional Chinese Medicine, Communication

1. Introduction

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) culture constitutes a precious treasure of China's traditional cultural heritage. The global dissemination of TCM represents a vital endeavor to share Chinese medical wisdom with international communities. The translation of classical TCM texts has long been recognized as a critical challenge in the overseas transmission of Chinese cultural classics, primarily due to the intricate conceptual system characterized by abstract profundity and terminological obscurity inherent in TCM theory. However, systematic linguistic analysis reveals that TCM discourse contains rich metaphorical phenomena. The internationalization of TCM culture transcends mere linguistic translation, necessitating particular emphasis on the transmission of underlying cognitive frameworks. Ancient TCM scholars extensively employed “analogical reasoning based on symbolic imagery” (取象比类)—utilizing familiar conceptual domains—to construct medical theories and elucidate therapeutic principles. As a fundamental cognitive mechanism, metaphor establishes cognitive associations across linguistic boundaries, rendering TCM concepts and theoretical frameworks comprehensible through universally shared cognitive foundations. Effective global communication of TCM should therefore address not merely the “what” of linguistic equivalence in translation, but more crucially articulate the “why” of conceptual reasoning. While translation operates at the linguistic level to convey denotative meanings, the explication of metaphorical mechanisms operates at the cognitive level to reveal underlying rationales.

2. Method

This article adopts two research methods: theoretical analysis of cognitive linguistics and comparative analysis. In terms of theoretical analysis in cognitive linguistics, Lakoff & Johnson's conceptual metaphor theory is used as the framework, and key terms and expressions in traditional Chinese medicine classic texts are taken as the research objects. The metaphorical types of the corpus are annotated, and the embodied cognitive theory is combined from the three aspects of “entity metaphor, spatial metaphor, and structural metaphor” for analysis. In terms of comparative analysis, analyze how metaphors in traditional Chinese medicine are rooted in the common bodily experiences of humans, and use the “human common metaphors” in traditional Chinese medicine to guide precise communication strategies, enabling Western audiences to understand traditional Chinese medicine culture through shared cognitive experiences.

3. Metaphorical Interpretation as Cognitive Science

Metaphor constitutes a foundational cognitive mechanism predicated on perceived similarities between distinct entities, operating through systematic mappings from simple, familiar *source domains* to complex, unfamiliar *target domains*. Crucially, this conceptualization transcends conventional understanding of metaphor as mere rhetorical ornamentation, positioning it instead as an essential cognitive modality for knowledge construction.

As recorded in *Xi Ci II* of the *I Ching (Book of Changes)*:

“In ancient times, when Bao Xi ruled the world, he observed celestial phenomena above and terrestrial patterns below, examined avian and zoological markings alongside earthly vegetation.

Drawing analogies from immediate bodily experiences and distant natural phenomena, he formulated the Eight Trigrams to comprehend divine virtues and classify the dispositions of all things.”

This passage elucidates the epistemological methodology of *analogical reasoning through symbolic correspondence* (取象比类), wherein ancient scholars derived universal principles through systematic observation and cross-domain metaphorical mappings. TCM exemplifies this cognitive tradition, with its practitioners meticulously observing environmental phenomena and establishing correspondences between tangible entities (seasons, materials, organisms) and medical concepts (physiological states, pathological manifestations, therapeutic interventions). The conceptual architecture of TCM thus embodies sophisticated metaphorical systems that interconnect macrocosmic natural patterns with microcosmic bodily processes.

The TCM theoretical system employs natural phenomena and quotidian objects as conceptual metaphors to explicate physiological functions and pathological mechanisms. This epistemological approach utilizes simple, familiar, and sensorially tangible domains to cognitively scaffold the comprehension of TCM’s complex, abstract, and hermeneutically dense theoretical constructs. Such cognitive progression follows an analogical trajectory characterized by: simplex-to-complex advancement, proximal-to-distal extension, superficial-to-profound penetration, known-to-unknown extrapolation concrete-to-abstract conceptualization, familiar-to-unfamiliar mapping.

