Constructing Common Ground for Cross-cultural Communication

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Abstract: It is a long cherished wish of many people to establish common ground for cross-cultural communication. Various conceptualizations of how to achieve this have been developed through the centuries. That which is most encouraging and inspiring is not, however, based on the notion of a gift from God or the foundation of humanity, or a universal structure of human experience, but rather is conceived as the terms, agreements, and consensus reached by two cultural parties to facilitate communication and mutual understanding. This essay takes the archetypal metaphor as the point of departure to discuss the possibility of building such common ground. It is argued that cross-cultural communication is an interactive, two-way metaphorical process. The founding of a basis of understanding between two cultures depends on whether their conceptual systems are able to reconcile the divergences in their metaphorical structures by way of mutual projection and accommodation, and on whether they are willing to agree to such reconciliation. [China Media Research. 2014; 10(4): 1-9]

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The most significant question is often the most basic. As we move toward increasing interdependence and communication across cultures, an extremely important but unanswered question is, how can we realize a “common ground” of cross-cultural communication and understanding? In asking this question, we bypass the equally important question of whether we can possibly have any common ground. The development of cross-cultural interactions over human history and their acceleration in recent times suggests that there is at least some basis of communication and understanding among the cultures involved in this historical process. The question then becomes, what kind of common ground should we talk about?

We often hear two opposite positions. One claims that we have been conditioned for a unique symbolic and conceptual world that evolves independently from others. We thus do not really share a common ground when two worlds communicate with each other. The other asserts that the fundamentals of our cultural experience are universal and can serve as a foundation for common understanding. Both sides are related to certain aspects of human experience, but the facts indicate that neither position is correct. If cultures really are fundamentally different or basically the same, then how can we understand the dual functioning of many archetypal metaphors? For instance, early Chinese thinkers were interested in exploiting the archetypal metaphor of water, a natural phenomenon that is basic to the survival of living beings, to illustrate such abstract concepts as “the Dao is like water.” The water metaphor makes early Chinese philosophical works accessible to the modern Western world, and has contributed to the formulation of a system of symbols and concepts with a particularly Chinese flavor.

This essay takes the archetypal metaphor as the point of departure to discuss the relationship between general human and cultural experiences to demonstrate the possibility of building a foundation for cross-cultural communication and understanding based on the interactive theory of metaphor. Such an interactive and dynamic approach has rarely been attempted in intercultural communications research. This essay puts forward the thesis that cross-cultural communication is an interactive, two-way metaphorical process whereby a so-called “common ground” of cross-cultural communication and understanding is constructed by two cultural parties acting in cooperation with each other, which reflects the consensus on a certain metaphorical view or vision that is reached by the parties through mutual projection and accommodation of the metaphorical structures of their cultural systems of concepts.

This thesis is unfolded in three stages. First, I consider the case of the metaphorical use of water to illustrate my view on the relationship between general human experience and cultural experience. I then introduce the interaction theories of metaphor of I. A. Richards, Max Black, and Bipin Indurkhya, and suggest that we view the interaction between general human and cultural experience and that between different cultural experiences as a two-way metaphorical process. In the third stage, I examine cases of China-West communication to see how China and the West can achieve a similar vision by way of mutual metaphorical projection and accommodation.

General Human Experience versus Unique Cultural Experience: The Case of a Saharan Village

It is generally agreed that some aspects of human experience are universal, whereas others are culturally
bound. There is debate about which are universal and which are specific to a particular culture. The debate becomes more sophisticated when we address the question of whether cultural similarities underlie differences or vice versa.

I propose that we take the archetypal metaphor as an entry point to examine this “similarity versus difference” issue. The term “archetype” has been used in a wide range of human studies. Philosophers including John Locke describe archetypes as the referents or external causes of ideas (1755, 2.31.2), whereas cognitive psychologists refer to them as core members of categories (e.g., Rosch & Mervis, 1975; Rosch, 1978). In the analytical psychology of Carl Jung, they are the “primordial images” that emerge from the collective unconscious of humankind (Jung, 1970; Jacobi, 1959). In literature and rhetoric, an archetype is a narrative pattern, character type, or literary or rhetorical image that holds universal significance (Jasinski, 2001). All of these interpretations, in one way or another, point to a prototype or basic pattern of experience. In this study, archetypal metaphor refers to the use of a prototype or basic pattern of experience as a metaphorical vehicle. Archetypal metaphors involving, for example, “water,” “light,” “life,” “mother,” and “family” appear in all forms of literature, myths, popular discourse, and even everyday rituals. These metaphors not only relate to our basic life experiences and collective memory but also play a crucial role in intercultural communication. They thus have much to say about cultural similarities and differences.

