

## Death Metaphors in Chinese TV Series: Four Case Studies

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### Abstract

Death has been a taboo subject in Chinese culture. Studying how Chinese people conceptualize death is an important way to better understanding Chinese culture. The current paper adopts the multimodal metaphor theory as the theoretical foundation and explores the death metaphors in some Chinese TV series. The present study finds five death metaphors, and they are DEATH IS DOWN, DEATH IS SETTING, DEATH IS GOING OUT, DEATH IS BIRTH and DEATH IS DARKNESS. The source domains are presented in the mode of pictorial signs and color while the target domain is presented by the mode of pictorial signs alone, or the mode of spoken signs alone, or sometimes by the two simultaneously.

**Key words:** Death metaphor; Multimodal metaphor; Chinese TV series; Case studies

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Death has always been a taboo subject for the Chinese people. They avoid talking about death in public places. When they have to talk about death, they always use euphemisms, for example, *shi shi* (pass away), *jia he xi gui* (go to the West on a Crane), *chang mian* (rest forever), *yao zhe* (die young), to name only a few. They try to stay away

from anything that is related to death. They try to avoid using the number “four” (*si*) on many occasions, for the pronunciation of “4” is quite similar to that of “death” (*si*). When they pass a graveyard, they will speed up and run away as fast as they can lest bad luck strikes their heads.

Nevertheless, there is an idiom *si zhe wei da* in Chinese. Literally it means the dead deserve the due respect from the living. This idiom shows the respect and reverence Chinese people have for death. Studying how Chinese people understand or conceptualize death is an important way to understand Chinese culture. The current attempts to study the multimodal death metaphors in some Chinese TV series. More specifically, the present paper takes multimodal metaphor as the theoretical foundation, analyzes how death is metaphorized and how the death metaphor is constructed by different modes in these Chinese TV series. Theoretically, the current study enriches the study of conceptual metaphor in Chinese language. Practically, the current study can make a small contribution to the spreading of Chinese culture.

### 2. PREVIOUS STUDIES OF DEATH METAPHORS IN MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE

Death is something unpleasant after all, be it for the Chinese culture or the Western culture. Therefore, there haven't been so many studies of death metaphor in multimodal discourses. In this section, we will briefly review the previous studies of death metaphor in multimodal metaphors.

Mats Rohdin (2009) studies the multimodal metaphors in classical film theory from the 1920s to the 1950s. In the study, the researcher claims that in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, the metaphor MACHINE IS MOLOCH can be read as reflecting the metaphor DEATH IS A DEVOURE. Mohammad Amin Sorahi (2013) collects 2000 death announcement posters from different places in Iran. He integrates Max Black's interaction theory

and Forceville's multimodal metaphor and metonymy theories. His research finds some major death metaphors and how they are presented by the pictorial and verbal modes. Sobrino (2014) proposes the Multimodal Conceptual Integration Model (MCIM) and applies it to the analysis of multimodal cognitive operations in two pieces of classical music. Though the primary purpose of the research is to revise Conceptual Blending Theory, the research indeed reveals the DEATH IS DOWN metaphor and how the metaphor is presented in the classical music.

Hao Mengzhen (2022) sets up a corpus with 25 children's picture book on death education. Taking multimodal metaphor as the theoretical foundation, she analyzes the metaphors used in constructing the concept "death" and how the metaphors are presented in different modes. Huang Conghui (2022) takes multimodal metaphor theory and conceptual metaphor theory as the theoretical framework and does a case study of the death metaphors in *Coco*, an animated film. She identifies the metaphors which are used to construct the meaning of death, and how they are presented in different modes.

In his study, Mats Rohdin merely mentions death metaphor without doing further study of the death metaphor. The study of Mohammad Amin Sorahi indeed explores the death metaphor, but the multimodal discourse under discussion is the announcement poster rather than Chinese TV series. Though Sobrino (2014) indeed touches upon the death metaphor, yet the multimodal discourse she studies is classical music. The multimodal discourse Hao Mengzhen analyzes is the children's picture book on death education, and the multimodal discourse in the study of Huang Conghui is an animated film.