Within this cognitive schema, metaphor serves as a critical cognitive interface, bridging phenomenological observations with theoretical systematization. The ostensibly disparate metaphorical expressions in TCM manifest rigorous internal coherence when analyzed through the lens of conceptual blending theory. These metaphors operate as an implicit network, interconnecting fragmentary medical observations through underlying logical frameworks that mirror cosmic-natural patterns.

4. The Phenomenon of Entity Metaphor in Traditional Chinese Medicine Culture

4.1 Container Metaphor

Container metaphor refers to treating things that are not containers as containers, which have internal and external boundaries and can hold contents. Traditional Chinese medicine regards the body and organs as containers, and through container metaphors, concretizes abstract laws of life or pathological processes. If the human body is viewed as a container, the concept of the three burners divides the human torso into three vertical regions: upper, middle, and lower, corresponding to different organ functions. The upper burner, such as the “upper opening of the container” (heart and lungs), the middle burner, such as the “middle part of the container” (spleen and stomach), and the lower burner, such as the “bottom of the container” (kidneys and bladder), respectively undertake gasification, transportation, and excretion functions. For example:

(1) “What human beings possess are merely blood and qi.” (Su Wen Tiao Jing Lun)

Example (1) conceptualizes the human body as a container, with “possession” emphasizing the container’s holding function that contains blood and qi as bodily substances.

(2) “The stomach serves as the sea of water and grains, with its upper transport at Qijie (ST-30) and lower reaching point at Zusanli (ST-36).” (Ling Shu Treatise on Seas in The Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon)

This metaphor employs “sea” as a container image to illustrate the stomach’s capacity for receiving and transforming food and fluids.

(3) “The head constitutes the repository of essential clarity.” (Su Wen Discourse on Essentials of Pulse Diagnosis)

The term “repository” (府) denotes a three-dimensional spatial entity, conceptualizing the head as a containing structure for cognitive functions.

(4) “When fluids flow through intestinal interstices with gurgling sounds, this is termed phlegm-rheum.” (Jin Gui Yao Lue On Pulse Patterns and Treatment of Phlegm-Rheum Cough)

The spatial marker “interstices” (间) positions intestines as containers where pathological products like phlegm-rheum accumulate as undesirable contents requiring elimination.

(5) “The five zang-organs are what store the essence-spirit, blood-qi, ethereal soul (hun) and corporeal soul (po).” (Ling Shu Treatise on Fundamental Zang Organs)

The verb “store” (藏) emphasizes the preservative and regulatory functions, framing heart, liver, spleen, lung and kidney as physiological containers for psycho-spiritual substances.

These canonical examples from Traditional Chinese Medicine texts systematically employ container metaphors to conceptualize bodily structures as: 1) receptacles containing vital substances (blood, qi, essence), 2) transformation chambers for physiological processes, and 3) storage spaces requiring maintenance of content purity. This metaphorical framework underlies TCM’s diagnostic logic of excess/deficiency and treatment strategies emphasizing regulation of containment functions.

Since the body and organs are containers, they have the function of holding objects inside. The contents inside the container change in quantity and state. The occupation and emptying of objects inside the container is one of the basic human experiences. Traditional Chinese medicine projects the experience of “occupation” and “emptying” in the container onto similar abstract experiences, and applies it to other situations. The concept of “deficiency and excess” in traditional Chinese medicine is related to the amount of content in the container. Deficiency refers to insufficient content in the container, such as “deficiency of qi and blood, deficiency of qi and blood, deficiency of spleen and kidney”; In fact, the contents of the container are abundant, such as “qi and blood are full, body fluids are abundant, and kidney qi is full”. If there is deficiency, supplement it. Supplementing qi and blood is to fill the insufficient contents of the container. For example, the Four Gentlemen’s Soup replenishes qi and the Four Things Soup replenishes blood. In fact, the treatment methods of “sweating, vomiting, and diarrhea” can be understood as expelling harmful substances from the container, repairing the function of the container, and regulating the state of the contents, such as using Longdan Xiegan Tang to clear damp heat in the liver and gallbladder.