In his pioneering study of the uses of archetypal metaphors in rhetoric, Michael Osborn (1967) argued that these metaphors are “immune to change wrought by time . . . unaffected by cultural variation . . . and grounded in prominent features of experience” and thus have a universal appeal “contingent upon [their] embodiment of basic human motivations.” The speaker “can expect such metaphors to touch the greater part of his audience” (pp. 115-116). From this point of view, archetypal metaphors are not culturally bound but grounded in shared experience and provide a wealth of potential associations that rhetors of different cultures can exploit for their particular purpose. Recent studies by mainland Chinese scholars have found evidence for this position. For instance, a survey of authoritative and renowned dictionaries in both English and Chinese, including the Oxford and Longman dictionaries and the Chinese dictionary “Cihai” (Sea of Words), revealed that both languages share similar metaphorical extensions and categorizations of light, which is associated with that which is “revealing” and “outstanding” and with “enlightenment,” “intelligence,” “hope,” “happiness,” and “life” (Han, Li, & Liu, 2009).

Among those who believe that cultures are fundamentally different, it matters little whether archetypal metaphors have been used cross-culturally or in similar ways. What really matters is how they have contributed to building a unique cultural system of meaning. We can see that archetypal metaphors are leading to opposing positions regarding the similarity-difference debate.

To clearly illustrate my position on this issue, I offer the following example. There is a village in the Sahara Desert area of Tunis. Water from the only springhead in the area is drawn at a small house at the entrance to the village. Every morning, the villagers gather together in front of the house, waiting to receive their share of the water. The village imam first puts his hand on the Koran and swears an oath and then distributes the water (Ge, 2008). For those who are thirsty, water is critical and lifesaving, but for these local villagers, water is also tied to an Islamic ceremony in which water is received as sweet dew from God. Water here is sustaining two kinds of existence: the villagers’ physical being and their social and cultural life.

This case shows two modes of human experience related to water. The first is basic to physical existence. We must take in a certain amount of water each day, and this need is common among all living beings. Human beings share many other experiences with water, including drinking wine, tea, or coffee and washing, irrigation, fishery, and water transportation. For those who advocate general human experience or cultural similarities, basic life experiences such as these may constitute what they believe to be the common ground of human communication and understanding. People from other cultures or areas may not understand the water allocation ceremony of the Saharan people; however, they should understand why the villagers take it so seriously. They may even believe that the villagers would fight to the death for this sole source of water without prior submission to a politically and religiously recognized procedure. This case also reveals a unique social and cultural process. The dignified ceremony instills a sense of the sacred. The villagers must perform a certain role: that is, they must submit to a system of belief and a secular power before they can come to enjoy what is given by nature. The villagers receive not only water but also a recognition or re-recognition of their social and cultural position.

The archetypal metaphor lies at the intersection of these two modes of experience, which is why it can go in either direction, evoking a sense of the universal or a sense of culture, depending on which mode of experience is being considered. The examination of archetypal metaphors is not intended to show which mode of human experience overrides the other, for either side can be argued, but to reveal the interaction of these two modes within the framework of a metaphor. It is this interaction, not the domination of one over the other, that explains the function of a metaphor.
Let us consider again the case of the Saharan village. The sociocultural experience of the villagers can be seen as the reorganization of their general human experience. When the local villagers feel thirsty, they could just follow their biological impulse and go straight to wherever they can find water. However, the Islamic society in which they live organizes such individual action through a matinal political and religious ritual. This socioculturally oriented experience replaces what otherwise would be a more physically and personally driven way of obtaining water. Although it inevitably involves coercion, the commitment of the Saharan villagers to the ritual relies ultimately on the reasonable appropriation and effective validation of what is in fact a metaphorical expression of water as sweet dew from God. The fundamental function of culture is to cultivate the popular reception of a unique cultural mode of experience as a valid parallel and significant expression of what may be called a common and universal mode of experience.

These two modes of experience can now be seen as having a metaphorical relationship. Both advocates of general human experience and advocates of unique cultural experience should have no problem with this metaphorical view, as long as they see only one side of experience, either the tenor or the vehicle, to use I. A. Richards’s terminology, as dominating the metaphorical process.

