

Metaphors of Learning Chinese Students Live by

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Abstract—In Postman’s classic book *The End of Education. Redefining the value of the school*, he stated that “... definitions, questions, metaphors — ... are three of the most potent elements with which human language constructs a world view” (Postman, 1996, p.175). The application of metaphor into education language provides us with a better understanding of the learning activity. This metaphorical language has significant values because of its rich and unique implications, which can better reflect the epistemological assumptions on learning. In this paper, embedded epistemological assumptions on the nature, the practice and the aims of learning are conveyed via metaphorical models. To present historical continuity, the paper mainly analyzes some conventionalized metaphorical structures of learning in Chinese culture from a diachronic perspective. Conceptualization of learning relates deeply to the conceptualization of understanding and knowing the cultural factors. Based on metaphorical expressions and proverbs, the cultural factors causing the changes are also discussed. Through the transition of student’s role in different periods, various metaphors of learning reveal the corresponding changes of learning approach, which provide a good reference for future education reform.

Index Terms—metaphor, learning, conceptualization, student’s role, cultural factors

I. INTRODUCTION

Besides the popularity arising in the researches of metaphor, more philosophers have rebuked metaphor as dangerous and unreasonable, expecting to reduce it to an unconsidered position. However, we still cannot deny its essential functions and value in structuring and reflecting our ordinary conceptual system. The application of metaphor into education language provides us with a better understanding of the educational activity. This paper tries to focus on the learning aspect of the whole activity. With the change of Chinese student’s role in different periods, learning approach is in different forms, which are presented by various metaphors of learning. China has a large education system and a long history of learning, thus researches on Chinese beliefs and practices of learning are interesting and meaningful. In the education system, teacher and student are two indispensable participants, which the latter is focused in the paper. Metaphor is a useful means to offer valuable sources of insight for this research.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

China has a long history of early education since primitive society. A brief review of the evolution of culture and students’ role in education system can enable us to understand the Chinese theories and ideas of education on one hand, on the other hand, through the overall comparison, we hope to sum up experience which can better serve the education theories and practice in the future. Chinese culture exerts significant influence on the shaping of students’ role, and thus is among the elements which construct educational identities. In the research, metaphors of students’ role serve a good means to represent Chinese conceptions of the participant in the education activity, which in turn represent Chinese conception of practice of learning.

A. Definition of Metaphor

To well understand the data based on metaphorical expressions and proverbs, what the metaphor is should be discussed at first. According to classical language theorists tracing back to Aristotle, a metaphor is a poetic expression mainly fulfilling the rhetoric function and having little to do with everyday language or systematic thought. However, contemporary theorists like George Lakoff (1993) are challenging this traditional view by defining metaphors as “mapping across conceptual domain” (p. 208). Lakoff (1993) further puts forward that metaphors are fundamentally conceptual rather than linguistic, and that they are originally embedded in our everyday language and experiences. There are two main roles for the conceptual domains posited in conceptual metaphors: source domain and target domain. And based on similarities, the mapping is a systematic set of correspondences that exist between constituent elements of the source and the target domain. As Petrie and Oshlag (1993) state “metaphor is one of the central ways of leaping the epistemological chasm, between old knowledge and radically new knowledge” (p.58). Even though many doubts and rebukes have been cast to metaphor by claiming that it is dangerous and irrational, we still believe in the important functions and value of metaphor. The contemporary view of metaphors we adopted here is more powerful and expansive than the traditional one, for it helps discover why we are likely to use metaphorical thinking. Different from other forms of thinking, metaphorical thinking sheds new light on the mechanism of understanding the world. The use of metaphor is by no means limited to poets or linguists, every one of us may prefer to say something about the world

with metaphorical languages on certain occasions. Through metaphor we attempt to understand some unfamiliar things or state of affairs in terms of another more familiar things or state of affairs.