4.2 Channel Metaphor

Channel metaphor is a metaphorical way of understanding abstract physiological functions or pathological processes through the concrete concept of “channels”. Traditional Chinese medicine often regards qi and blood, body fluids, pathogenic factors, etc. in the human body as substances flowing in specific “channels”, and explains the occurrence and treatment of diseases through the smoothness of channels. Channels have the characteristics of flowing, unobstructed, and path like.

Channels originate from the initial physical experience, and the body has many channels, such as the esophagus when entering through the mouth, the ear canal when entering through the ears, and the gateway to the throat when entering through the mouth and nose. They are all pathways leading to the internal space of the human body, which is the path to enter the human body space. From the perspective of traditional Chinese medicine, there are various internal channel systems in the human body, including the circulation of qi and blood, the flow of body fluids, the unblocking of meridians, and the metabolic processes, all of which have the nature of channels. The metaphor of channels reflects the profound insight of ancient Chinese medicine scholars into the dynamic flow of life. The traditional Chinese medicine concept of “obstruction of qi and blood, blockage of meridians and qi, qi stagnation and blood stasis, liver depression and qi stagnation, obstruction of qi mechanism, soothing the liver and regulating qi, and regulating the Ren meridian” regards abstract physiological or pathological processes as the result of movement in channels. People often metaphorically refer to “qi stagnation” as “traffic congestion” and “blood stasis” as “river siltation”. Whether it is compared to traffic congestion or river siltation, they are essentially channel metaphors. There are also sayings related to channel metaphors in traditional Chinese medicine classics.

(6) If the master is unknown, the twelve officials will be in danger, causing the road to be blocked and blocked. (Su Wen, Linglan Secret Dian Lun)

In the metaphor of a channel, “communication” is seen as a good thing, while “disconnection” is seen as a bad thing. Such experiences are readily available. Smooth traffic is a good thing, while traffic congestion is considered a bad thing. The experience in modern society is also the same. Smooth network signals are a good thing, while blocked network signals can make people anxious. The purpose of objects moving in a channel is to achieve a state of “communication”, so traditional Chinese medicine says that the human body “generally does not feel pain, but when it feels pain, it becomes blocked”, and believes that blockage of qi and blood can lead to illness. The meridians are the channels for the movement of qi and blood. If they are blocked, they will get sick, which is similar to the flood caused by river blockage. Therefore, the treatment is to dredge the meridians, such as acupuncture and moxibustion. In short, channels play an important role in abstract and similar concepts, cleverly and appropriately expressing the ideas of traditional Chinese medicine.

In addition to the container metaphor and channel metaphor listed above, there are countless entity metaphors in traditional Chinese medicine, such as the Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon: “The six meridians are rivers, and the gastrointestinal tract is the sea”, which compares the meridians to rivers and the gastrointestinal tract to the sea; The term “fire” in traditional Chinese medicine refers to the state of inflammation or overheating; Due to its variable flow, “wind” metaphorically refers to the invasion and wandering of wind pathogens into the body, resulting in varied symptoms... and so on, there are countless examples.

5. The Phenomenon of Spatial Metaphor in Traditional Chinese Medicine Culture

In the process of interacting with the world, people form abstract cognitive experiences, and spatial orientation is the most easily perceived experience, often becoming the basis for understanding other complex concepts. People use spatial schemas to understand abstract experiences, such as “up-down” schemas, “left-right” schemas, “inside-outside” schemas, “front-back” schemas, “center-edge” schemas, closed schemas, open schemas, etc. Spatial metaphors are also reflected in many aspects of Chinese medical culture.

5.1 “Up-Down” Directional Metaphor

The metaphors of “up” and “down” are typical spatial orientation metaphors. In traditional Chinese medicine theory, the “up” and “down” orientation metaphors map the spatial concepts of “up” and “down” to abstract physiological, pathological, or therapeutic processes.