This essay suggests, however, that instead of taking sides we should study how the two sides interact to see what kind of metaphorical vision emerges from this process. Interaction theory can help to explain this interactive process.

**An Interactive Approach**

A historical overview of theories of metaphor also reveals opposite tendencies toward either the tenor or the vehicle. Metaphor has long been seen as simple substitution—a substitution of the vehicle for the tenor or a substitution of the metaphorical meaning for the literal meaning. Both positive and negative views of such substitution exist. Ancient Greek rhetoricians tended to view metaphor as good and valuable. Aristotle, for example, asserted that metaphor “gives clearness, charm, and distinction to the style” (1973, 3.2). After the classical period, however, metaphor came to be seen as vague, inaccurate, unnecessary, and even deceptive. This was because, in Richard Whately’s words, metaphor deviates “from the plain and strictly appropriate style” (1864, pt. 3, chap. 2.3). People taking the latter view are inclined to protect what they believe to be the original and essential meaning of the tenor from any possible distraction or interference by the vehicle.

Another classical approach to metaphor is comparison theory. According to this theory, metaphors make comparisons, that is, compare the similarities between the tenor and vehicle. Aristotle believed that “a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars” (1996, 1.1459a). Comparison theory places the tenor and vehicle on a relatively equal footing. However, a simple and static comparison cannot really explain the dynamics of metaphor. If metaphor simply expresses similarities, then how can it possibly produce “clearness, charm, and distinction”? In the 1930s, I. A. Richards (1936, pp. 107-108, 116-126) challenged the traditional view that metaphor always involves the expression of similarities between things. He pointed out that disparities frequently do exist between the tenor and vehicle. In the classical Chinese metaphor “the Dao is like water,” for instance, the two constructs are dissimilar in many respects. Although one can identify features that they have in common, the metaphor is not used merely to suggest that the Dao and water are similar. As the tenor and vehicle are categorically different, a tension exists between them. Richards (1936, pp. 100-108) stated that a metaphor is made by the tension between the tenor and vehicle and the interaction between them to relax that tension. This interactive approach was later refined by Max Black, Bipin Indurkhya, and others to become the current interaction theory of metaphor.

In his classic essay “Models and metaphor” (1962), Max Black explained the interaction between the tenor and the vehicle in terms of the principal and the subsidiary subject. The tenor is the principal subject, which provides the literal “frame” of a metaphorical expression, whereas the vehicle is the subsidiary subject, which is the non-literal “focus” of this expression. The tenor and vehicle are regarded not as isolated words but systems of commonplaces. In “the Dao is like water,” for instance, a new perception of the Dao is created through the interaction between the two systems. In this process, a set of commonplaces selected from the water system operates to organize the Dao system by emphasizing and suppressing certain features of the Dao (e.g., unfolding, circulating, connecting, and directional, in the case of emphasis; and firm, tough, stable, and fixed, in the case of suppression). As the metaphor is read within the frame of the Dao, the predicates, however highlighted and organized by the water system, must also be predicative of the Dao system. Thus, in Black’s interaction view, the vehicle provides only a structure. The things to be structured must already exist in the tenor. Black illustrated this interaction view with an analogy:

Suppose I look at the night sky through a piece of heavily smoked glass on which certain lines have been left clear. Then I shall see only the stars that can be made to lie on the lines previously prepared upon the screen, and the stars I do see will be seen
as organized by the screen’s structure. We can think of a metaphor as such a screen and the system of “associated commonplaces” of the focal world as the network of lines upon the screen. We can say that the principal subject is “seen through” the metaphorical expression—or if we prefer, that the principle subject is “projected upon” the field of the subsidiary subject (Black, 1962, p. 41).

In his work on metaphor and cognition, Bipin Indurkhya (1992) presented a more finely interwoven theory of interaction to resolve a paradox he found in previous interaction views: “The paradox is in assigning reality the role of constraining our conceptual organizations, but denying it a mind-independent, preconceptual ontology and structure” (p. 131). Indurkhya proposed bridging the polarity between the cognitive agent and reality through three successive concepts, namely, the concept network, cognitive relation, and a sensorimotor dataset. Their relationships are shown in the following diagram.

