



## The Metaphorical Meaning of Natural Elements in Mandarin Idioms (*chéngyǔ*)

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### Abstract

This study focuses on the analysis of the metaphorical meanings of vocabulary relating to the elements of nature in Mandarin Chinese. The natural elements used in this study are those recognised in the Five Elements theory (五行 *Wǔ Xíng*), which is a concept of great importance to Chinese society. These five elements comprise water (水 *shuǐ*), fire (火 *huǒ*), wood (木 *mù*), metal (金 *jīn*), and earth (土 *tǔ*). The data for this study consists of natural element vocabulary found in Mandarin Chinese idioms (成语 *chéngyǔ*), thereby enabling the identification of metaphorical meanings associated with these natural elements as constituent parts of the idioms. The idiom data was drawn from the Lancaster Corpus of Mandarin Chinese, focusing on the five idioms with the highest frequency. Using a qualitative research method, the data was analysed using conceptual metaphor theory. This study found an association between the meanings of the natural element vocabulary and the Five-Element theory. Furthermore, interpretations were found that align with the natural properties of these elements. The research was conducted to gain an understanding of the Chinese people's way of thinking regarding the vocabulary of natural elements.

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## INTRODUCTION

Idioms are formed from a combination of two or more words whose meaning cannot be directly derived from the meaning of each individual word. In Mandarin, the majority of idioms (成语 *chéngyǔ*) consist of four characters.

Mandarin idioms are also capable of reflecting cultural imagery (Ayesa, 2017; Haiyan et al., 2016; Nall, 2009). Through research on idioms containing numerical vocabulary (Nall, 2009), it was found that the presence of numbers or combinations of numbers in idioms reflects the beliefs, ways of thinking, and mythology held by Chinese society. In a comparative study of Indonesian and Chinese idioms containing animal vocabulary (Haiyan et al., 2016), similarities and differences in ways of thinking and culture between Chinese and Indonesian societies were identified. Idioms also reflect the culture of their speakers through the depiction of human behaviour, which serves as the inspiration for the creation of metaphorical idioms (Ayesa, 2017).

Insights into the culture or mindset of the Chinese people can be gained through the interpretation of idioms (成语 *chéngyǔ*), particularly metaphorical ones. Metaphors reveal the language user's way of thinking regarding phenomena they have previously experienced. This aligns with the theory of conceptual metaphor (Kovecses, 2005; Kövecses, 2003), which demonstrates that there is an activity of projecting elements from a source domain onto a target domain, but not the other way round. The mapping of the source domain to the target domain is driven by the speaker's experience. Lakoff and Johnson explain that the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another (Lakoff & Johnsen, 1982)

From this statement, it can be understood that to comprehend a metaphor, one must know or have experienced the thing to which the metaphor refers. Fundamentally, metaphor is a natural concept. Lakoff and Johnson explain that conceptual metaphor is a natural part of human thought. Furthermore, which metaphors we possess and what they mean depend on the nature of our bodies, our interactions within the physical environment, and our social and cultural practices. Any question regarding the nature of conceptual metaphor and its role in thought and language is an empirical one.

The cosmological theory of the Five Elements (五型 *Wu Xing*) is a concept deeply integrated into human life, even to this day (Wang, 2019). The elements of nature are an integral part of Chinese culture. This philosophy is found in the Shangshu or Book of Documents. This theory is a cosmological doctrine intended to explain the formation and organisation of the universe in ancient Chinese philosophy. The categories of water (水 *shuǐ*), fire (火 *huǒ*), wood (木 *mù*), metal (金 *jīn*), and earth (土 *tǔ*) are the five fundamental elements that constitute the universe (Yu, 2009).