The traditional Chinese medicine concept of “fire with heat rising” is related to the orientation of “upward”. The physical characteristics of rising flames are used to illustrate that the “fire” in the body is reflected upwards. “Rising flames” are the source domain, while the manifestations of heart fire and liver fire are the target domain. Inflammation of the heart fire can cause mouth and tongue sores, and

hyperactivity of liver fire can cause headaches and blurred vision. The folk term for internal heat symptoms is commonly referred to as “upward fire”. The reason for using the “upward” orientation is because the flame burns in an upward direction, and the symptoms are similar to the spatial orientation of “upward”.

The treatment of “fire induced heat rising” adopts the method of “burning at the bottom of the pot” (using rhubarb to promote internal circulation and eliminate heat), with the aim of reducing, eliminating, lowering, or purging fire. The direction of “reducing, eliminating, lowering, and purging” is downward, that is, through interventions such as medication, diet, and lifestyle, to restore the excessive “fire” to a normal state.

The pathology of “dampness descending” in traditional Chinese medicine is related to the orientation of “descending”. The natural phenomenon of water flowing downwards indicates that the dampness in the body is descending. “Water flowing downwards” is the source domain, while the target domain is the dampness and heat descending to cause symptoms such as gonorrhea and diarrhea. The symptoms and spatial orientation of “descending” are similar.

5.2 Metaphor of “Inside-Outside” Orientation

The traditional Chinese medicine concepts of “cold on the surface and heat on the inside, from the surface to the inside, pathogenic factors on the surface entering the inside, pathogenic factors on the inside leaving the surface, half surface and half inside, invasion of dampness and toxins” are related to the metaphorical orientation of “inside- outside”. The “inside outside” directional metaphor is an important type of spatial directional metaphor. In traditional Chinese medicine theory, by mapping the spatial relationship between “inside” and “outside” to human physiology, pathology, and treatment, a systematic understanding of disease transmission, depth of disease location, and treatment direction is constructed.

The metaphor of “inner-outer” orientation is closely related to the metaphor of the container. The human body is a clearly defined container, with the interior and exterior forming opposing spaces. The exterior (skin) is the outer boundary of the container, responsible for resisting external pathogens, while the interior (organs, meridians) is the internal space of the container, responsible for biochemistry, qi and blood, and maintaining functions. Traditional Chinese medicine believes that diseases are invaded by external pathogens, such as wind, cold, heat, and dampness, which enter the body from the outside, causing communication between the inside and outside of the body as a container and causing internal imbalance. “Yingwei Qi” refers to the protective energy that guards the body surface and prevents external pathogens from invading, which is like maintaining the boundaries of a container. As the gateway of the body surface, the pores control the entry and exit of internal and external substances. The “sweating method” is used to treat superficial symptoms, by sweating and expelling pathogenic factors from the body, achieving a balance between the inside and outside of the container.

In the eight principles of traditional Chinese medicine (exterior and interior, cold and heat, deficiency and excess, yin and yang), “exterior and interior” is often used to describe the depth of the disease site in traditional Chinese medicine. Exterior syndrome usually refers to the early stage of external infections, where the disease site is on the surface of the body, such as the skin, muscles, meridians, etc., while interior syndrome is a problem where the pathogenic factors penetrate deep into the organs and belong to internal problems. The core principles for distinguishing the depth of disease location are “surface syndrome” and “internal syndrome”, which determine the direction of treatment, such as “resolving the surface” or “attacking the interior”. For example:

(7) From the inside out, adjust it internally; From the inside out, treat the outside out. (Su Wen: A Comprehensive Discussion on the Ultimate Truth)

(8) At the arrival of evil winds, diseases are like wind and rain. Therefore, those who are good at treating them treat the fur, followed by the skin, then the muscles and meridians, then the six viscera, and then the five viscera. (Su Wen: The Great Treatise on the Correspondence between Yin and Yang)

Example (7) Establishing the therapeutic principle of interaction between the external and internal aspects; In Example (8), “treating fur and skin” belongs to treating the exterior, while “treating tendons, meridians, six viscera, and five viscera” belongs to attacking the interior, reflecting the process of disease transmission from the exterior to the interior.