The mediating concept next to the cognitive agent is the concept network. Concepts are interconnected to each other in various ways. Consider the concept network associated with water. It subsumes the notions of liquid, flow, permutation, softness, flexibility, transparency, and tastelessness, among others. In Chinese writing, water is also associated with soil, mountain, fire, fish, and algae, among other things, to form a greater network of concepts. These hierarchical networks operate to guide our understanding of the concept of water.

Another mediating concept, which is closely related to reality on the other side of the interaction, is the sensorimotor dataset. This dataset is the reality “that is made available for conceptualization through the sensorimotor apparatus of the cognitive agent” (1992, p. 132). According to Indurkhya, the content (or ontology) of the sensorimotor dataset is determined by the biological structure of the cognitive agent’s perceptual and motor apparatus, and the pattern of the stimulus is determined by the pre-existing structure of the world of things-in-themselves (pp. 132, 159). This level of reality is confined to a rough reception of raw data from the outside world, for instance, a simple mixture of the perceived physical and chemical features of water. The dataset does not yet reflect the cognitive agent’s conception of the world. Neither of the cognitive agent’s concept networks has an immediate effect on the sensorimotor dataset. However one comes to conceptualize and describe water, the data of one’s senses of water remain the same.

The two sides of the interaction finally meet through a cognitive relation, which links certain concepts in the concept networks with certain parts of the sensorimotor dataset. Indurkhya (1992, pp. 132, 161-164) maintained that only by establishing a cognitive relation, namely, mapping things onto our conceptual world, can we perceive and understand these things. He identified two cognitive mechanisms that a cognitive agent uses to keep cognitive relations (or cognitive models) coherent to make predictions about the relations. The first mechanism, accommodation, restructures the concept network to better accommodate new data, and the second, projection, maintains the current concept network and modifies its mapping to the new data (pp. 164-169).

Indurkhya’s view of metaphor as the mechanism of projection is adopted here. Specifically, metaphor is an unconventional projection of one concept network (vehicle) onto the realm of another (tenor), which according to Indurkhya is either a sensorimotor dataset or an “imagined” perceptual experience that is constructed from sensorimotor datasets received in the past (1992, pp. 245-282). Such a projection necessarily involves an interaction between two autonomous structures—the mind-dependent structure of our concept network and the pre-conceptual structure of our sensory dataset, which leads to the construction of a meaningful and inspiring metaphorial relation.

Indurkhya’s model is worthy of attention not only because of his helpful cognitive insight and well-knit argument for the interaction view of metaphor. He also leaves room for us to reconsider the nature of “common experience,” although Indurkhya himself is not as concerned with the issue of cultural commonality versus specialty as with the issue of objectivity versus subjectivity.

At first glance, Indurkhya’s theory seems to favor the view that a universal structure underpins human experience. This universal structure is determined by both the biological form of our perceptual apparatus and the physical and chemical features of the objects being perceived and does not change because of culture. For instance, we can assume that people in both the Sahara Desert and China have the same built-in sensory system to sense the nature of water and that the chemical make-up of the water found in the Sahara Desert is basically the same as that drawn from the Yangtze River, if we disregard the effects of the local environment.

In fact, the level of reality available for our perception and conceptualization through the sensorimotor apparatus, as Indurkhya discusses (1992, pp. 158-161), goes beyond the universal structure. Although the same sensory apparatus on the human side and the same pattern of stimulus from the world seem to form the perfect condition for a universal structure of experience, their interaction in specific time and space makes a great deal of difference. Sense perception is a concrete and individual activity and process arising from a certain biological and cognitive state that accounts for the actual functioning of our sensorimotor
system. External stimulants have to be concrete and sensible to impress our sense organs. As such, they must stand out from their universal structure. Water, for instance, is reduced to a set of physical and chemical attributes if we trace it to its universal structure. However, this set of attributes is not directly accessible as a whole to our sense organs, although we may find and measure it in a laboratory via scientific instruments.

For the convenience of discussion, however, we can speak in general terms about basic needs and common life experiences. Our basic experiences with water, such as with drinking, and washing, irrigation, fishery, and water transportation, can still be considered common to many civilizations. On the conceptual level, we can separate the common from the specific cultural mode of experience for the purpose of manifesting the complex structure of our experience and living environment. Nevertheless, at the level of sense impression, the two modes actually merge into one.