B. Association between Learning and Metaphor

There is a widespread recognition of the fact that metaphors play a significant aesthetic, ornamental and pedagogical role not only in literature but also in education. Perhaps the most basic definition of metaphor with respect to education is that seeing, describing or interpreting some unfamiliar or abstract educational phenomena, events or actions in terms of familiar or specific things, events or actions, such as “teachers are guides”, “learning is an uphill battle”. It is exactly the creative, innovative and interactive role of metaphor which creates the similarities between background information of the world and the understanding of some complex education phenomena. They act as powerful cognitive models through which we can better understand educational phenomena and participants by relating them to something previously experienced. In addition, a number of other metaphorical assumptions are basic to education in the comprehensive sense of the term, including the nature of humankind, of knowledge, of the school, of teaching and learning. There is a clear relationship between the metaphorical images chosen to portray the nature of education system and education phenomena. If we regard the school as a “factory”, then it is easy to make a small step to think about the curriculum as guideline for “production”, the teachers as factor workers, the students as “raw material” and further visualize teaching and learning as processes that are aimed at some forms of production. From the root metaphor of education as production, multiple branches of metaphors spring up, enriching the conceptual meaning and structure.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Since the publication of *metaphors we live by*, we have been first aware of how pervasive metaphor is in our ordinary everyday way of thinking, speaking and acting. The author George Lakoff (1993) points out that metaphors are in nature conceptual but not linguistic, and that they are embedded in our everyday language and experiences. Conceptual Metaphor Theory puts more emphasis on the metaphorical thinking pattern, in which the set of mappings are applied to a source-target pairing linked by the analogical reasoning and inferences. This thinking pattern decides the close relation between cultural background and the application of metaphor.

Following the proper sequence of dealing with data, the author firstly collects a large amount of data, and then selects from them the most typical ones, and finally analyzes those data in detail. Data for analysis are mainly taken from conventionalized metaphorical expressions and proverbs. In the paper, some typical metaphors of learning in China are analyzed from the perspective of three different times: ancient time, modern time and contemporary time. With the variation of culture in different periods, the use of metaphor differs, which further leads to the various understanding of students' role. Therefore, it is urgent to employ the metaphorical thinking pattern to better understand the diverse change of the roles. In addition, the transformation of student's role will ultimately cause the change of forms and qualities of learning presented by different metaphors. In the end, metaphor's importance as an aid to provide better understanding of conceptions and creating novel meaning and cognitive effects by connecting the known to the unknown, the physical to the ineffable are concluded through some metaphors of learning.

IV. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

A. Changes on the Metaphor of Learning in China from the Perspective of Students' Role

Researches on the history of education metaphor have shown that the metaphorical images of students are concerned mainly from three aspects: nature instincts; learning attitudes and status. Those metaphorical reflections of student in education system are obviously influenced by social cultural background on one hand, and on the other hand, they lead to diverse metaphorical reflections of learning in terms of its nature, aims and processes.

1. Metaphors of learning in ancient China

Early education in China starts in primitive society. In ancient China, the nature instincts and the status of students are two important factors giving rise to the reflections of learning. The ancient sages hold different view on whether the nature of human is good or evil, based on which the learning aim, process and approach vary. Learning and teaching are two indispensable aspects in education system. Therefore, teaching also sheds a light on learning. The use of metaphor, images and analogies has a long history in Chinese learning and teaching. Most early researches have analyzed ancient thoughts of human nature from the perspective of teaching. Two basic metaphors embodied in teaching are lexicalized in Chinese: jiao-shu “teaching the book” and yu-ren “teaching the person”. The former emphasizes content knowledge and the later emphasizes teaching learners how to live, through which we clarify that teachers are not just conduits of book knowledge but need to provide moral insights and guidelines necessary for proper functioning of society. Confucius, a famous educator in ancient China, put forward “teach students in accordance of their aptitude” which manifests his education principles. In the expression, students are compared to different kinds of “cai” (material) and thus the aim of education is to provide proper ways of teaching to students.

1.1 Learning is the eye of the mind

During the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States Periods, many scholars prefer to discuss the nature of students from the perspective of human nature. According to Mencius who are in favor of the theory of original goodness of

human nature, “人无有不善，水无有不下。今夫水，搏而跃之，可使过颡；激而行之，可使在山。是岂水之性哉？” (Tian & Xiao, 2005, p.21) He compares the nature of student to water, through which we can better understand his view that human nature is born to be good as water is doomed to flow down. Mencius believes that the bad humanity of some people is caused by external environment and the purpose of education is to preserve and rediscover the original goodness of mind.