Spatial metaphor is the cognitive logic of understanding abstract life activities through concrete spatial relationships. In order to express abstract concepts, people talk about things and things through analogies, and space is the basis of analogy. In this process, metaphor plays a great role. Metaphor is a cognitive tool that allows people to draw analogies and apply them to other non spatial fields to help understand and construct more complex and abstract concepts. With the intricate connections between things, metaphors are constructed to expound the concepts and ideas of traditional Chinese medicine.

6. The Phenomenon of Structural Metaphor in Traditional Chinese Medicine Culture

Many concepts in traditional Chinese medicine are products of the human environment, arising from the participation of personal experiences. The environment we live in shapes our culture, and culture that is free from environmental constraints does not exist. Traditional Chinese medicine theory uses structural metaphors to reflect abstract life phenomena with concrete things or processes in nature and society, thus constructing a unique cognitive and diagnostic system. The essence of structural metaphor is to systematically map the structure of a source domain to another target domain, enabling abstract concepts to be expressed concretely. Structural metaphor has the characteristic of systematic correspondence.

6.1 The Structural Metaphor of “Yin and Yang (阴阳)”

Yin and Yang represent two aspects of the unity of opposites, originating from the observation of natural phenomena. In the alternation of day and night, day belongs to yang and night belongs to yin. During the day, there is ample sunshine, people are active frequently, and yang energy is strong; At night, the moon appears, and people rest and fall asleep, dominated by yin energy. Day and night alternate, just like the transformation of yin and yang. When the day is over, the night will come, and after the night is over, the day will come again. Yin and yang are constantly changing and transforming. Traditional Chinese medicine applies this binary opposition structure to human health, emphasizing regular daily living, advocating early sleep and early rise to adapt to the growth and decline of yin and yang, and maintaining body balance.

For example, in the changing seasons, spring and summer are sunny, autumn and winter are shady. As the temperature rises in spring and summer, all things grow and thrive; the temperature drops in autumn and winter, and all things are collected, with a restrained vitality. In traditional Chinese medicine theory, health preservation in spring and summer should focus on nourishing yang and exercising more, while in autumn and winter, it should nourish yin, nourish yin and moisten dryness, and adapt to natural changes. The natural phenomenon is that mountains are yang, valleys are yin, mountain ranges are towering, solid, and upward, river valleys are low-lying, moist, and downward. Traditional Chinese medicine corresponds to the human body, with the back being yang, corresponding to the Du meridian, and the body being yang qi. The abdomen is yin, corresponding to the Ren meridian, and the body being yin blood.

The yin and yang of nature (day and night, four seasons, water and fire, etc.) reveal the dynamic balance of energy and matter. The yin and yang of the human body maintain health through similar laws. Imbalance between yin and yang can lead to diseases, and treatment is to restore the balance of yin and yang, which is similar to the concept of balance in nature. The theory of yin and yang in traditional Chinese medicine is not an abstract symbol, but a reflection of the laws of nature.

6.2 The Structural Metaphor of the “Five Elements (五行)”

The Five Elements (Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, Water) are five visual symbols that use the mutual generation and restraint of the Five Elements to understand the coordination of the functions of the Five Organs (Liver, Heart, Spleen, Lung, Kidney). The Five Elements should be balanced, and the Five Organs should also be harmonious. Mapping the elements and attribute structures of nature onto the human body and health is a typical structural metaphor.

There is a systematic mapping relationship between the characteristics of the Five Elements and the functions of the Five Organs. The characteristics of wood correspond to the liver, which is responsible for regulating and releasing fluids; The characteristics of fire correspond to the heart, which governs the bloodline; The characteristics of soil correspond to the spleen, which is responsible for transportation and transformation; The characteristics of gold correspond to the lungs, which are

responsible for regulating qi; The characteristics of water correspond to the kidneys, which are responsible for storing essence.