**Mutual Understanding Constructed through Interaction**

Let us continue to examine the relationship between general human and cultural experience within the framework of metaphor. Now, if we can talk about a common structure of experience in light of interaction theory, then such a structure can emerge only from the interaction of these two modes of experience. This being the case, this common structure must be different from both the original structure of general experience and that of cultural experience.

To borrow Black’s metaphor of the smoked glass, basic and general experience can be compared to the stars filling the sky and the cultural mechanism (or the cultural network of concepts) to the smoked glass. Through this glass, we see a starlit sky via cultural tracings. Nevertheless, the stars we see are already there in the sky. We do not mistake them for moons, nor do we see any new stars. What we actually see is the overlap of the two structures of experience. It is worth noting that although the stars we see through the smoked glass are not new, they have assumed a new structure that neither mirrors their original distribution nor reflects exactly the trace of the smoke. On the one hand, the stars are now seen as arranged along certain lines; on the other hand, their original pattern of distribution remains intact within these lines. Their emerging structure is actually a combination of the original arrangement of the stars in the sky and the effect due to the current pattern of lines.

This smoked glass metaphor serves to illustrate how a new structure can be created by the interaction of the two modes of experience. We may speak of this new structure as a “common ground” of understanding for people sharing a culture (e.g., the Saharan villagers). When the tenor and vehicle are drawn from different cultures, however, the interaction becomes much more complex. In the context of intercultural communication, which involves an interaction between two cultural systems of experience, how can we possibly talk about a common structure of human experience or common ground of understanding? It would seem that we still need to seek this possibility within a metaphorical framework and through the interaction of the tenor and vehicle of the cultures. We can place our hope in the cooperation of both cultures and the seemingly unlimited creativity of metaphor.

At this point, we should not expect that an in-built universal structure of experience exists. As noted, our sense impressions, or sensorimotor datasets, exclude such a universal structure in the first place, let alone further interpretation based on the concept networks of specific cultures. We do not seem to have an actual basis to discuss this kind of common ground.

We thus need to reconceptualize the so-called “common ground” of intercultural understanding. If we do not simply deny the significance of the discussion of this concept, then we need to take a more dynamic approach. Rather than viewing this common ground as something inherent and fixed in our structure of experience, we can better conceptualize it as constructed cooperatively by both cultural parties through a process of interaction and negotiation.

The archetypal metaphor provides a significance space for us to think of a possible common ground of cross-cultural communication. As discussed, an archetypal metaphor such as “water” has dual meaning in our lives, being associated with not only a primordial condition of physical existence but also the fundamental beliefs of a culture. In the case of the Saharan villagers, water is held to be a bounty bestowed by Allah. Understanding the vital importance of water among people can facilitate mutual understanding across cultures. However, the mutual understanding that we achieve via an archetypal metaphor is only temporary and partial because of the subtle connection of the metaphor with a particular cultural system of beliefs.

For a clear understanding of the complex role that the archetypal metaphor plays in intercultural communication, discussion is needed about how this type of metaphor contributes to the building of concept networks and cognitive relations with our perceptual world. It is important to know that the construction of a cognitive relation is often a metaphorical process. People look at the clear night sky. The first image hitting our retina is an array of twinkling things, which are immediately identified as “stars.” The identification, which occurs in the twinkling of an eye, is merely a flash of a long-term cognitive and metaphorical achievement. Our concept networks and sensorimotor datasets must have gone through a long and intricate process of interaction by way of projection and
accommodation before they come to form a stable cognitive relation between the stars and those twinkling things in the sky. The smoked glass metaphor is just a simple illustration.

The networking function of the archetypal metaphor also has a claim on our attention. The kind of archetypal metaphor of concern here is the so-called root metaphor, which Lakoff and Johnson (1980, pp. 18-22) called the “metaphoric structure of the most fundamental concepts in the culture.” According to the American Sinologist Sarah Allan (1997, p. 17), “the formulation of the earliest intellectual concepts in the formative period of a philosophical discourse, be it East or West, will draw on the root metaphors of that civilization.” Allan provides an inspiring study of the root metaphors of Chinese culture. In The way of water and sprouts of virtue (1997), she states that water serves as a root metaphor of early Chinese philosophical and ethical thought. Almost one hundred years ago, the great German philosopher of history, Oswald Spengler (1917/1991, p. 102), offered a different view. He believed that the prime symbol of Chinese culture is the “Way” (Dao) or “Path.” Allan informs us, however, that the concept of the Way is actually grounded in “the root metaphor of a stream of water” (1997, p. 66). She observes that many philosophical concepts in classical Chinese texts are described in terms of water, including such fundamental ideas of Chinese thought as the Dao, wuwei (doing nothing), and xin (mind/heart) (pp. 65-92).