Based on this cultural background, learning is the eye of the mind is much easier to illustrate. Eyes can be said one of the most important organs for our human beings, which enable us to know the world and people around us, while the eyes of the mind mainly refer to a way used for self-recognition and self-realization. In this expression, mapping learning onto eye of the mind is a Goal-oriented metaphor for learning, through which the fundamental aim of learning is emphasized. This metaphor is constructed on the similar function between learning and eyes, while the former is considered as a way to appreciate kindness with our heart and regain the original goodness of our own.

1.2 Learning is a baptism

Different from the view above, Xuncius believes in the theory of original badness of human nature by claiming “故枸木必将待巢枿、熏矫然后直，钝金必将待砿、厉然后利。” (Tian & Xiao, 2005, p. 52) He connects the conception of human nature to the metaphorical conceptions of “rotten wood” and “dull gold” in order to describe how bad the nature of human is. In his famous article “Exhortation to Learning”, Xuncius further illustrates the significant functions of education from the following saying: “木受绳则直，金就砺则利”。 The evil side or shortcomings of humanity and can be amended by education. In this metaphor, the target domain of learning is mapped onto a religious rite of baptizing. With the related knowledge on baptism, it's easier to figure out the interconnection between learning and baptism. Christians believe in the original sin of human and consider baptism as a symbol of cleaning this sin. Like the process, with the accumulation of knowledge and experience, learning help us overcome the original badness and weakness, making nice and wise humans.

1.3 Learning is imitating and digesting

This metaphor indicates two stages of learning with the first emphasizing the imitation from masters and the second underlining reviews on what has been learned. In ancient China, seniority means wisdom due to the influence of Confucian, and thus teachers (xian-sheng) who were born before and read more have higher status. Students are, therefore, followers of these foregoers. At that time, students imitate what their teacher offers as a model; no matter it is a book, a skill, knowledge or wisdom and then they will practice the model repeatedly and diligently. The stage of learning shares some similarities with the flying practice of little birds who imitating to flap their wings repeatedly so that they can fly like their parents. Many proverbs can also support this conceptualization. For example, “Reading the same book one hundred times would make you understand its meaning by itself.” “Tempering for a hundred times makes steel.” It becomes clear that the basic features of this stage are imitation and repetition and diligence.

In the metaphor Learning is digesting, the reflection process of learning is stressed and mapped onto the process of digesting food, both of which emphasize the extra efforts used to make what have gained more effective. Our ancestors have pointed out that reflection is also an essential stage to learn. If the learning only refers to imitating and memorizing without reflecting, it is deprecated as stuffing ducks, as is shown in some proverbs and expressions: “learning without reflecting gains nothing; thought without learning is dangerous.” “Learning is inappropriate swallowing: swallow a date whole, without thinking.”

2. Metaphors of learning in modern China

In modern China, many scholars turn to stress the important status of students in the education system by denying the previous low status of students and criticizing the receptive attitude to learning. At this period, they advocate to give more humanistic care to students, paying attention to their physical and psychological development as well as the self-enhancement through education. Considering the receptive and duck-stuffing learning style of traditional education, many scholars firstly point out its disadvantages and then put forward brave innovation on education. One famous educator Tao Xingzhi describes the traditional education with a metaphor “By offering a book to the students and asking them to recite it, the teacher becomes a producer of book shelves and those students originally different turn into similar book shelves. He appeals to bring into full play their autonomy, self-motivation and creativity.” (Fang, 2005, p.175)

2.1 Learning is an unending growth

We have many common metaphors for students, such as little plants, little birds and little rivers, all of which are concerned with a process of getting bigger or growing up. Even though external stimulus can promote this process, the self-motivation is more important. Here, learning is an unending growth is elaborated by the image schema of Process. The source domain of growth reminds us of the normal growing process in nature, which share something in common with learning process. The fact that growth starts from the moment of birth and lasts the whole life manifests that learning should not be abounded in the whole life. Learning is not confined into certain time and certain knowledge; on the contrary, it involves learning from teachers, books, experience and so on. Many old proverbs have proved this modest attitude of learning: Live to old age, learn to old age. There is no stopping place for learning. Greater learning brings greater modesty: knowing that there is always more to learn drives the learner towards more learning. From another perspective, everyone will experience happiness and sadness sometimes in the growing process. Likewise, learning will bring us joy and satisfaction but also demand sweat and perseverance. Therefore, learning is portrayed as a long-term activity full of various kinds of experience and feelings.