**Table 1.** A system of five-element categorization (Yu, 2009)

| <i>Elemen</i>     | <b>Wood</b>   | <b>Fire</b>     | <b>Earth</b>        | <b>Metal</b>    | <b>Water</b>  |
|-------------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------------|-----------------|---------------|
| <b>Nature</b>     |               |                 |                     |                 |               |
| <i>Location</i>   | east          | south           | center              | west            | north         |
| <i>Season</i>     | spring        | summer          | long summer         | autumn          | winter        |
| <i>Climate</i>    | windy         | hot             | humid               | dry             | cool          |
| <i>Planet</i>     | Jupiter       | Mars            | Saturn              | Venus           | Mercury       |
| <i>Animal</i>     | chicken       | sheep           | ox                  | horse           | pig           |
| <i>Crop</i>       | wheat         | millet          | foxtail millet      | rice            | bean          |
| <i>Life cycle</i> | birth         | growth          | ripeness            | harvest         | storage       |
| <i>Odor</i>       | rancid        | scorched        | fragrant            | fishy           | putrid        |
| <i>Flavor</i>     | sour          | bitter          | sweet               | spicy           | salty         |
| <i>Color</i>      | blue/green    | red             | yellow              | putih           | hitam         |
| <b>Human</b>      |               |                 |                     |                 |               |
| <i>Zang org.</i>  | liver         | heart           | spleen              | lung            | kidney        |
| <i>Fu organ</i>   | gallbladder   | small intestine | stomach             | large intestine | bladder       |
| <i>Sense org.</i> | eyes          | tongue          | mouth               | nose            | ears          |
| <i>Tissue</i>     | tendons       | vessels         | flesh               | skin/body hair  | bones         |
| <b>Emotion</b>    | <b>anger</b>  | <b>joy</b>      | <b>overthinking</b> | <b>grief</b>    | <b>fright</b> |
| <i>Indicator</i>  | nails         | complexion      | lips                | body hair       | hair          |
| <i>Expression</i> | shouting      | laughing        | singing             | wailing         | moaning       |
| <i>Spirit</i>     | ethereal soul | spirit          | purpose             | corporeal soul  | will          |

These five fundamental elements are divided into two categories: nature and humanity. The relationships between these five fundamental elements and the categories of nature and humanity are as follows. Within the nature category, there are sub-elements, namely location, climate, weather, planets, animals, agricultural produce, life cycles, scent, taste, and colour (Yu, 2009).

The research focuses on the metaphorical meanings of the natural elements that form the constituents of Chinese idioms. The natural elements in question are water (水 *shuǐ*), fire (火 *huǒ*), wood (木 *mù*), metal (金 *jīn*), and earth (土 *tǔ*). These five natural elements are known as the Five Phases (五型 *Wǔ Xíng*), which represent the five stages of the formation of the universe in ancient Chinese thought. This issue is elaborated into the following research questions: 1) What is the metaphorical meaning of the elements of nature in Mandarin idioms, and 2) What is the connection between the metaphorical meaning of the elements of nature in idioms and the meaning of the elements of nature in the Five Elements (五型) concept.

The aim of this study is to understand aspects of Chinese culture through the presence of natural elements contained within idioms. The problem is broken down into the following research questions: 1) What is the metaphorical meaning of natural elements in Mandarin idioms, and 2) What is the relationship between the metaphorical meaning of natural elements in idioms and the meaning of natural elements in the concept of the Five Elements (五型)

Research on Mandarin Chinese idioms has been extensively conducted within the field of linguistics, including studies examining the relationship between syntactic form and cultural value (Ayese & Sutami, 2022) and semantic transparency (Liu & Su, 2021). Furthermore, there are also numerous

studies examining idioms containing specific constituents, such as research on the relationship between culture and idioms containing animal vocabulary (Lyu & Li, 2020), as well as those containing colour vocabulary (Ayesa, 2021). These studies demonstrate that idioms are metaphorical in nature. Consequently, this study employs idioms as a tool to identify the metaphorical meanings of the words they contain, specifically those related to natural elements.

## METHOD

The data used in this study consists of text in the form of linguistic units such as words, phrases, clauses and sentences. Accordingly, qualitative procedures rely on data in the form of text and images, involve unique steps in data analysis, and draw upon a variety of research strategies (Creswell & Cruse, 1987).

The research process began with a search for idioms containing vocabulary related to natural elements within the Lancaster Corpus of Mandarin Chinese (LCMC). Among Mandarin corpora, the LCMC is a corpus that is openly accessible to the public. Furthermore, this corpus features a highly diverse range of text types. Consequently, using this corpus as a data source is believed to yield more reliable findings.

Idiom data collection was carried out by searching for compound words containing the characters 1) 水 *shuǐ*; 2) 火 *huǒ*; 3) 木 *mù*; 4) 金 *jīn*; and 5) 土 *tǔ*. Subsequently, a selection was made of four-character words suspected to be idioms. The meanings and categories of these words were identified using the following dictionaries:

- 1) The Comprehensive Chinese-Indonesian Dictionary (Compilation Team, 1995)
- 2) Xīnhuá Chéngyǔ Cídiǎn (Compilation Team, 2010) or ‘Xinhua Idiom Dictionary’
- 3) Xīnhuá Chéngyǔ Cídiǎn (Li Yi Hua and Lü De Shen, 1985)
- 4) The Comprehensive Mandarin-Indonesian Dictionary (University of Indonesia Lexicography Team, 1997).

The following table shows the number of idioms found in the LCMC.