In summary, the existing studies of death metaphors in multimodal discourses can be divided into two categories. In the first category, the death metaphors are just touched upon and are not their primary goal. In the second category, the death metaphors are explored but the discourses analyzed are not Chinese TV series. Therefore, the death metaphors in Chinese TV series remain a field to be explored.

### 3. CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR AND MULTIMODAL METAPHOR

Metaphor has been treated as a kind of rhetorical device for a long time in the history of mankind. In the 1980s, with the publication of *Metaphors We Live By*, metaphor has been regarded as a way in which human beings conceptualize the world. However, different scholars hold different views of conceptual metaphor. Therefore, this part will first present those different views and then set up the working theoretical foundations to be employed in the following analysis.

#### 3.1 Conceptual metaphor

As for metaphor and metonymy, there have been various discussions and heated debates about the distinction

between the two (see Barnden J., 2010). However, the present thesis is not concerned with those theoretical issues. Therefore, it is assumed that there is a difference between metaphor and metonymy (Ruiz de Mendoza, 1997), namely, metaphor involves a domain-external mapping across different conceptual domains while metonymy involves a domain-internal mapping within a conceptual domain.

The most widely accepted definition of conceptual metaphor is the one given by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) (Zhang Hui & Lu Weizhong, 2010, p.31). Lakoff and Johnson claim that "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another, a way of conceiving one thing in terms of another" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p.7, p.37).

Barcelona defines metaphor as "the cognitive mechanism whereby one experiential domain (in the sense of Langacker, 1987, Ch. 4) is partially mapped onto a different experiential domain, the second domain being partially understood in terms of the first one, and both domains have to belong to different superordinate domains" (Barcelona, 1997, p.23). Compared with the definition given by Lakoff and Johnson, the one given by Barcelona is better in that it captures the distinctive feature of metaphor: the mapping involved in metaphor is domain external. However, in the current study, the definition has to be modified a little by substituting "conceptual domain" for "experiential domain" in that the term Ruiz de Mendoza has used is conceptual domain. Conceptual metaphor is thus defined as a cognitive mechanism whereby one conceptual domain is partially mapped onto a different domain that belongs to a different superordinate domain, with the second domain being partially understood in terms of the first one.

#### 3.2 Multimodal Metaphor

To define multimodal metaphor, it is necessary to define mode first. In the systemic-functional grammar, mode refers to the mode of discourse, or channel of communication, which includes spoken mode, written mode, electronic mode, etc. (Zhu Yongsheng, 2007, p.83). However, the notion of mode involved in the current study is a cognitive one. It is first defined as "a sign system interpretable because of a specific perception process, and thus distinguishes five modes: the visual mode, the sonic mode, the olfactory mode, the gustatory mode, and the tactile mode" (Forceville, 2009, p.22). But this categorization is proved to be an invalid one in that, for example, "the sonic mode under this description lumps together spoken language, music and non-verbal sound" (ibid., p.22). Forceville then suggests another list of modes: (1) pictorial signs; (2) written signs; (3) spoken signs; (4) gestures; (5) sounds; (6) music; (7) smells; (8) tastes; (9) touch (ibid., p.23). However, as will be illustrated by the following analysis, color is also an important part in Chinese TV series. Therefore, it is added to the list above as an independent mode.

Forceville sets up three criteria that multimodal metaphor must meet:

- (1) Given the context in which they occur, the two phenomena belong to different categories;
- (2) The two phenomena can be slotted as target and source, respectively, and captured in an A IS B [and Aing IS Bing, my addition] format that forces or invites an addressee to map one or more features, connotations, or affordances from source to target;
- (3) The two phenomena (i.e., target and source) are cued in more than one mode simultaneously.