2.2 Learning is sailing against current

Chinese always say that "Learning is like sailing a boat against the current, not to advance is to drop back". This metaphor mainly emphasizes two aspects. First of all, the process of learning is mapped on to a sport domain, which suddenly presents in front of us a thrilling confrontation of currents. As for learning, difficulties as currents are inevitable on one hand, on the other hand, the whole society is like a river, in the fast-developing period, everyone in society are trying to catch up with others through learning, so those who stop learning will fall behind from others, and gradually be excluded by the society. It is decided by the competitive nature of human and society. Secondly, sailing cannot be totally controlled by others because no one would like to leave his life to others, he should make his own decision where to go and whether to stop or not. Likewise, with the guidance of teachers and books, the aim, the means and the success are mostly determined by the learner's autonomy and self-motivation.

3. Metaphors of learning in contemporary China

Further developing the view of modern China, students' status and functions in education system as well as their diverse personalities are put in a prominent place. Correspondingly, the authoritative teachers in traditional education just turn into a guide for the students who are traveling on the road of learning. In addition, students with different personalities are compared to various kinds of trees. Under the care and influence of education, they should adopt an active attitude to select the most suitable ways and aims of learning for themselves. We may be aware of the evolution of learning from ancient to present time. Firstly, the previous low status of students is elevated to the protagonist in education system. Students' passive and receptive attitude towards learning transfers to an active one, leading them to become travelers in the learning path or players in the game. The final self-realization is based on their constructions of their knowledge, thought and personalities.

3.1 Learning is an endless journey

This is one of the dominant traditional metaphorical concepts of learning. From a traditional point of view, it underlines the path of following and imitating the teacher diligently. However, we will illustrate it from a new perspective corresponding to the innovation of education. Learning is an endless journey implies learning from two aspects: the relation between the student and the teacher and ways of learning. In the new era, the previous authoritative teacher is more like a friend or a helper who provides his experience and suggestions to the student leading them to think for themselves and make their own decisions on the way. A good teacher, as quoted in the *Li Ji* (the Book of Rites): in his teaching, the superior man guides his students but not pull them along; he urges them to go forward and does not suppress them; he opens the way, but not take them to the place. Guiding without pulling makes the process of learning gentle, urging without suppressing makes the process of learning easy; and opening the way without leading the students to the place makes them think for themselves. (Jin, L. & Cortazzi 2006) In addition, the metaphorical concept of learning is elaborated by the image- schema of path on which students may meet many teachers to learn from and share their own experience and views to those teachers, too. Meanwhile, according to the different personalities and merits, students can choose different means to learn or travel. Taking a train journey, mountain climbing or even traveling on foot can be selected by every traveler himself. Therefore, in the new illustration of learning, the interpersonal aspect and the individual aspect are both highlighted.

3.2 Learning is architecture

Modernization of society has given rise to the new metaphorical concept of learning. Architecture is a useful metaphor for thinking about learning: its nature, process and aims. Architecture is a rich source of metaphors in education because the act of building is often compared to the acts of thinking and learning. The structure of architecture and the structure of learning are closely related. The knowledge, wisdom and experience need to be accumulated step by step which is similar to constructing a building. A building with a poor foundation is not well constructed and may fall apart at any time. Meanwhile, the lack of patience, proper methods and hard-working in the process of constructing or learning can result in failure. In another aspect, though the ultimate aim of constructing is the building, different materials should be put into different use in order to form various kinds of architecture. Likewise, the final aim of learning is to cultivate people and make better men. As a saying goes like a piece of jade cannot become an object of art without chiseling and a man cannot come to know the moral law without education. (Jin, L. & Cortazzi 2006) However, different people have their own ways to go and their own aims to realize in the process of learning. Learning is the only way to help people fulfill their potential and perform their functions in this society.