**Table 2.** Number of Idioms

| Natural Elements | Amount of data |
|------------------|----------------|
| 水 <i>shuǐ</i>    | 32             |
| 火 <i>huǒ</i>     | 17             |
| 木 <i>mù</i>      | 6              |
| 金 <i>jīn</i>     | 15             |
| 土 <i>tǔ</i>      | 5              |

Make sure that work can be repeated according to the details provided. It contains technical information of the study presented clearly. Therefore, readers can conduct research based on the

techniques presented. Materials and equipment specifications are necessary. Approaches or procedures of study together with data analysis methods must be presented.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following presents the results of the data analysis using the research theories and methods outlined above.

### 1. The ‘water’ element

The ‘water’ element in Mandarin is represented by the word 水 ‘shuǐ’. In the LCMC, thirty-two idioms containing this element were identified. The five idioms with the highest frequency of occurrence are as follows.

**Table 3.** Idioms Containing the ‘Water’ Element

| No. | Idiom                     | Literal Meaning           | Idiomatic Meaning             |
|-----|---------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1.  | 水落石出 <i>shuǐluòshíchū</i> | water-falls-stone-emerges | the truth is revealed         |
| 2.  | 背水一战 <i>bèishuǐyīzhàn</i> | back-to-water-one-battle  | a life-or-death struggle      |
| 3.  | 水泄不通 <i>shuǐxièbùtōng</i> | water-flows-not-open      | packed to the brim            |
| 4.  | 水深火热 <i>shuǐshēnhuǒrè</i> | deep-water-hot-fire       | misery                        |
| 5.  | 如鱼得水 <i>rúyúdéshuǐ</i>    | like-a-fish-in-water      | already smooth and accustomed |

In the idiom 背水一战 *bèishuǐyīzhàn*, water represents the river where the battle takes place. This idiom refers to the Battle of the Yangtze River, where there was no chance of retreat. This means that in that battle, there was no other option but to face the battle to the death. Thus, it can be understood that the element of water represents the entity found in the river.

In the idiom 水泄不通 *shuǐxièbùtōng*, this element of water is associated with its flowing nature. This idiom refers to a situation so crowded that even water cannot flow through. Thus, the water element in this idiom serves as a metaphor for its flowing nature and its ability to find gaps to escape.

In the idiom 水深火热 *shuǐshēnhuǒrè*, the water element is associated with its quantity; when abundant, it can bring hardship or disaster. This idiom actually originates from a story about the difficult conditions of war. In this idiom, the water element refers to its great quantity and depth for humans. With such deep water, it is naturally difficult for humans to breathe. Thus, the water element in this idiom is associated with its quantity.

In the Five Elements theory, the water element is linked to the emotion of fear and the expression of weeping. Of the five idioms above, the first three share a connection to the Five Elements concept: the idioms 背水一战 *bèishuǐyīzhàn*, 水泄不通 *shuǐxièbùtōng*, and 水深火热 *shuǐshēnhuǒrè*.

In the idiom 如鱼得水 *rúyúdéshuǐ*, the water element is associated with something that is inseparable from the life of a fish. By obtaining water, a fish can live well. Furthermore, it can also be noted that the water element is associated with its clear nature. This section presents the research results. The research findings may be supplemented with tables, graphs, picture, and/or charts. The discussion section explains the processed data, interprets the findings logically, and connects them to relevant reference sources.

## 2. The ‘fire’ element

The ‘fire’ element in Mandarin is represented by the word 火 *huǒ*. In the LCMC, seventeen idioms containing this element were identified. The five idioms with the highest frequency of occurrence are as follows.

**Table 4.** Idioms containing the ‘fire’ element

| No. | Idiom                       | Literal Meaning           | Idiomatic Meaning      |
|-----|-----------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|
| 1.  | 水深火热 <i>shuǐshēnhuǒrè</i>   | deep-water-hot-fire       | misery                 |
| 2.  | 烟熏火燎 <i>yānxūnhuǒliǎo</i>   | smoke-smoke-fire-burn     | extremely hot; drought |
| 3.  | 灯火辉煌 <i>dēnghuǒhuīhuáng</i> | lantern-fire-bright-light | brightly lit           |
| 4.  | 炉火纯青 <i>lúhuǒchúnqīng</i>   | furnace-fire-clear-green  | perfection             |
| 5.  | 热火朝天 <i>rèhuǒcháotiān</i>   | heat-fire-towards-the-sky | high spirits           |

The idiom 水深火热 *shuǐshēnhuǒrè* has been discussed in the subsection on the water element. Just as the water element in that idiom signifies something impassable, the fire element is also associated with the meaning of something that cannot be crossed.