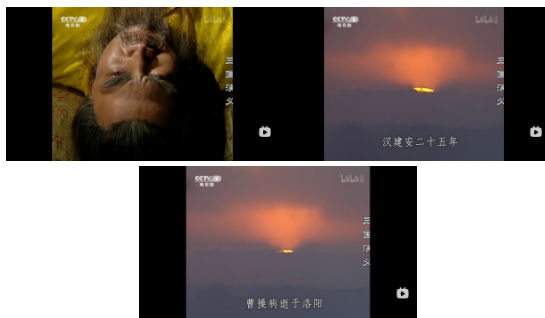
(Forceville, 2008, p.469)

As for the definitions of multimodal metaphor, there are two versions: one is a definition in the narrow sense and the other in the broad sense. In the narrow sense, multimodal metaphor is defined by Forceville as “metaphors whose target and source are each represented exclusively or predominately in different modes” (ibid., p.24). Metaphors of this kind are also called, in the words of Eggertsson and Forceville, “pure” multimodal metaphors. Since the ‘pure’ multimodal metaphors are distinguished for analytical purposes” and “there is nothing inherently better about ‘pure’ and ‘impure’ multimodal metaphors”, Eggertsson and Forceville suggest a definition of multimodal metaphors in a broad sense, which goes as “metaphors whose source and/or target are cued in more than one mode simultaneously” (Eggertsson & Forceville, 2009, p. 430; see also Zhao, 2011, p.2).

## 4. ANALYSIS

In this section, we analyze the death metaphors in four case studies: the death of Cao Cao in the TV series *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the death of Zhuge Liang in the TV series *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the death of the Yongzheng Emperor in the TV series *The Reign of Yongzheng Emperor*, and the death of Zhu Chuanwu in the TV series *Brave the Journey to the Northeast*. The structure of the analysis of each case is as follows: (1) I make a brief introduction to the TV series and the background of the character’s death; (2) I analyze the presentation of the death scene and the underlying metaphor and show how the death metaphor is represented in different modes.

### 4.1 Case Study 1: The Death of Cao Cao in the TV Series *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*



The TV series *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is adapted from the novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* written by Luo Guanzhong. The TV series produced by the CCTV is usually called the 84-episode version or the old version. The three pictures above are screenshots of the 60<sup>th</sup> episode in the 84-episode version.

In the first picture, Cao Cao is lying on his sickbed with his eyes closed. He has just breathed his last. In picture 2, the sun is behind the cloud with only a very small part still visible to us. In picture 3, the sun is also behind the cloud. But the scene in picture 3 is slightly different from the scene in picture 2. The part of the sun visible to us in picture 3 is smaller than that in picture 2. This means the sun is falling down behind the cloud. In addition, there is a subtitle in picture 2 and picture 3 respectively. The one in picture 2 reads in the 25<sup>th</sup> year of reign of the Xian Emperor in the *East Han Dynasty*. The one in picture 3 reads Cao Cao died of disease in Luo Yang. The subtitles are accompanied by a voice-over.

Here Cao Cao is compared to the sun and his death is compared to the setting of the sun. The underlying metaphor is DEATH IS SETTING. The sources of the metaphors are presented in pictorial signs. The target of the underlying metaphors is presented in written signs and spoken signs simultaneously.

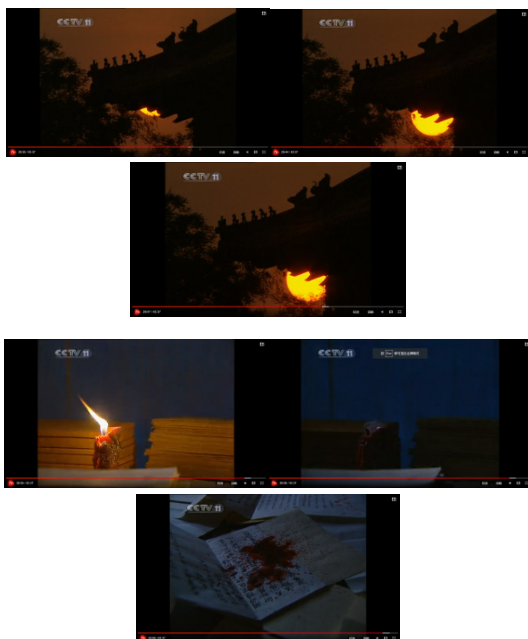
### 4.2 Case Study 2: The Death of Zhuge Liang in the TV Series *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*