B. Functions and Values of Metaphor of Learning on Chinese Education

It is important to note that there is no single metaphor that can best capture all of the complexities of the educational phenomena under research and that any phenomenon can effectively be portrayed by a multiplicity of metaphors. Learning as one process of education is also a comprehensive term, which covers the nature, attitudes, means, aims and effects. Metaphors are found in all these diverse areas of learning and they are conducive to presenting an impressive understanding of learning.

1. Providing better conceptual understanding of complex educational theories

Bullough and Gitlin (2001) claim that human beings are born into metaphorical meaning systems. It is the changed point of view in metaphors that have led to new interpretations of learning in educational system. Metaphors of learning arouse a familiar feeling from people, which is the key to better express and understand various aspects concerning learning. As part of the complex education, learning can be clarified by series of theoretical disciplines and approaches,

which is only easy for educational experts and teachers to understand. However, employing metaphor as a means to portray it can stimulate the resonance between learning and other common experiences. Therefore, metaphor enables us to pay less cognitive effort to understand complex and abstract conceptions. Chinese culture exerts significant influence on the shaping of student's role, and thus is among the elements which construct educational identities, especially learning identities. Several typical metaphors of learning accompanied some metaphorical images of students serve as a good way to conceptualize and practice learning. The choice to portray "learning" by means of these metaphors is a choice for a specific understanding of the complex concept "learning" from different perspectives.

2. Creating more meaning and cognitive effects

Metaphor combining different conceptual domains to educational domain brings about changes in the understanding of the nature of education. It not only plays a significant role on understanding of the meaning of the complex concept portrayed, but also creates more meaning on the target conception which causing more cognitive effects. For example, according to the analysis above, learning is visualized as an endless journey, on which students are the travelers, teachers are the guidance and different patterns of learning are mapped onto different ways of travel. We may notice the root metaphor "learning is an endless journey" implies a series of relevant conceptions presented by other metaphors. Here, metaphorical use is not only indicative of the long period time of learning, but that it harbors far more meaning. Compared to the direct expression "learning is an endless process", metaphorical image "journey" creates more meanings on the explanatory meaning by means of interaction in which the meaning of both the literal and metaphorical elements of the two semantic fields are mapped and related conceptions are generated. The creation of novel meaning demands extra cognitive effort to realize the optimal relevance between source domain and target domain, while the paid effort will produce unexpected cognitive effects such as a more comprehensive and impressive understanding of a concept.

V. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The Chinese associations with learning stressed the social, moral and interpersonal dimensions. Conceptualization of learning relates deeply to the conceptualization of understanding and knowing the cultural factors. Metaphor is one of the powerful means to portray learning aspects implicitly assumed or explicitly acknowledged, which embodies and reflects certain underlying meanings and values. From above comparisons, we find that in Chinese educational system, traditional learning has rather negative connotations, lacking in original and creative inspiration, positive involvement, or active interaction. Students are kept passive and managed by or controlled by teachers. Even if such learning also focuses on diligence, devotion, hard-work, and commitment, we can detect in the metaphorical conceptualization of learning a tendency to cast the students into a uniform frame. The changes of the metaphor structures manifest a tendency to expect students to seek, to find and to invent what they do not yet know and finally lead them to fulfill their potential with the help of guidance and self-realization. The metaphors in later periods foreground an equal relationship between teacher and student, interdependence, autonomy and various forms of evolution on learning.

Metaphor's importance as an aid to thought and expression in a culture can hardly be overemphasized. In fact, we cannot imagine that humans could make sense of their world, especially the world of ideas, without these tools for creating meaning by connecting the known to the unknown, the physical to the ineffable, the everyday to the sublime. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff & Turner, 1989; Ortony, 1979). It needs little argument that these developments in the understanding of metaphor would impact the views of students and learning. All these dimensions of learning harbor embedded epistemological assumptions and values which are conveyed to the nature, the practice and the aims of learning via metaphorical models.

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