

Traditional Chinese Conception of Students: A Conceptual Metaphorical Perspective

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Abstract—Education has been a vital human activity through which cultures are transmitted and human development is gained. Students are the object of education and play an irreplaceable role in this activity. How they are conceptualized or treated is a matter of whether education can be successful or not. Based on perceptual similarity, conceptual metaphor about students can reveal educators' attitudes toward students. This paper will be devoted to the conception of students in Chinese tradition from the perspective of conceptual metaphors. Five major conceptual metaphors in Chinese Classics: STUDENTS ARE WOOD, STUDENTS ARE WATER, STUDENTS ARE METAL, STUDENTS ARE JADE and STUDENTS ARE EARTH, will be examined. Chinese cultural specificity revealed and particular traditional Chinese educational concepts conveyed by these conceptual metaphors will also be presented in the process of investigation.

Index Terms—education, conceptual metaphor, conceptual metaphors about students, Chinese tradition

I. INTRODUCTION

Studies on metaphor can be traced back to as far as two thousand years ago, at the age of Aristotle. For quite a long historical period, metaphors have been conceived as a linguistics phenomenon. They have been investigated as comparison, substitution and interaction between two similar entities or concepts. However, Lakoff and Johnson ushered in a new era of metaphorical studies after their publication of *Metaphors We Live By* in 1980. They (1980) maintain that metaphors are more cognitive phenomenon than merely linguistic one which underlies their Conceptual Metaphor Theory. Conceptual metaphors, instantiated by linguistic metaphors, are mappings between two conceptual domains. They reveal how the world or embodied experience is perceived and conceptualized.

Education is of great significance to human because it is closely related to their cultural transmission and development. Teachers and students are two most important participants in education activity. How teachers teach and students learn and their attitudes towards each other determine whether education is efficient and successful or not. Such teaching and learning attitudes can be reflected by metaphors in education or education metaphor.

Education metaphor refers to metaphors employed in educational contexts, including metaphors about teachers, students, teaching, learning, school, institutes, and colleges, education per se, etc. Previous researches (e.g. Gao, 2014; Li, 2011; Zhao & Zhou, 2008; Wei, 2006; Chen, 2001) on education metaphors in Chinese educational context have been mainly focused on linguistic metaphors or metaphors as a linguistic phenomenon though there are studies (e.g. Jin & Cotazzi, 2008) from conceptual metaphorical perspective. In addition, these researches have been mainly directed at metaphors about teachers, teaching, learning, etc. in Chinese contemporary educational background which has been greatly influenced by western educational concepts. Little attention has been paid to students in educational metaphorical studies. Neither is there any focus on conceptions of students in Chinese traditional educational background.

Traditional Chinese education has undeniably witnessed great boom and cultivated many great thinkers like Lao-Tzu, Confucius, and Mencius and so on though there are limitations within it. How are students conceptualized or treated in this educational system? We will answer this question by examining metaphors about students in Chinese classics from the perspective of Conceptual Metaphor Theory.

This paper is divided into four parts. The first part is a brief introduction of researches on conceptual metaphors and education metaphors. The second and third parts are the focus of the paper. Five major conceptual metaphors about students in Chinese classics, STUDENTS ARE WOOD, STUDENTS ARE WATER, STUDENTS ARE METAL, STUDENTS ARE JADE and STUDENTS ARE EARTH will be examined in the second part. The third part is devoted to the discussion of traditional educational concepts conveyed by those conceptual metaphors. Finally, conclusions of the paper will be given.

II. CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS ABOUT STUDENTS IN CHINESE TRADITION

Students are the objects of education and one of the most important and indispensable participants in this activity.

What roles students play in educational activities or how to treat students not only reveals teachers' attitudes toward students but also determines whether an activity of education can be successful or not. Conceptual metaphor, reflecting our particular ways of conceiving and conceptualizing the world, both internal and external, is quite revealing in how students are construed in the activity of education.

With a long history of education, even before the age of Confucius, traditional Chinese education has witnessed great prosperity and cultivated great minds such as Lao-Tzu, Confucius, and Mencius and so on. How are students orientated in traditional Chinese education? Through our investigation on Chinese classics, five major conceptual metaphors about students including STUDENTS ARE WOOD, STUDENTS ARE WATER, STUDENTS ARE METAL, STUDENTS ARE JADE and STUDENTS ARE EARTH will offer a glimpse of this question.

