

# The heart in emotion

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## Abstract

The present article attempts to explore and discuss conceptual metaphors and metonymies for emotions in the Chinese language with regard to the role of the body in emotions. The study on emotion metaphors and metonymies enables us to see how people of a given culture or different cultures conceptualize and verbalize their emotions, given that the nature of the human body and its physiology are presumably universal.

**Keywords:** cognitive linguistics, emotion, heart

## 1. Introduction

Each culture has its own unique way of modeling the body, which often serves as the base for the figurative language about topics.

The conceptualization of emotion, for example, is largely based on conceptual metaphor and metonymy of body parts, bodily events and processes, body heat, internal pressure, etc. (Lakoff, 1987).

Chinese, in this respect, is exceptionally rich in its metaphorical and metonymical expressions for the emotions that are associated with body parts, especially the internal organs, because of the folk theory of the human anatomy and its physiological functions. The present article attempts to explore and discuss conceptual metaphors and metonymies for emotions in

the Chinese language with regard to the role of the body in emotions, since the figurative language not only pervades daily expressions people use for the emotions, it is also essential to the understanding of the most aspects of the conceptualization of emotion and emotional experience (Kovecses 2000, 20).

## 2. The Chinese folk theory and the encoding of emotion

Emotion are commonly described as 'seven emotions' in Chinese, which are considered to be the seven basic human emotional feelings including 'joy', 'anger', 'sorrow', 'fear', 'love', 'hate', 'desire'. The popular folk theory holds that all seven emotions have effects, usually bad/ill or negative, on one's internal organs, especially the heart, and hence all emotions should be put under control. The folk theory has been deeply rooted in the traditional Chinese medicine, which considered emotions in general as disease or psychological instability and hence the internal factors causing the ailment of the body and the internal organs. Since the traditional Chinese medicine has been performed thousands of years and often worked wonders, its views and knowledge have permeated the Chinese culture. With the traditional medicine as the guide, Chinese people have a general understanding of the relationship between bodily functions and emotions. For example, worry may hurt one's spleen, etc. The traditional medical view has laid the

foundation for the folk understanding of the correspondence between emotions and the actual physiology, and the folk theory, in turn, has led to abundant conceptual metaphors and metonymies furthering this understanding. The following hyperbolic expressions, for example, give us a glimpse of the crucial link between the human internal organs and the conceptualization of emotion.

- 1) so angry that one's lungs explode
- 2) so scared that one's gall punctures
- 3) so sorrowful that one's heart breaks

Other body parts such as the face, the facile organs, the limbs, etc. are also used in the metaphorical language of emotion in Chinese, specifically in the display of emotions, as shown in the following metonymies:

- 4) one's hands and feet dance (joy)
- 5) one's eyes are burning (anger)
- 6) to express love with one's eyes and eyebrows

However, they play a less important or secondary role in the conceptualization of emotion, and are used much less in encoding emotions in Chinese than the concept of the heart (which often extends to refer to all internal organs) since the Chinese culture has been less likely to encourage one to openly express or display one's emotional feelings. The ancient Chinese philosophy, especially Confucianism, advocated keeping up the morality, controlling emotions and eliminating desires because if one lets one's emotions and desires grow or unleash, they would gradually drown one's conscience and morality, and overcome the good (Wang 1994). As a result, the Chinese people do not normally display or show their emotions, and are thus considered introvert by people of other cultures. The belief of keeping-control can be readily seen from the following Chinese mottos.

- 7) Do not be a slave to one's emotions!
- 8) Learn to control one's feelings!
- 9) Do not be swayed by one's emotions!

10) Do not put one's emotional feeling first!

11) Do not lose control at any time!

The Chinese folk theory of physiological effects of emotion on the body, especially the heart, with its roots in traditional Chinese medicine, forms the basis of the most general metaphor for emotions: EMOTIONS ARE IN THE HEART. On the other hand, the cultural belief of controlling or hiding one's emotion, with the ancient philosophy and ideology as basis, helps us understand the structural organization of conceptual metaphors and metonymies for emotion in the Chinese language.

### **3. The Chinese characters representing the basic emotions**

A look at the Chinese characters that encode the seven basic feeling will reveal interesting correspondence between emotion and the heart. I will briefly introduce the Chinese writing role that the concept of the heart plays in the Chinese language of emotion.

It is well known that the Chinese writing system is a logographic one, which utilizes written signs to express the morphemes or words of the spoken language. In general, the basic orthographic units—the characters—bear little relationship to the sound of the spoken word but correspond directly to morphemic meanings. This unique relationship between sound and meaning in the written form allows the Chinese people to understand a single Chinese written text, while they have a multiplicity of spoken languages or dialects that are vastly different in the phonological form to be mutually unintelligible. Although Chinese characters have complex spatial configurations and number in thousands, they can be divided into two broad categories: simple and compound. While simple characters (e.g. rain) cannot be divided into meaningful subu-

nits or components, compound characters (about 85% of the total characters, Zhou 1078) can be readily analyzed meaningful into components. Most compound characters consist of two components: a semantic radical and a phonetic radical, which can be arranged spatially as left-right (feeling/emotion), upper-lower (thunder), or inside-outside (round). Semantic radicals of compound characters historically evolved from simple characters, most of which provide semantic information of the whole compound characters.

