



Research Paper

# A Study on the Translation of Water Metaphor in Chinese Classical Poetry

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**ABSTRACT:** Lakoff's conceptual metaphor theory holds that metaphor is a systematic mapping from a specific conceptual domain (source domain) to an abstract conceptual domain (target domain). This paper intends to apply Lakoff's conceptual metaphor theory to analyze the typical water metaphors in Chinese classical poetry, and analyze the metaphor translation of these four typical water metaphors, which can help readers better understand the inner beauty of Chinese classical poetry through the analysis of the conceptual metaphors in specific poems and also understand strategies of metaphor translation in Chinese classical poetry.

**Keywords:** water metaphor, metaphor translation, Chinese classical poetry

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## I. Research Background

In the collection and analysis of Chinese classical poetry, the author has noticed that the water metaphor frequently appeared in the works of great poets in different dynasties, some of which were used to express emotions, some of which were used to clarify the truth. In poetry, water, the most common substance in our life, has become a way for people to cognize the world. Through applying Lakoff's conceptual metaphor theory to study of water metaphor in Chinese classical poetry, four typical water metaphors in Chinese classical poetry are concluded as TIME IS WATER, LOVE IS WATER, SADNESS IS WATER and MAN IS WATER.

## II. The Working Mechanism of Conceptual Metaphor

The working mechanism of metaphor is a cognitive process in which some features of one thing are mapped to another. According to Lakoff and Turner (1989), metaphor is not a linguistic expression, but a mapping from one conceptual domain to another. A mapping is a corresponding set between two conceptual domains, which is driven by human experience. People cognize experience from the target domain with experience from the source domain. When mapped from the source domain to the target domain, some features of source domain are emphasized while others are hidden thus the experience of target domain can be cognized partially.

## III. Water Metaphor Translation in Chinese Classical Poetry

There four kinds of typical water metaphors: TIME IS WATER, LOVE IS WATER, SADNESS IS WATER and MAN IS WATER. The analysis to the four kinds of water metaphors in Chinese classical poetry is as follows.

### 3.1 Translation on Time Metaphor

The poems in Chinese classical poetry that take water as the source domain and time as the target domain are like: 君不见黄河之水天上来，奔流到海不复回。(李白《将进酒》) 滚滚长江东逝水，浪花淘尽英雄。

(杨慎《临江仙·滚滚长江东逝水》) 浮云一别后，流水十年间。(韦应物《淮上喜会梁州故人》) In these poems, for one thing, the poets captured the common features between water and time: water flow runs on forever and time passes away all the time. For another, as China's terrain descends from west to east, most rivers in China also flow from west to east. The irreversibility of water flow is similar to the passing of time, so Chinese poets prefer expressing their lamentation of the fleeting time via the description of the rushing water. Therefore, it can be concluded that "TIME IS WATER".

Table 3.1 Time is Water

	Water (source domain)	Time (target domain)
君不见黄河之水天上来，奔流到海不复回。	runs on forever flows from west to east (irreversible)	passes away all the time never comes back
滚滚长江东逝水，浪花淘尽英雄。		
浮云一别后，流水十年间。		

There are some special water metaphors: 一箭流光，又趁寒食去。(吴文英《西子妆慢·湖上清明薄游》) 流光容易把人抛，红了樱桃，绿了芭蕉。(蒋捷《一剪梅·舟过吴江》) 可惜流年，忧愁风雨，树犹如此<sup>[17]</sup>!(辛弃疾《水龙吟·登建康赏心亭》) The “flow” is the most distinctive feature of water so that many water metaphors such as “流年” and “流光” use “flow” to refer to “water flow”, and “flow” is used to metaphorize the fleeting time.

### 3.2 Translation on Love Metaphor

The poems in Chinese classical poetry that take water as the source domain and love as the target domain are like: 曾经沧海难为水，除却巫山不是云。(元稹《离思五首·其四》) 日日思君不见君，共饮长江水。(李之仪《卜算子·我住长江头》) 过尽千帆皆不是，斜晖脉脉水悠悠<sup>[20]</sup>。(温庭筠《望江南·梳洗罢》) 盈盈一水间，脉脉不得语。(佚名《迢迢牵牛星》) Both the choppy river and the quietly flowing trickle have been used by Chinese poets to express ardent or tender love. Water is formless, sometimes billowing, sometimes calm, which is similar to love, sometimes intense, sometimes soft. No matter which kind of love, it is always praised by Chinese poets as pure as clear water. The similarities between water and love lead to the conclusion that “LOVE IS WATER”.

