



Images and Metaphors in a New Cultural Horizon

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Many of us, when asked about what we remember most about our early childhood, would probably think of many fairy tales and fables which are so fascinating to the minds of very young children. I still remember so vividly many fables told by my mother as bed-time stories when we lived in a remote town in central Vietnam. One of my favourites was The ugly Duckling, which tells a story of a little swan which got lost among a family of ducks. The baby swan was treated differently by other little ducklings because she did not belong to them. She did not understand why they created pain and suffering for her. But time and nature gave her some insights about the other little ducklings' behaviour or misbehaviour: gradually she grew into a beautiful swan, no longer a duck, she flew high in the sky towards a new beautiful horizon.

As an innocent little child, I thought this story was funny and I was pleased with the same happy ending of the story: she lived happily ever after.

Now, I am no longer an innocent child. I have grown up in a new cultural environment. Unlike the ugly duckling, I don't want to fly away in a new horizon. I like to live here and share with you the wonderful mixture of our metaphors with their own happiness, sorrow, confusion and frustration. This story gives me some insights about our new existence in the OZ land.

Somehow, this simple funny childish story reflects a part of the current existence of many Vietnamese migrants in Australia. For some the same ending occurs: living happily ever after. On the contrary, for others: this place is, in the words of a French philosophical novelist Albert Camus, a homeland in exile. Pessimistically, for some Vietnamese children in Australia, still very young and innocent, prisons are sadly their only homes. For some Vietnamese adult migrants, there is no light at the end of a tunnel.

Like many fables and fairy tales in the world, the ugly duckling story is full of metaphors which lie underneath the surface appearance of a story.

Recently I came across a very interesting PhD thesis written by Neville Grady (1993). It is called 'Images, Metaphors and Climates' which was a research investigation of the relationships between teachers' images of their schools, their perceptions of work climates, and students' perceptions of

classroom environment. In this thesis, Grady argues that metaphor is the window into our inner world. It deeply reveals our attitudes and perceptions consciously and unconsciously. In other words, metaphors reflect our individual inner world and our world view.

According to Grady's thesis, images and metaphors are very much the same. Boulding (1956) pointed out that an individual's image represents his or her subjective knowledge of "fact" and "value". Such an image varies in certainty or uncertainty, probability or improbability, clarity and vagueness. Boulding went further to argue that in each of us, an image results from an active internal organising principle much as gene is a principle or entity organising the growth of bodily structures.

Vietnamese is very rich in metaphor. Metaphor is the way Vietnamese people talk about their world by 'using this thing to talk about another thing' (muon cai nay de noi cai kia). However, a metaphor-loaded statement is not a vague and unreliable statement. As Grady argues very convincingly, metaphor is more likely something other than a fanciful "embroidery" of facts. Actually, it may be perceived to be 'a way of experiencing the facts, a way of thinking and living: an imaginative projection of the truth (Hawkes, 1972, p. 39).

If students think of their school as a prison metaphorically, they will treat it as a prison and therefore behave like prisoners. They hate their school and the people who run it: principal, teachers. They want to get out of it and sometimes they burn their school to bury their hatred. Whereas, if children think of the school as a cosy family, they treat other students and school staff as family members and they want to enhance their school atmosphere and conditions. Metaphor is not just a mere image. It is a powerful image. When I say that Vietnamese is rich in metaphor, in Lakoff and Johnson's words (1980, p.3), I mean metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action as our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. To express it in another way, "if we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p.4).

In my view, metaphor is not just an individual matter. It is not confined to an individual world as seen in some research works mentioned above. I like to introduce the term 'cultural metaphor' to show that metaphor is very much culturally motivated and orientated. It is psychologically very powerful. It can be both constructive and destructive. I would like to discuss this point in making a special reference to the Vietnamese culture.

Confucianism is a strong socio-cultural philosophy and belief in Vietnam. It has permeated the Vietnamese culture for centuries and its influence is found in every aspect of the Vietnamese culture, particularly in literature and education. In a Confucian perspective, human beings are fundamentally social beings. They have specific roles to play and specific duties to perform so that social harmony can be achieved, in families, small community and the whole society. For instance, teachers are metaphorically viewed and treated as 'parents' (or higher) and students are therefore perceived as their own 'children'. This cultural metaphor of a teacher is the principle, which governs the goals and objectives of education in general and the behaviour of teachers and students in schools in particular. Teaching is not just confined to intellectual development as normally seen in many schools in the West. It includes moral teaching and spiritual guidance. In Vietnamese, there is a saying 'khong thay do may lam nen' (without a teacher, you cannot become a good person). This metaphor of 'teachers as parents' is strongly reflected in school discipline and hidden curriculum. However, it is not confined to a classroom discourse, the teacher-student dyad based on this cultural metaphor operates in a wider community. In Vietnam, teacher day is a special event in which current and past students visit their teachers at their homes to show profound gratitude and respect.