Zhugue Liang is a household name in China. He is known for his wisdom and loyalty. He worked until the last moment of his life in gratitude for Liu Bei, who had been appreciative of his ability. In the 77<sup>th</sup> episode of the 84-episode version of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Zhuge Liang died after he failed to prolong his life by restoring to magic arts. The four pictures above are screenshots of the episode showing the last moment of Zhuge Liang’s life. In picture 1, Zhuge Liang is sitting in his wooden wheelchair under a setting sun, still holding his goose-feather fan. In picture 2, he is still sitting in the wheelchair, but his fan is down on the ground. In picture 3, there is a subtitle which reads “The prime minister of *Shu Han* passed away in Wuzhangyuan” and the subtitle is accompanied by a voice-over. In picture 4, the sun is falling behind the mountain.

Zhuge Liang has used the goose-fan all his life. To some extent, the fan has been the manifestation of Zhuge Liang himself. With the fan falls on the ground, Zhuge Liang breathes his last. The falling down of the fan is like the falling down of or the death of Zhuge Liang. The underlying metaphor is DEATH IS DOWN. Compared with the sun in picture 1 and picture 2, the sun in picture 4 is much lower in terms of height. This means the sun keeps falling down. Here the death of Zhuge Liang is conceptualized as the setting of the sun. The underlying metaphor is DEATH IS SETTING. In picture 4, the color of the background is dark in some way, and only the outline of the mountain and the surface of a river are visible to the audience. Darkness here is used to represent death. The underlying metaphor is DEATH IS DARKNESS. In all of the three metaphors here, the target domain, namely the death domain, is presented in written signs and spoken signs simultaneously. The sources of the first two metaphors are both presented in the mode of pictorial signs. The source in the last metaphor is presented in the mode of color.

#### 4.3 Case study 3: the death of Yongzheng Emperor in the TV series *The Reign of Yongzheng Emperor*



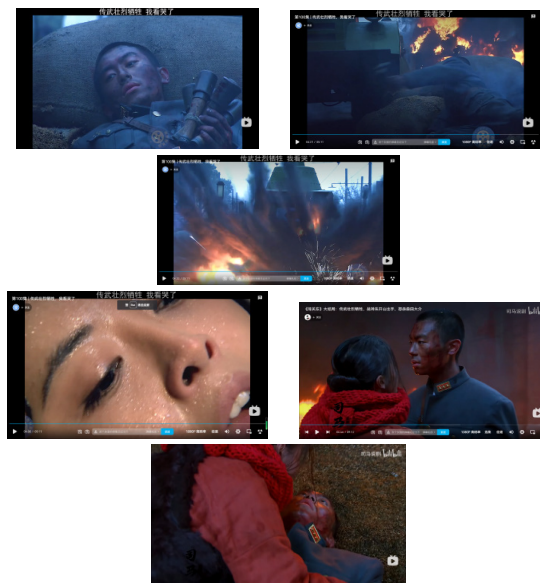
Yongzheng Emperor is the fourth son of Kangxi Emperor. He is the 3<sup>rd</sup> ruler of the Qing Dynasty, from the year 1722 to the year 1735. From the day he became the emperor to the day of his death, there has been a lot of rumors about him. Even to the time being, historians have not been able to come to a consensus about the legendary emperor. However, in the TV series *The Reign of Yongzheng Emperor* is adapted from Er Yuehe's novel *The Reign of Yongzheng Emperor*. In the TV series, Yongzheng Emperor is portrayed as a hard-working ruler. He spends most of his time handling government affairs. In the last

episode of the series, he dies when he is reviewing the memorial to the throne.

The six pictures are screenshots of the 44<sup>th</sup> episode of the TV series. In the first groups of pictures, the audience can see the sun in the sky. However, the position of the sun in each picture is different. The sun is getting lower and lower in height. In other words, the sun is falling down behind the upturned eave. The scene is presented just a few minutes before the scene of the death of Yongzheng Emperor. Therefore, here the death of the Yongzheng Emperor is compared to the setting of the sun. The metaphor is DEATH IS SETTING. The source domain of the metaphor is again presented in pictorial mode. The target of the metaphor is presented later in the voice-over. This means the target domain is presented in the mode of sound.