The idiom 烟熏火燎 *yānxūnhuǒliǎo* means ‘extremely hot’ or ‘drought’. The meaning of the fire element in this idiom relates to the interpretation within the climate category of the Five Elements theory, namely ‘heat’.

The overall meaning of the idiom 灯火辉煌 *dēnghuǒhuīhuáng* is ‘brightly lit’. This idiom describes a bustling, brightly lit night-time atmosphere. This bustling night refers to a joyful atmosphere. This relates to the ‘emotion’ category of the fire element in the Five Elements theory.

The fire element in the idiom 热火朝天 *rèhuǒcháotiān* is associated with a spirited soul. Referring to the ‘spirit’ category within the Five Elements, the fire element relates to enthusiasm. Similarly, in the idiom 炉火纯青 *lúhuǒchúnqīng*, the fire element refers to the fire in a furnace. This idiom signifies success or perfection when the furnace emits a pure blue flame. It is often used as a metaphor to denote the attainment of a high level of skill and perfection. The four idioms above demonstrate a connection in meaning with the categories of the Five Elements theory, encompassing the categories of emotion, spirit, and climate.

### 3. The ‘wood’ element

The ‘wood’ element in Mandarin is represented by the word 木 (mù). In the LCMC, six idioms containing this element were identified. The five idioms with the highest frequency of occurrence are as follows.

**Table 5.** Idioms containing the ‘wood’ element

| No. | Idiom                     | Literal Meaning                       | Idiomatic Meaning                     |
|-----|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1.  | 大兴土木 <i>dàxīngtǔmù</i>    | large-scale-earth-wood                | to undertake large-scale construction |
| 2.  | 一草一木 <i>yī cǎo yī mù</i>  | one-grass-one-wood                    | small things                          |
| 3.  | 人非草木 <i>rén fēi cǎomù</i> | people-are-not-grass-and-trees        | humans have feelings                  |
| 4.  | 入木三分 <i>rùmùsānfēn</i>    | penetrate-wood-three-points           | insightful and clear comments         |
| 5.  | 呆若木鸡 <i>dāiruòmùjī</i>    | staring blankly like a wooden chicken | lost in thought                       |

The idiom 大兴土木 *dàxīngtǔmù* means ‘large-scale construction’. The wood element in this idiom relates to the raw materials used in such construction. In the cycle of life, the earth and wood processes can also be regarded as the first stage or the birth of the building. This can be associated with the life cycle category in the Five Elements theory. However, the only element that can be linked to this life cycle is the wood element. Therefore, the wood element in this idiom may not be related to the Five Elements theory.

The meaning of the idiom 一草一木 *yīcǎoyīmù* refers to ‘very small things’ or ‘ordinary things’. This idiom originates from a sentence in the biography of Ying Shao (Southern Dynasties) which reads:

“春一草枯则为灾，秋一木华亦为异。” *Chūn yī cǎo kū zé wéi zāi, qiū yī mù huá yì wèi yì.* “A withered blade of grass in spring is a disaster. A blossoming tree in autumn is an anomaly.”

This idiom associates the wood element with ‘trees’. In this context, the wood element is also linked to autumn, which is then described as strange or unusual. In the Five Elements theory, wood is associated with the category of spring, which also signifies birth or the beginning of a life cycle. Nevertheless, when considered within the overall context, the metaphorical meaning of the wood element is difficult to interpret.

In the idiom 人非草木 *rénfēicǎomù*, there is a metaphor suggesting that humans are not trees. Similar to the previous idiom, the wood element also refers to trees. This idiom describes humans as having feelings and being easily influenced by various things, unlike grass and trees which are lifeless, without reason, and without feelings. In this idiom, the primary distinction between humans and trees lies in feelings or emotions. This relates to the ‘soul’ category within the Five Elements theory, specifically the ethereal spirit.

The wood element in 入木三分 *rùmùsānfēn* refers to a wooden writing board. This idiom conveys the meaning of ‘a profound and clear comment’, by depicting the depth of three ink marks on the writing board. This illustrates the power of ink, which is associated with thought, and the wooden writing board, which is associated with a problem that is difficult to penetrate or solve. Similar to the two previous idioms, the wood element in the idiom 呆若木鸡 *dāiruòmùjī* is also understood as an inanimate object.

Thus, it can be understood that the metaphorical meaning of the wood element can refer to the categories of the life cycle, seasons, and emotions within the Five Elements theory. However, the wood element can also be viewed as a lifeless and hard entity.

#### 4. The ‘gold’ element

The ‘gold’ element in Mandarin is represented by the word 金 (*jīn*). In the LCMC, fifteen idioms containing this element were identified. The five idioms with the highest frequency of occurrence are as follows.