“Flowing water is such that it does not go further forward until it has filled all the hollows. A gentleman, in his pursuit of the Way, does not get there unless he achieves a beautiful pattern” (Mencius, 7a:24).

“[A]ll under heaven will come [to the Way], as streams and torrents flow into a great river or sea” (Laozi, chap. 32).

“Nothing under heaven is softer or more yielding than water; but when it attacks things hard and resistant there is not one of them that can prevail” (Laozi, chap. 78).

“And if water in stillness possesses such clarity, how much more must pure spirit. The sage’s mind in stillness is the mirror of Heaven and earth” (Zhuangzi, chap. 13, p. 142).

According to the twenty-eighth chapter of the Xunzi (Allan’s trans., 1997, p. 24), Confucius loved to watch a river flowing east and learned much from doing so. His disciple Zi Gong asked: “Why is it that when a gentleman sees a great river, he always gazes at it?” Confucius replied:

Water, which extends everywhere and gives everything life without acting is like virtue. Its stream, which descends downward, twisting and turning but always following the same principle, is like rightness. Its bubbling up, never running dry, is like the way. Where there is a channel to direct it, its noise is like an echoing cry and its fearless advance into a hundred meter valley, like valor. Used as a level, it is always even, like law. Full, it does not require a ladle, like correctness. Compliant and exploratory, it reaches to the tiniest point, like perceptiveness. That which goes to it and enters into it, is cleansed and purified, like the transformation of goodness. In twisting around ten thousand times but always going eastward, it is like will. That is the reason that when a gentleman sees a great river, he will always look upon it.

We can imagine that water is flowing in all directions from some pivotal point, and reaching out in various ways (“extends everywhere and gives everything life without acting.” “descends downward, twisting and turning but always following the same principle”) to link successively the Confucian concepts of virtue, rightness, the Way, valor, law, correctness, perceptiveness, transformation of goodness, and will. This can be seen as a projection of the metaphorical structure of water. As the structure gradually unfolds, Confucius reveals the important qualities of what he believes to be a perfect gentleman.

Meanwhile, we see another projection from the other side of the interaction, from the Confucian system of virtues. The river flowing east does not come naturally and correctly to model the personal attributes of virtue, rightness, the Way, valor, and so forth. Confucius would not have seen these attributes in water had he not conceived things through a model or schema of virtues that he already possessed. Meanwhile, the projection neglects other attributes of water. Confucius’s moral system and general perception of water may have undergone several rounds of mutual projection and accommodation before they found a seemingly ideal meeting point in “the gentlemanly character” of water.

Now the question is whether Confucius’s moral system is a self-enclosed metaphorical structure. If so, then it could block all possible channels of cross-cultural communication. However, even the most rigid metaphorical structure of a cultural network of concepts is open to some extent. When a root metaphor of a culture is used to reorganize a set of concepts, it is describing a symbolic rather than a real relation. In this case, Confucius makes it explicit that water is “like virtue,” “like rightness,” “like the Way,” “like valor,” and so forth. This means that water in itself is not virtue, rightness, the Way, or valor—water is not a gentleman after all. Confucius merely tries to recommend and establish a set of metaphorical relations and does not exclude other possible ways of seeing a river flowing.
east. In so far as the flowing water is considered to be “like virtue,” “like righteousness,” “like the way,” and “like valor,” it can be seen as something else as well.

A root metaphor or prime symbol of a culture often derives from a universal natural phenomenon, such as water or a road (or path), which appears appealing to Spengler in his inquiry into Chinese culture (1917/1991, p. 102). Although the expression of these phenomena may differ between cultures, their prime imagery is there for all to see. Those who have ever seen a tornado should be familiar with such phenomena as “extends everywhere and gives everything life without acting,” “descends downward, twisting and turning but always following the same principle,” “bubbling up, never running dry,” and “its noise is like an echoing cry and its fearless advance into a hundred meter valley, like valor.” What remains unclear for people of other cultures are the deep cultural connotations of such imagery.