In the first picture of the second group, there is a burning candle. In the second picture, there candle is no longer burning but extinguished. In the third picture, there are drops of blood the Yongzheng Emperor has coughed, accompanied by a voice-over “On the midnight of the eighth lunar month, 1735, the 13<sup>th</sup> year of his reign, the Yongzheng Emperor suddenly passed away. He was then only 58 years old. Here the death of Yongzheng Emperor is represented metaphorically as the going out of the candle. This echoes an old saying in Chinese, “ren si ru deng mie” or “the death of a man is like the going out of the light”. The underlying metaphor is DEATH IS GOING OUT. The source domain of the metaphor is presented in the mode of pictorial signs. The target domain of the metaphor is presented in the voice-over or presented in the mode of spoken signs.

#### 4.4 Case study 4: the death of Zhu Chuanwu in the TV series *Brave the Journey to the Northeast*



The TV series *Brave the Journey to the Northeast* tells the story of Zhu Kaishan and his family in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Zhu Kaishan is from Shandong Province. After

the Boxer Rebellion is suppressed, he goes to Northeast China and settles down there. Then he writes a letter to his wife, tells her his current place of residence and asks her to go to him for shelter. Zhu Kaishan has three sons and Zhu Chuanwu is his second son. He is the commander of a regiment and loses his life later in a battle against the Japanese army.

The six pictures above are screenshots of the 52<sup>nd</sup> episode of the TV series. In picture 1, seeing his soldiers falling down one after another, Chuanwu takes with him a bunch of grenades, waiting for the Japanese tank. In picture 2, Chuanwu places the bunch under the tank. In picture 3, the tank is blown up and destroyed. In picture 4, Xia Yushu, who is the wife of Chuanwu's younger brother Chuanjie, just gives birth to a small baby, which is indicated by the cries of the newborn. In picture 5, Chuanwu stands up again but in picture 6 he falls down and leaves forever.

In the episode, the scene in picture 3 and the scene in picture 4 are presented simultaneously. This means the death of Chuanwu and the birth of the newborn takes places at the same time. Here it is believed that the death of one man is the birth of another. In other words, death is metaphorized as birth. The underlying metaphor is DEATH IS BIRTH. The source domain of the metaphor is presented in the mode of pictorial signs. The target domain of the metaphor is also presented in the mode of pictorial signs. In addition, as mentioned above, in picture 6, Chuanwu is down on the ground and forever leaves. Here Chuanwu's death is compared to his falling down on the ground. The underlying metaphor is DEATH IS DOWN. Like the metaphor above, both the target domain and source domain of the metaphors are presented in the mode of pictorial signs.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The current study explores the death metaphors in some Chinese TV series, including how they are constructed by different modes. The major findings of the paper are as follows. First of all, the death metaphors in the TV series analyzed in the present paper are DEATH IS DOWN, DEATH IS SETTING, DEATH IS GOING OUT, DEATH IS BIRTH and DEATH IS DARKNESS. The one with the highest frequency of occurrence is DEATH IS SETTING, followed by DEATH IS DOWN. One of the most probable reasons is that the figures whose deaths are presented are among the most influential figures in the history of China. The figures like Cao Cao, Zhuge Liang and the Yongzheng Emperor are to their fellow citizens what the sun is to mankind. When the sun sets, the place will be in a dark. The loss of an influential figure is like the loss of the sun. Therefore, the death of these important figures is compared to the setting of the sun. Second, death, the target domain of the death metaphor, is presented in the mode of pictorial signs alone, or spoken signs alone, or

the spoken and written signs together. The source domains are presented in the mode of pictorial signs or the mode of color. Most of the time, the source domains and target domain are presented in the mode of pictorial signs. One of the most probable reasons is that pictorial signs are vivid and concrete, and the employment of pictorial signs can save the audience from making unnecessary cognitive efforts. In spite of the discoveries that we have made in the current study, the current study bears some limitations. For example, we just do case studies in the current paper. The conclusions we draw need further quantitative support. What's more, we focus our attention on the death metaphors in Chinese TV series. Future studies can analyze the death metaphors in American TV series.

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