**Table 6.** Idioms containing the element ‘gold’

| No. | Idiom                      | Makna Harfiah              | Makna Idiom                      |
|-----|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1.  | 拾金不昧 <i>shíjīnbùmèi</i>    | pick-up-gold-do-not-hide   | not to hide someone else’s money |
| 2.  | 金石为开 <i>jīnshí wéi kāi</i> | gold-stone-will-open       | all difficulties can be overcome |
| 3.  | 金蝉脱壳 <i>jīnchántuōqiào</i> | gold-cicada-escape         | to make a hasty escape           |
| 4.  | 一刻千金 <i>yīkèqiānjīn</i>    | one-quarter- thousand-gold | time is extremely precious       |
| 5.  | 一掷万金 <i>yīzhìwànjīn</i>    | one-put-ten thousand-gold  | to spend a large sum of money    |

The element ‘gold’ in the idiom 拾金不昧 *shíjīnbùmèi* refers to 钱财 ‘*qiáncái*’ ‘money’. Thus, this idiom signifies the virtue and moral principle of not taking what does not belong to one. In line with this idiom, the idiom 一掷万金 *yīzhìwànjīn* also refers to something of great value. This idiom signifies a purchase made by paying a large sum of money. The gold element refers to money.

In the idiom 金石为开 *jīnshíwéikāi*, the meaning is ‘all difficulties can be overcome’. The gold element in this idiom refers to something hard and difficult to open. Thus, the gold element in this idiom is associated with something solid and strong.

The idiom 金蝉脱壳 *jīnchántuōqiào* means ‘to make a clean getaway’. The overall meaning of this idiom is to escape skilfully, so that others cannot detect it. The gold element in this idiom is used to modify the constituent 蝉 *chán* ‘cicada’. Thus, gold in this context also refers to something valuable. The meaning of the gold element relating to valuable worth can also be found in the idiom 一刻千金 *yīkèqiānjīn*. This idiom means that time is extremely precious.

Unlike the previous three elements, the meaning of the gold element is not related to concepts in the Five Elements theory. The gold element in these idioms is associated with something valuable, such as money, as well as with something hard.

## 5. The ‘earth’ element

The earth element in Mandarin Chinese is represented by the word 金 *jīn*. In the LCMC, five idioms containing this element were identified. The five idioms with the highest frequency of occurrence are as follows.

**Table 7.** Idioms containing the ‘earth’ element

| No. | Idiom                      | Makna Harfiah                      | Makna Idiom                          |
|-----|----------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1.  | 大兴土木 <i>dàxīngtǔmù</i>     | large-scale-earth-wood             | large scale construction             |
| 2.  | 土洋结合 <i>tǔyángjiéhé</i>    | earth-ocean-unite-harmonious       | combining native and foreign methods |
| 3.  | 土生土长 <i>tǔshēngtǔzhǎng</i> | earth-live-earth-long              | locally born and bred                |
| 4.  | 守土有责 <i>shǒutǔyǒuzé</i>    | guard-the land-have-responsibility | to safeguard one’s homeland          |
| 5.  | 风土人情 <i>fēngtǔrénqíng</i>  | wind-land-people-sentiments        | every place has its own customs      |

In addition to containing the earth element, the idiom 大兴土木 *dàxīngtǔmù* also contains the wood element. In this context, the earth element refers to the raw materials used to construct buildings. In the idiom 土洋结合 *tǔyángjiéhé*, the earth element refers to the land. This idiom signifies combining simple local methods with modern foreign methods. Based on the location category, the earth element is situated in the centre, in accordance with the naming concept of the Chinese state.

The meaning of the earth element referring to the land is also found in the idiom 土生土长 *tǔshēngtǔzhǎng*. This idiom means ‘born and raised in one’s hometown’. Other idioms, such as 守土有责 *shǒutǔyǒuzé* and 风土人情 *fēngtǔrénqíng*, also contain the earth element, which refers to the meaning of ‘earth’ or ‘location’.

## CONCLUSION

Through analysis of the data, it was found that the majority of natural elements in Mandarin idioms refer to the concept of the Five Elements or 五型 *Wu Xing*. However, this is not the case for idioms containing the element of gold. It may be that the element of gold is more closely associated with the concept of material value. Unlike the previous three elements, the meaning of the gold element is not related to the concept in the Five Elements theory. The gold element in these idioms is associated with something valuable, such as money, as well as with something hard. This finding suggests that to interpret the metaphorical meaning of natural elements, the Five Elements concept can be used as a reference to understand their source domain.

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