A. *Students Are Wood*

As one element in Wu Xing (the Five Elements: Water, Wood, Earth, Fire and Metal), wood which refers to a general concept similar to the notion of plant, acting as a cover term for tree, flower, grass, etc., is assigned with not only importance of daily life but also cultural significance in traditional Chinese culture. Metaphorical usage of the concept WOOD as the source domain to interpret various concepts in other domains permeates traditional Chinese literary works. The concept STUDENTS in the conceptual domain of EDUCATION can also be construed in terms of WOOD, which gives rise to the conceptual metaphor: STUDENTS ARE WOOD. Thus, the following linguistic expressions which instantiate this conceptual metaphor are readily available in Chinese classics.

(1) 蓬生麻中，不扶自直。（《荀子》 劝学）

“Raspberry vines growing among hemp plants are not staked, yet they grow up straight.” (Knoblock, 1988, p.135)

(2) 大抵童子之情，乐嬉游而惮拘检，如草木之始萌芽，舒畅之则条达，摧挠之则衰痿。（《阳明传习录》 训蒙大意示教读刘伯颂等）

“Generally speaking, children enjoy romping and are afraid of being constrained just like trees and grass. When growing unrestrainedly, they will thrive quickly but once restricted they will soon wither.”

In the above examples, students are metaphorically construed in terms of raspberry vines, trees and grass, and the living environment of raspberry vines and natural growth of trees and grass in the conceptual domain of WOOD are respectively mapped onto educational environment and cultivation of students in the domain of EDUCATION. Through these metaphors, Xunzi emphasizes that educational environment or rather education itself plays a vital role in the cultivation of students while Wang propose that teachers should follow the nature or interests of students in the process of teaching.

(3) 宰予昼寝。子曰：朽木不可雕也，粪土之墙不可朽也；于予与何诛？（《论语》 公冶长篇）

“Zai Yu was in bed in the daytime. The Master said, ‘A piece of rotten wood cannot be carved, nor can a wall of dried dung be trowelled. As far as Yu is concerned what is the point in condemning him?’” (Yang & Liu, 2008, p.71)

(4) 故枸木必将待巢括、熏、矫然后直……今人之性恶，必将待师法然后正，得礼义然后治。（《荀子》 性恶）

“Thus, a warped piece of wood must first await application of the pressframe, steam to soften it, and force to bend its shape before it can be straight...Now, since human nature is evil, it must await the instructions of a teacher and the model before it can be put aright, and must obtain ritual principles and a sense of moral right before it can become orderly.” (Knoblock, 1994, p.151)

The conceptual metaphor STUDENTS ARE WOOD is further elaborated by example (3) and (4). In these examples, the concept TIMBER is exploited to interpret students. Accordingly, the role carpenter or artist and the activity carving or processing of timber are metaphorically mapped onto teacher and education. These metaphors highlight that students' shortcomings should be the target of education and the task is to wipe them out.

B. *Students Are Water*

Water, another element in Wu Xing, is also an important cultural and philosophical image in Chinese tradition, which is even thought to be near to what Lao Tzu calls Tao in his philosophical system. Meanwhile, the image of water is equally important to Confucianism. For example, both Confucius and Mencius tend to resort to WATER when they explain other concepts or experience during their teaching. Mencius even compares students to water, as is shown in (5). He maintains that students are not born with bad habits as is the same with the movement of water which is not the nature of it but external force makes it so, which reflects his philosophical tenet that human beings are good by nature. Underlying such a linguistic metaphor is the conception that STUDENTS ARE WATER, which can be further elaborated by (6).

(1) 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？其势则然也。人之可使为不善，其性亦犹是也。（《孟子》 告子上）

“Now by striking water, and causing it to leap up, you may make it go over your forehead; and by damming and leading it, you may make it go up a hill; but are [such movements according to] the nature of water. It is the force applied which causes them. In the case of a man's being made to do what is not good, his nature is dealt with in this way.” (Legge, 1875, p.178)

(2) 然学者不能自信，见夫标末之盛者便自荒忙，舍其涓涓而趋之。（《象山语录》 傅子云季鲁录）

“However, unlike the spring water, learners are not confident enough. So they are flurried when seeing the long way they have to go and give up their struggle for the goal.”

In (6), students' following a path is interpreted as the streaming of spring water, and their struggle for their goals is conceived as the non-stop flowing of water. Without constant flowing, a brook will never run into the sea. Comparably, students cannot achieve their goals unless they are willing to make continuous efforts. Lu indicates from this metaphor that students should never cease their efforts towards their aims.

C. *Students Are Metal*

Metal is also an element in Wu Xing. It plays an important role in people's daily life because their living utensils and sacrificial vessels are mainly made of this material. But what is more important is that it is vital to safety of a country in ancient China, especially at the age of war for most of the weapons in ancient times are forged by metal. Therefore, forging is not only essential to the people but also to the country. And such a concept is brought into education, giving rise to the conceptual metaphor STUDENTS ARE METAL. In relation to this conceptual metaphor are conceptual metaphors including TEACHERS ARE CRAFTSMEN, TEACHING IS FORGING, TEACHING IS POLISHING, STUDENTS ARE PRODUCTS, LEARNING IS POLISHING, etc.