Another cultural metaphor strongly held in many Vietnamese people is the image of a parent. Vietnamese songs, poems, novels, fables and proverbs are full of images describing 'mother' and 'father'. 'Mother' is one of the most talked about theme in Vietnamese literature. Listening again to the touching song 'Long Me' (motherly love) of Y Van brings along endless tear drops in Vietnamese people, particularly when our mothers are no longer here with us. For example:

- Long me bao la nhu bien thai binh dat dao.(Motherly love is as vast as the Pacific Ocean)
- Long me thuong con nhu van trang tron mua thu. (Motherly love is like a full moon in Autumn)
- Loi me tha thiet nhu lan gio dua mua ho (Mother's words are like a breeze peacefully and lovingly soothing the surface of a lake).

The last cultural metaphor in Vietnamese that I would like to share with you is the powerful word 'que huong' with its beautiful images in many Vietnamese migrants. It is impossible for me to find an equivalent word in English to express the deep meaning of this word. In English, there are words such as country, nation, home, homeland, etc. However, they do not express powerfully, eloquently, and romantically the word 'que huong'. Any translation of this word into English is a misrepresentation or distortion of its metaphors.

So far, I have briefly examined the concept 'metaphor' and discussed its powerful impact in the Vietnamese culture. Now, I would like to return to the 'ugly duckling story' by discussing how Vietnamese migrants live with their cultural metaphors in a new cultural context.

Most Vietnamese migrants came to Australia with empty hands (*ban tay trang*). Some have built up their new lives with great success, conquering big waves in new life to obtain peace, security and prosperity; while others, including me, are still very empty-handed. However, regardless of their success stories or otherwise, they came to Australia with a heavy luggage of metaphors, particularly to elderly people. These metaphors have enriched their lives in a new cultural environment. However, the cultural metaphors that they brought from Vietnam to Australia could also create some pain, despair, and sometimes destruction. Why? The answer could be explained by discussing several popular metaphors which occupy the minds and hearts of many Vietnamese migrants.

In Australia, the definition of a teacher is culturally different. A teacher is a person who teaches and teaching is viewed as helping students to make their own decisions, to be independent thinkers and to challenge knowledge, not just to accept it uncritically. Teachers are no longer the only source of knowledge as often seen in the traditional transmission model of teaching and learning in which teachers are knowledge givers and students are knowledge receivers. This passive metaphor of a teacher is no longer in the consciousness of educators and students. Vietnamese children can easily cope with new metaphors in which teachers and students are collaborative learners and the school is a community of active learners. For those parents who expect that schools should treat moral and intellectual education 'more seriously' in terms of the old metaphors would feel betrayed by the new education system. In addition, some Vietnamese children do not share the same values toward education as their parents. The following two stories illustrate my point.

A father, who is a doctor, was shocked to be told by his son that he would like to be a butcher. This was not only a disappointment to the father but a disgrace to the whole family. He kept this information privately as he would not want friends and relatives knew about this disaster in the family. Both the husband and wife were shocked by their son's decision. To them, a butcher is the last thing one would want to be. The metaphor of a butcher tortures them: 'do ban ca ban thit o ngoai cho' (those uneducated fish and meat sellers in the town market). Their images of a butcher are: loud mouth, swearing, cheating, abusing, quarrelling etc. It is quite a contrast to the metaphor of a doctor: well educated, intelligent, well-respected, rich, and 'cultured'. The father cried to me: "Something is wrong in my son's head? What did the school do to him!!!".

The second story shows the same agony indicating a social and psychological phenomenon I refer to as 'conflict of metaphors'. A husband came to my house to tell us that his wife had nastily left him after fifteen years of living 'happily' together. In his words, his wife has changed recently. She was no longer a kind, supportive, and hardworking wife that he married many years ago in Vietnam. She wanted to have her own bank account and do what she thought was best for her. She selfishly 'dumped' the kids in a childcare centre so that she could undertake a university course without his approval. The images of his wife in Vietnam and in Australia were like two contrasting seasons after their migrating to Australia. Lam Phuong's song states this situation illustratively: Anh da lam dua em sang day (I made a mistake by bringing you here).

Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p.5) describe eloquently this dilemma: Men are always trying to find similarities between new and familiar situations, to find out the extent to which the former can be explained in terms of accepted concepts. This habit of mind is the *raison d'etre* of metaphor and analogy and their widespread use in our ordinary conversation.

The two story mentioned above in the current context of Vietnamese migrants and the ugly duckling story at the opening of this paper are funny and interesting stories in one sense and sad and disturbing in another sense. It is disturbing on the grounds that many Vietnamese migrants in Australia have been victimised by continuous conflicts of old and new metaphors.

What is the solution? What is the best answer? What should we do to help them? These are the questions that are not easy to answer. However, they are not the questions that we should sweep under the carpet metaphorically. Somehow, we have to learn live with metaphors.

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