The widespread interest in the West in such classical Chinese texts as the Analects and the writings of Mencius and Xunzi has to do with their extensive use of natural metaphors. The use of universal natural imagery breaks down linguistic and temporal barriers, which has allowed these Chinese doctrines to find their way into modern Western discourse. However, it also creates difficulties in understanding the rich and profound implications of such imagery. Sarah Allan, who has studied classical Chinese philosophy for more than thirty years, has a particularly keen sense of this dilemma:

Written two and a half millennia ago in a language that has no genetic relationship to our own, the distance between the language and thought of these works [the Analects of Confucius, Daodejing, Mencius, Zhuangzi, and Xunzi] and that of twentieth-century Europe and America could hardly be greater. On the one hand, they are proof of the universality of the human mind: they are understandable, at least in a general sense. We can learn to read them in the original and they can be translated into European languages. Once translated, they are not only comprehensible, but meaningful, and even speak of things in ways that we can apply to our own lives. Indeed, the Laozi Daodejing and the Zhuangzi are extraordinarily popular works throughout the world today. On the other hand, the texts are evidence of the richness of human diversity. Our understanding of them, especially when we approach them through the medium of our own language and culture, is both partial and inaccurate. (p. xi)

A Chinese saying goes, “The water that bears the boat is the same that swallows it.” The metaphor of water also has this double-edged effect: it can block as well as facilitate communication. In Mencius, we find another passage expressing Confucius’s admiration for water. Professor D. C. Lau (1970, 4b:18) of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, translated it as follows:

Hsü Tzu said, “More than once Confucius expressed his admiration for water by saying, ‘Water! Oh, water! What was it he saw in water?’”

“Water from an ample source,” said Mencius, “comes tumbling down, day and night without ceasing, going forward only after all the hollows are filled, and then draining into the sea. Anything that has an ample source is like that. What Confucius saw in water is just this and nothing more. If a thing has no source, it is like the rain water that collects after a downpour in the seventh and eighth months. It may fill all the gutters, but we can stand and wait for it to dry up. Thus a gentleman is ashamed of an exaggerated reputation.”

Allan (1997, p. 3) says that this passage is likely to lead even the most sympathetic Westerner to believe that Chinese are inscrutable. There is no problem with Lau’s translation, which transmits the original words of Mencius quite accurately. This, however, is exactly the problem for a Western reader. “Indeed, few teachers can have tried to read this passage in a translation class, with Confucius’ exclamation, Whuízai! Shuízai! 水哉！水哉！‘Oh Water! Oh Water.’ (Or perhaps, more evocatively, Ah, Water! Ah, Water) without producing incredulity or even bemused laughter” (p. 3). For a Western reader, the contrast between water that collects after a rainfall and eventually evaporates in the sun and water that flows from an ample source is easy to understand. Its implied moral reference to the reputation of a gentleman is also comprehensible after Mencius’s explanation. What is baffling is Confucius’s infatuation with water and the way in which he praises water as if water itself were the fathomless source of virtue.

Among those contributing to building a foundation for cross-cultural communication, I am most interested in the intercultural communicators working at the front lines of culture. The use of archetypal metaphors (e.g., the water metaphor) by Confucian sages certainly helps the global spread of Confucianism. However, those who have actually brought Confucian doctrines to the world are translators, preachers, commentators, educators, and other intercultural workers who seek and construct a basis of intercultural understanding.

Deserving of special attention is the translation of the classical texts of a culture and the negotiation of meaning involved in the process. Such negotiation is in effect a course of searching for a common ground of understanding. It proceeds in the context of intercultural communication through an interactive process of mutual
projection and accommodation between two cultural languages. Nevertheless, metaphorical projection is unlikely to create a junction that is acceptable for both cultural systems of meaning.

The English translation of a core Chinese concept, *dao*, is a revealing example. *Dao* is a broad and rich notion. It connotes something welling out of a living fountain. Thus, “[t]he gentleman devotes his efforts to the roots, for once the roots are established, the [Dao] will grow therefrom” (Confucius, 1:2). More often, it means the course of nature; “To follow our nature is called the [Dao]” (*Doctrine of the mean*, chap. 1). It also contains the sense of circulation and transformation—“The successive movement of the inactive and active operations constitutes what is called the [the Dao]” (*The I Ching*, p. 355)—and refers to something with splendid prospects. Hence, “[a] gentleman, in his pursuit of the [Dao], does not get there unless he achieves a beautiful pattern” (Mencius, 7A:24).