Table 3.2 Love is Water

	Water (source domain)	Love (target domain)
曾经沧海难为水，除却巫山不是云。	raging/choppy quietly flowing clear	ardent/intense tender pure
日日思君不见君，共饮长江水。		
过尽千帆皆不是，斜晖脉脉水悠悠。		
盈盈一水间，脉脉不得语。		

Some water metaphors are used with their negative form like: 相恨不如潮有信，相思始觉海非深。(白居易《浪淘沙》) In people’s cognition, the sea is so deep that it can’t be easily measured thus the word “情深似海” is often used for expressing the profound emotion when the depth of water was mapped to the love. The poet depicted that the depth of water is not as deep as the love of the lovesick woman to her lover in which the very deep love of the lovesick woman is more touching for readers.

### 3.3 Translation on Sadness Metaphor

The poems in Chinese classical poetry that take water as the source domain and sadness as the target domain are like: 抽刀断水水更流，举杯销愁愁更愁。(李白《宣州谢朓楼饯别校书叔云》) 问君能有几多愁？恰似一江春水向东流。(李煜《虞美人·春花秋月何时了》) 风萧萧兮易水寒，壮士一去兮不复还<sup>[25]</sup>。(佚名《渡易水歌》) The flowing water never can be stopped and seems to stretch into infinity. That always attracts sentimental poets for their lingering sadness. In addition, the similar negative signals will be transmitted when someone touches the cold water and hold a sad mood. The similarities between water and sadness enables poets to visualize sadness in their poems. Therefore, “SADNESS IS WATER”.

Table 3.3 Sadness is Water

	Water (source domain)	Sadness (target domain)
抽刀断水水更流，举杯销愁愁更愁。	keeping flowing cold→negative	lingering negative
问君能有几多愁？恰似一江春水向东流。		

风萧萧兮易水寒，壮士一去兮不复还。		
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### 3.4 Translation on Man Metaphor

In cognitive linguistics, personification is also a form of metaphor. The poems in Chinese classical poetry that take water as the source domain and man as the target domain are like: 仍怜故乡水，万里送行舟。(李白《渡荆门送别》) 溪水无情似有情，入山三日得同行。(温庭筠《过分水岭》) 吞声别，陇头流水，替人呜咽。(贺铸《子夜歌·三更月》) Ancient Chinese poets always have a lot of inexplicable emotions in their deep inside. When they intend to express their feelings, the favored water becomes a “man” who speaks for them. When the poet left home, the boat travelled with water passing away. The flowing of the water was regarded by the poet as “a send-off thousands of miles”, in which the flowing of water was mapped to man who was sending the poet off. When the poet travelled alone, he heard nothing but the murmur of a stream that had been flowing all night. The flowing of water was regarded by the poet as “a company along the way”, in which the flowing of water was mapped to man who acted as a companion. When the poet described one who is waiting at home alone for someone who never comes back, the gurgling sound of water flow was explained by the poet as “whimper”, in which the sound of water flow was mapped to man who was missing his or her lover. The natural flowing of water could be linked with the act and mood of man for their similarity, thus “MAN IS WATER” can be considered.

Table 3.4 Man is Water

	Water (source domain)	Man (target domain)
仍怜故乡水，万里送行舟。	flowing	act
溪水无情似有情，入山三日得同行。		
吞声别，陇头流水，替人呜咽。		

### 3.5 Summary

TIME IS WATER, LOVE IS WATER, SADNESS IS WATER and MAN IS WATER are four typical water metaphors in Chinese classical poetry. There are also some connections among them. Firstly, the flow of water reminds people of time, thus TIME IS WATER. The passage of time is the immutable law of nature that people are unable to break, then infinite sadness arises. People associate water with time, then time generates sadness, and water and sadness have similar features, thus SADNESS IS WATER. Secondly, there is the sadness of parting, the sadness of unfulfilled ambition, and much more sadness about love in Chinese classical poetry. As water becomes more and more associated with sadness about love, the similar features between love and water are gradually cognized, thus LOVE IS WATER. Thirdly, people cognize time in the constant changes of things in the world, and love and sadness are part of people’s mood. When time, love and sorrow are connected with water, man himself is connected with water. Thus, MAN IS WATER.

## IV. Conclusion

There are four water metaphors in Chinese classical poetry: TIME IS WATER, LOVE IS WATER, SADNESS IS WATER and MAN IS WATER. In “TIME IS WATER”, the fleeting time can be understood through the irreversibility of water flow. In “LOVE IS WATER”, love can be understood through the calm state or turbulent state of water and their similar pure feature. In “SADNESS IS WATER”, the continuous water flow and the cold touch can be used to understand the lingering and negative sadness. In “MAN IS WATER”, people’s behaviors and emotions can be understood through the flowing of water. The four water metaphors all support that the working mechanism of metaphor is “a cognitive process in which some features of one thing are mapped to another”.

In order to enhance the artistry of poetry and express their own emotions, ancient Chinese poets adopted a large number of conceptual metaphors with water as the source domain and time, love, sadness and man as the target domain respectively. In the appreciation of the poem, the readers can analyze the metaphors of the poetry in accordance with the research method of this paper. Once they understand the purpose of the poet through the similarities of the source domains and target domains, they have a cross-time dialogue with the poet.

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