(1) 善待问者如撞钟，叩之以小者则小鸣，叩之以大者则大鸣，待其从容，然后尽其声。（《礼记》学记）

“The master, who skillfully waits to be questioned, may be compared to a bell when it is struck. Struck with a small hammer, it gives a small sound. Struck with a great one, it gives a great sound.” (Legge, 1885, p.89)

(2) 木受绳则直，金就砺则利，君子博学而日参省乎己，则知明而行无过矣。（《荀子》劝学）

“So, too, wood that has been marked with the plumbline will be straight and metal that has been put to the whetstone will be sharp. In broadening his learning, the gentleman each day examines himself so that his awareness will be discerning and his actions without excess.” (Knoblock, 1988, p.135)

Examples (7) and (8) represent different derivative metaphors from STUDENTS ARE METAL, with (7) instantiating STUDENTS ARE PRODUCTS and (8) elaborating LEARNING IS POLISHING. In (7), the master is the one who strikes a bell and the student is the bell struck, while in (8), the student is the sword being whetted and the process of learning is the process of whetting. What these metaphors convey is that students can only be improved by learning and their bad habits or weakness can be got rid of through education.

D. *Students Are Jade*

In Chinese tradition, jade is also given specific cultural importance. It is thought to be auspicious and can bring good fortune to its owner in the eye of Chinese people. As artifacts, jade is often mined from mineral and carefully cut and polished by lapidaries. This process whereby a gem in the stone is continuously refined and polished and finally made into a delicate jade accouterment is conceived to be experientially similar to the process of education in which an innocent child gradually becomes wise through patient cultivation, which motivates the conceptual metaphor STUDENTS ARE JADE. Conceptual metaphors relating to this one include TEACHERS ARE LAPIDARIES, TEACHING IS CUTTING AND POLISHING, STUDENTS ARE PRODUCTS, etc.

(1) 玉不琢不成器，人不学不知道。（《礼记》学记）

“The jade uncut will not form a vessel for use; and if men do not learn, they do not know the way (in which they should go).” (Legge, 1885, p.82)

(2) 今有璞玉于此，虽万镒，必使玉人雕琢之。（《孟子》梁惠王）

“Here now you have a gem in the stone. Although it be worth 240,000 [taels], you will surely employ your chief lapidary to cut and polish it.” (Legge, 1875, p.108)

The above examples are elaborations of STUDENTS ARE JADE. In these metaphors, the role of lapidaries and jade are respectively mapped onto TEACHER and STUDENTS in the conceptual domain of EDUCATION, and teaching is construed as the refining and polishing of jade. These metaphors also stress that students should be educated so that they can be useful gifts of the society and the country.

E. *Students Are Earth*

Being another element of Wu Xing, earth, too, conveys profound cultural significance in Chinese tradition, which can be readily reflected by Chinese traditional porcelain culture. Similar to metal and jade, earth can be exploited and fired into exquisite porcelains and other artifacts. Therefore, just like STUDENTS ARE METAL and STUDENTS ARE JADE, the conceptual metaphor STUDENTS ARE EARTH arises from the same motivation. In alignment with this metaphor, there are conceptual metaphors TEACHERS ARE CRAFTSMEN, STUDENTS ARE PRODUCTS, TEACHING IS FIRING, etc.

(1) 陶人埴埴而为器，然则器生于工人之伪，非故生于人之性也。（《荀子》性恶）

“The potter molds clay to make an earthenware dish, but how could the dish be regarded as part of the potter's inborn nature?” (Knoblock, 1994, p.157)

This is an example which realizes STUDENTS ARE EARTH. In this metaphor, the process of education in which a child is taught by a teacher from innocence to erudition is construed by the process whereby porcelains are created by craftsmen from earth.

In addition to those major conceptual metaphors discussed above, there are also some other metaphors about students in Chinese classics, such as STUDENTS ARE SAND (白沙在涅，与之俱黑。“Diligence is the path to the mountain of knowledge, hard-working is the boat to the endless sea of learning.”), STUDENTS ARE PILOT (书山有路勤为径，学海无涯苦作舟。“Diligence is the path to the mountain of knowledge, hard-working is the boat to the endless sea of learning.”), STUDENTS ARE TRAVELLER (路漫漫其修远兮，吾将上下而求索。“The way to get profound knowledge and grand morality is so far that I will search them from the paradise to the hell wholeheartedly.”), etc.