Now, let us examine the Chinese characters standing for the seven basic emotions.

1. “joy”, which is a compound character having the upper-lower configuration. The original pictograph of the character is composed of a drum (the upper part) and a mouth (the lower part), indicating a lively scene of laughter and drumming, hence meaning joy or happiness (Shi 1997). However, “joy” can also be written with an added heart at the left or the bottom of the character as its semantic radical (c.f., *The Comprehensive Dictionary of Chinese Characters* 1995), suggesting the heart plays a role in joy.
2. “anger”, which is a compound character having the upper-lower configuration. The semantic radical of the character is a heart, indicating anger has to do with one’s heart. Another character standing for anger is (fen), whose semantic radical is also a heart.
3. “sorrow”, which is a compound character having the upper-lower configuration. The semantic radical of the character is a heart, indicating the relationship between sorrow and the heart. Another character standing for sorrow is (ai), which has a mouth as its component, linking ai with sobbing or crying.
4. “fear or shock”, which is a com-

pound character having the left-right configuration. The semantic radical of the character is a heart, indicating the correspondence between fear and one’s heart. Other common characters standing for fear are (pa), (jing), and (kong), all of which have a heart as their semantic component.

5. “love”, which is a compound character having the upper-lower configuration. The character is a simplified version of the original, which also has a heart as a component. One of the compound words commonly used in Chinese to express love, beloved, or treasure is 宝贝, which is literally translated as ‘heart-love’.
6. “hatred”, which is a compound character having the left-right configuration. The character has a heart as its semantic radical, indicating hatred and the heart are related.
7. “desire”, which is a compound character having the left-right configuration. This modern character for yu has a (lack of, short of) as its semantic radical, which indicates something missing (e.g., morality and conscience), according to *A Comprehensive Dictionary of Chinese Characters* (1995). Nevertheless, the character is often written with a heart underneath it, meaning desire also has to do with the heart.

The above characters standing for the seven basic emotions in Chinese almost all consist of a heart as their semantic radical. In fact, there are about 1,100 characters with the heart as the semantic radical in *A Comprehensive Dictionary of Chinese Characters*, about 60% of which indicate human feelings and emotions, which include not only the seven basic emotions but also shame, surprise, pride, worry, etc. Moreover, the Chinese word for emotion of feeling can be a compound character (qin) or a compound word (gan-

qing), all three characters having the heart as their semantic component.

The concept of the heart seems to be ubiquitous in the Chinese language of emotion because the ancient Chinese considered the heart the center of one's body, as shown by the character *zhong* (center), which has been used metonymically for the heart (see (13) below). Consequently, the heart was believed to control not only the body but also the mind and thoughts, and the word *xin* (heart) has since been extended in Chinese to refer to the mind, the brain, the thoughts, and human nature as well. For example, manual laborers are referred to as *lao-li zhe* (literally: people who work with their brawn), and mental workers as *lao-xin zhe* (literally: people who work with their heart). Since emotions are human nature, they ought to have everything to do with the heart. Actually, emotional feelings are thought to come from the heart, as indicated by the following Chinese idioms:

12). Anger rises from the heart

13). Sorrow comes from the heart.

In the following sections, I will discuss in detail how the Chinese language makes a principal use of the heart in the conceptualization of emotion. The role of some of the body parts in emotion will also be examined and discussed. While discussing the conceptualization of emotion in Chinese, I will illustrate each of the conceptual metaphors with linguistic examples, all of which are taken from native speakers' daily conversations, contemporary Chinese short stories and novels as well as Chinese dictionaries.

#### 4. Conclusion

The present paper investigates the role of body in the conceptualization of emotion in the Chinese language and shows that there is a coherent conceptual organization underlying the metaphorical and metonymical expressions for emotions. It

argues, in general, that there are two central ideas in the conceptualization of emotion in Chinese, both characterizing the HEART CONTAINER: one is A SUBSTANCE IN THE HEART and the other A DAMAGING FORCE TO THE HEART, as revealed by a variety of metaphorical entailments of and lexical elaborations on such source domains as gas/fluid, knife, fire, ice, nature force, physical/psychological agitation, etc. Other body parts such as the face and the facial organs are related to THE HEART CONTAINER, and also important in the conceptual metaphors for emotions, although they play a secondary role to the heart. These general metaphors for emotions and their structural organization are largely based on the Chinese folk theory and folk understanding of the physiological effects of emotions on the body and bodily functions, and influenced by the ancient Chinese philosophy and ideology on human nature and emotions. It seems that the cultural models of emotion are indeed the joint products of metaphor and metonymy, physiology, and the cultural context (Kövecses 2000), and the study on emotion metaphors and metonymies enables us to see how people of a given culture or different cultures conceptualize and verbalize their emotions, given that the nature of the human body and its physiology are presumably universal.

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