Today, the generally agreed-upon English translation of the *Dao* is “the Way.” The English word “way” also covers a broad spectrum of meanings, with the primary one being a road or path. The word comes from the Greek term “hodos,” meaning “road” or “highway.” Many Western scholars have used the road metaphor to express the *Dao*. Oswald Spengler (1917/1991, p. 101-102), for instance, described the *Dao* as an indirect path towards nature, whereas in *Confucius: The secular as sacred*, Herbert Fingarette (1972, p. 19) wrote of the *Dao* of Confucius as “the metaphor of traveling the road.”

Although the road interpretation appears somewhat simplistic to the Chinese, it does convey a wealth of metaphysical and spiritual meaning among Western audiences. Christians believe that human beings are fettered by their corporeal body and secular desires and thus need to be guided along a particular path to enter the kingdom of heaven. “Road,” then, connotes religious guidance, spiritual journey, and salvation. The apostle Thomas asked Jesus: “Lord, we don’t know where you are going. So how can we know the way?” Jesus replied: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. The only way to the Father is through me” (John 14:5-6). This “way” metaphor (“I am the way”) figures prominently in the Christian system of faith. It is not only the single “path” to “Heaven” but also a link to a set of fundamental concepts in Western thought such as “truth,” “life,” “virtue,” “justice,” and “principle.” In the Christian world, this way, Jesus, is believed to be available everywhere for whomever is willing to accept God, truth, and a new life, similar to the omnipresent “Dao,” which sets the same spiritual and ethical goals for the Chinese.

The *Dao* has also been rendered in the West in other terms, including “the Supreme Reason of the Divine Being,” “the Creator,” “the Governor” (see Legge, 1891/1962, p. 12), “Reason” (e.g., Hegel, 1830s/1999, pp. 124-125), “Nature” (e.g., Watters, 1870, pp. 40-41), and “the region” (Heidegger, 1971, pp. 74-75, 91-92). Nowadays, both English and Chinese scholars (e.g., Waley, 1938; Lau, 1979; Henricks, 1989) seem to be content with “the Way” translation. This choice actually results from a historical process of mutual projection and accommodation between the two cultural networks of concepts. From the Chinese point of view, the water metaphor subsumes the image of the road. Water coming out of a spring flows continuously in a certain direction, such as downward. It is no wonder that a road or way is one of the earliest meanings of the *Dao*. The decision to standardize the translation of the *Dao* as the Way in fact reflects the persistent effort of both Chinese and English scholars to search for a common basis of communication and understanding.

The building of such a common ground requires some degree of transcendence. The two cultural parties involved in the process need to adapt to each other’s position. If Western audiences do not understand Confucius’s stated admiration for water, then bemused laughter is not the appropriate response; rather, they must try to enter into Confucius’s symbolic world to sense the “virtues” of flowing water. We may want to try, with Sarah Allan, to “allow our imaginations to glimpse the possibility of seeing the world in another way” (Allan, 1997, p. 5). Mutual understanding implies that we “gain some insight into the relationship between language and thought as well as a certain perspective on the cultural basis of our own thought and the limitations of our own preconceptions” (p. 5).

The foregoing discussion is intended to demonstrate that there is no inherent or fixed ground of common understanding between cultures or, at least, that we should not presuppose the availability of such a ground. We would be better to conceptualize a common ground of cross-cultural understanding as that which is constructed by two cultural parties who are willing to communicate with each other and make efforts to reach a certain state of mutual understanding. Such a constructivist and interactive view of a common ground is, I believe, the most encouraging and inspiring for cross-cultural communication.

Cross-cultural communication is a creative process in which each party switches from a familiar cultural language to an unfamiliar one or adapts from a conventional to a foreign set of cultural images and concepts. It is in this sense that I speak of intercultural communication and understanding as an interactive, two-way metaphorical process. This process requires the creative use of metaphors, especially those that are archetypal, on both sides of the communication process.

To date, a study of intercultural communication from a certain state of mutual understanding. Such a constructivist and interactive view of a common ground is, I believe, the most encouraging and inspiring for cross-cultural communication.

In the search for a possible basis of mutual understanding between two cultures, it seems justified
to argue that the establishment of this basis really depends on whether the conceptual systems of the two cultures can reconcile the divergences in their metaphorical structures by way of mutual projection and accommodation. It also relies on whether the two are willing to agree to such reconciliation.

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