Though it is a universal principle that we tend to resort to cognized experience when construing new ones, that is, conceptual metaphor is a universal cognitive device, conceptual metaphors do reveal certain degree of cultural specificity. Consequently, conceptual metaphors about students in Chinese tradition offer a glimpse of some specific Chinese cultural phenomena. As has been examined, STUDENTS in the conceptual domain is mainly construed by WOOD, WATER, METAL, JADE and EARTH in Chinese classics. The reason may lie in the fact that wood, water, metal, earth in Wu Xing and jade are culturally salient in ancient China and attributed with profound cultural connotations.

III. TRADITIONAL CHINESE EDUCATIONAL CONCEPTS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

What conceptual metaphors about students in Chinese tradition convey are not only teachers' attitudes toward students and cultural specificity, but also particular concepts of education in ancient China. These concepts may be of considerable significance to contemporary education.

A. Educational Concepts

As has been mentioned, wood, water, metal, earth in Wu Xing and jade are favored as the source domain to construe students in Chinese classics while fire has failed to operate in such mappings even though it is also an indispensable element in Wu Xing. The reason is perhaps that the other four elements, wood, water, metal and earth are malleable, as is the same with jade, while fire is not. In this sense, traditional Chinese educational concepts hold that students are malleable and education is aimed at shaping them.

However, as far as how to shape the students is concerned, two diverging perspectives arise. One claims that radical changes are necessary while the other one, contrary to the former, proposes that no change is needed. Here, by “change”, it is meant whether it is necessary to the nature of a student or not. The most representative figures of the two schools are Mencius and Xunzi respectively.

According to Mencius, human are born good and what makes them different is their living environment. Therefore, what educators are supposed to do is to follow students' nature and create favorable studying environment for them. Then education is directed at preserving students' nature and shaping and improving them on the basis of their own goodness. Such a process has been metaphorically interpreted as following the natural direction of water and natural growth of plants as are manifested in examples (1), (2), (5), etc.

On the contrary to Mencius, Xunzi declares that human are evil in nature and such evilness has to be removed through external force or education so that they can be good. Consequently, educators should fix their attention on eliminating students' evilness in nature and lead them to a right course. Therefore education should be committed to reshaping the nature of students and inculcating them with goodness, which is perceptually similar to carving jade and wood, making porcelains and molding and polishing metal, etc., as is shown in examples (3), (4), (8), (9), (11), etc.

In conclusion, shaping, whether to change students' nature or not, has been an important concept in traditional Chinese education. As a result, educators' responsibility for students has been over-emphasized while students' autonomy and initiative have been neglected.

B. Significance

Though traditional Chinese educational concepts conveyed by conceptual metaphor about students may appear to be outdated and incompatible with contemporary education, they are heuristic and of considerable significance to present education.

Firstly, insights in traditional educational concepts should be carried on to serve contemporary education and appropriate adjustments should be made accordingly. Holistic education has been the focus of contemporary education. It is student-oriented and beneficial to a healthy and holistic development of students. To this end, on the one hand, educators should do as what their predecessors have done in ancient time and follow students' nature or interests. But this is not enough. Students, on the other hand, should not be treated as “malleable materials”. Instead, they should be given “life” of their own; or rather, they should be given more autonomy and initiatives.

Secondly, lessons can be from where traditional education has failed. Under the guidance of traditional educational concepts, students have been totally constrained, and their studies have been mainly confined in the studies of classics which they are not supposed to defy. As a consequence, they are good students in the sense that they follow their teachers strictly and obediently without any sense of innovation. However, in response to contemporary educational concepts, those constraints should be dislodged and students should be empowered with more freedom. Meanwhile, they should be encouraged to take their own initiatives and be more open-minded, and most importantly more critical and innovative.

It will be surely of great help to contemporary education if we are wise enough to absorb what is good in traditional educational concepts and discard what is not.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Aimed at the conception of students in Chinese tradition from the perspective of conceptual metaphors, this paper has attempted to conduct an investigation on five major conceptual metaphors employed in Chinese classics: STUDENTS ARE WOOD, STUDENTS ARE WATER, STUDENTS ARE METAL, STUDENTS ARE JADE and STUDENTS ARE EARTH. Though these metaphors are only the tip of the iceberg of traditional Chinese culture, they reveal certain Chinese cultural specific conceptions of students. In detail, WOOD, WATER, METAL, EARTH, JADE are culturally salient concepts, resulting in their high frequency in conceptual metaphors about students in Chinese classics. In addition, particular concepts of education in ancient China are also conveyed in these metaphors. As has been elucidated, traditional Chinese education has imposed great responsibility on educators and interfered with students' autonomy and initiative. Nonetheless, following the nature or interests by some great thinkers has been advocated, which is what has been the tenet of contemporary education. Lessons should be drawn from traditional education. Meanwhile, its insights should also be carried forward to serve current education.

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