The five elements are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Wood generates fire, liver generates heart. The liver stores blood, which helps the heart, just like burning firewood to start a fire. If the liver blood is insufficient, it can lead to palpitations and insomnia; Fire generates soil, heart generates spleen, heart yang warms the spleen and soil, just like sunshine warms the soil. If the heart yang is not vibrating, it will be like fire not warming the soil, leading to spleen deficiency and diarrhea; Earth generates gold, the spleen generates the lungs, and the spleen transports water and grain essence to nourish the lung qi, just like the earth generates mineral deposits. If there is spleen deficiency, the lung qi will be weak, leading to shortness of breath and coughing and wheezing; Gold generates water, lungs generate kidneys, lungs descend and help kidneys absorb qi, just like metal condenses into water. If the lungs are deficient in yin, then the kidneys are deficient in yin, leading to dry cough and lower back pain; Water generates wood, the kidneys generate the liver, and the kidney essence nourishes the liver blood, just like moistening plants and trees. If the kidney essence is deficient, the liver blood will be deficient, leading to dizziness and blurred vision.

The five elements constrain each other, and the five organs also constrain each other. Wood restrains soil, liver restrains spleen, and excessive liver qi can cause spleen deficiency and bloating; Soil restrains water, spleen restrains kidneys, and spleen deficiency can lead to edema; Water restrains fire, kidney restrains heart, and kidney yin deficiency can lead to excessive heart fire; Fire restrains gold, heart restrains lungs, and excessive heart fire can cause lung heat and coughing up blood; Jin Kemu, lung restrains liver, and lung qi deficiency can lead to dizziness and headache.

The five elements have a systematic correspondence with the five organs, emphasizing the importance of dynamic balance, which can be maintained by adjusting the five elements to maintain health. By understanding this metaphorical structural model, one can intuitively grasp the essence of the holistic view and dialectical treatment in traditional Chinese medicine.

7. Conclusion

The article illustrates the metaphorical phenomena contained in traditional Chinese medicine concepts and theories from the perspective of cognitive metaphor, using examples from three aspects: entity metaphor, spatial metaphor, and structural metaphor. More than two thousand years ago, ancient medical scholars linked phenomena such as diseases, physiology, and treatment with similarities to nature and daily life when understanding the operation of life and exploring the laws of life, forming a unique metaphorical discourse system of traditional Chinese medicine. The metaphors of traditional Chinese medicine carry the wisdom of traditional Chinese medicine, and the use of cognitive science metaphor methods can help understand and construct the theory of traditional Chinese medicine.

Foreigners are not very familiar with the concepts and theories of traditional Chinese medicine, such as Yin and Yang, five elements, qi, meridians, etc., so they need to use their familiar daily things as an analogy, establish cognitive relationships through familiar things, from concrete to abstract, from known to unknown, provide clear and understandable cognitive paradigm for people who do not know traditional Chinese medicine, and explain obscure concepts and theories of traditional Chinese medicine to foreigners with easy to understand metaphors. This interpretation not only retains the essence of traditional Chinese medicine, but also is much more effective than literal translation. It helps foreigners understand the concept of traditional Chinese medicine through similarity in the level of thinking.

If the dissemination of traditional Chinese medicine culture can change the way of thinking, from the translation of surface language to the interpretation of the operation of deep thinking, establish the awareness of cognitive relevance, seek the commonness of human experience from the cognitive experience and embodied environment, and the cognitive experience based on human commonness can trigger people's recognition and resonance, foreigners can deeply understand traditional Chinese medicine on the basis of understanding, which is like finding the key to open the door to broad and profound traditional Chinese medicine, spreading traditional Chinese medicine culture, and finding the common way of deep cognition is the shortcut of translation.

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