

A Comparative Analysis of the Conceptual Metaphor of 'Water' (水: Shuǐ) in Mandarin and Indonesian Proverbs from a Cross-Cultural Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Water, as a fundamental element of human life, frequently appears in both Chinese and Indonesian proverbs. This study presents a comparative analysis of conceptual metaphors associated with the lexical item 水 (shuǐ) / air in the proverbial expressions of the two cultures. A total of 40 water-related proverbs were examined, comprising 20 Mandarin expressions (Proverbs 12 and 10 idiomatic expressions) and 20 Indonesian peribahasa. The Mandarin data were drawn from the *Hanyu Yanyu Da Cidian* (The Comprehensive Dictionary of Chinese Proverbs), *Xiandai Hanyu Cidian* (The Contemporary Chinese Dictionary), and other authoritative reference works, while the Indonesian data were sourced from the *Kamus Peribahasa Indonesia* and KBBI. The inclusion criteria were: i) containing the lexical item 水 (shuǐ) or air; ii) functioning as a proverb or idiomatic expressions; iii) carrying metaphorical meaning; and (4) cross-validated through multiple authoritative dictionaries. Through cross-cultural comparison, the analysis reveals that the metaphorical mapping of "water" exhibits more convergences than divergences across the two linguistic traditions, despite their distinct cultural backgrounds. The concept of "water" is pervasively associated with themes of unpredictability and flux, purification and sacredness, vitality and sustenance, as well as social relationships. These shared patterns suggest a common cognitive grounding in human experience with water, while culture-specific nuances also emerge in the ways these metaphors are elaborated. This study underscores the value of proverbs as rich repositories of local worldviews, reflecting culturally embedded beliefs about nature, life, and human interaction.

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1. INTRODUCTION

"Water" is one of the most fundamental elements of the natural world, and its pervasive presence in human life is reflected in the linguistic expressions of virtually all cultures. Proverbs, as condensed repositories of folk wisdom, offer a particularly revealing window into how different societies conceptualize natural phenomena and embed them with cultural values. In both Chinese and Indonesian cultural traditions, water-related proverbs abound, carrying metaphorical meanings that extend far beyond the physical properties of the element itself.

Proverbs are traditionally defined as concise, didactic statements that encapsulate the collective wisdom, cultural values, and social norms of a speech community (Mieder, 2004; Norrick, 1985). As a genre of folk literature, proverbs are characterized by their fixed or semi-fixed forms, metaphorical richness, and intergenerational transmission through oral and written traditions (Honeck, 1997; Taylor, 1985). Beyond their surface-level meanings, proverbs serve as linguistic resources through which communities articulate philosophical reflections on human existence, moral conduct, and the natural world. In paremiology—the systematic study of proverbs—scholars have long recognized that proverbs are not merely ornamental expressions but are deeply embedded in the cognitive and cultural frameworks of their speakers (Mieder, 2004; Lau, 2018). This dual nature of proverbs—as both linguistic artifacts and cultural documents—makes them particularly valuable for cross-cultural investigations of conceptual metaphor, as they provide naturally occurring data in which abstract ideas are systematically grounded in concrete, culturally salient source domains.

The study of metaphor has undergone a significant paradigm shift since the publication of Lakoff and Johnson's seminal work *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), which posits that metaphor is not merely a rhetorical ornament but a fundamental mode of thought. According to conceptual metaphor theory, humans understand abstract domains (target domains) through more concrete, embodied experiences (source domains). Water, as a universally tangible and experientially rich phenomenon, serves as a prolific source domain across languages. Kövecses (2002) further elaborates on this framework by demonstrating that while certain conceptual metaphors may be universal, others are culturally specific, shaped by distinct ecological, social, and historical contexts. Wierzbicka (1997) similarly emphasizes how culturally significant "keywords"—such as water—play a constitutive role in shaping conceptual worlds and cultural experiences. Kramsch (1998) provides a complementary theoretical lens for understanding the interrelationship between language and culture, which is essential for any cross-cultural comparison of metaphorical expressions.

Cross-cultural proverb research has established that despite variations in ecological conditions and social structures, certain thematic universals—such as metaphors of nature, human relationships, and moral values—recur across linguistic traditions (Mieder, 2004; Taylor, 1985; Lau, 2018). Conversely, culture-specific proverbs often reflect distinctive environmental features, historical experiences, and philosophical orientations, making them valuable indices of cultural cognition (Honeck, 1997; Norrick, 1985). Accordingly, cross-cultural comparisons of proverb metaphors can illuminate both shared human cognition and culturally particular modes of conceptualizing experience.

Within the Chinese linguistic tradition, water metaphors have been extensively documented in classical and modern lexicographical works. Proverbial expressions such as proverbs (谚语) and idiomatic expressions (成语) frequently invoke water to convey moral principles, strategic wisdom, and affective states. In the Indonesian context, *peribahasa* similarly draw upon water imagery to encode social norms, philosophical insights, and pragmatic life lessons. Despite the richness of these two traditions, comparative studies that systematically examine the conceptual metaphors of "water" across Mandarin and Indonesian proverbs remain relatively scarce. Existing studies have tended to focus on single-language descriptions (Thamrin & Suhardi, 2020; Widiatmika, 2023) or have employed corpus-based methods to map water metaphors within a single linguistic system (Fatin, Budiawan, & Mualafina, 2024). A cross-linguistic and cross-cultural comparison of water metaphors between Mandarin and Indonesian—two linguistically unrelated but ecologically comparable cultures—has yet to be undertaken. Given that paremiological research has demonstrated the pedagogical and intercultural value of proverb study (Lau, 2018; Honeck, 1997), the present comparative investigation also aims to generate insights that can inform language teaching and cross-cultural communication training.

To address this gap, the present study conducts a comparative analysis of conceptual metaphors associated with the lexical item 水 (*shuǐ*) in Mandarin and air in Indonesian, as they appear in proverbial expressions. Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions: i) What conceptual metaphors of "water" are prevalent in Mandarin and Indonesian proverbs? ii) To what extent do these

metaphorical mappings converge or diverge across the two cultural-linguistic systems? iii) How do these metaphors reflect culturally specific worldviews, social values, and cognitive patterns?

The data for this study consist of 40 water-related proverbs—20 Mandarin expressions (10 proverbs and 10 idiomatic expressions) and 20 Indonesian peribahasa—selected from authoritative dictionaries: the *Hanyu Yanyu Da Cidian* (Comprehensive Dictionary of Chinese Proverbs), the *Xiandai Hanyu Cidian* (Contemporary Chinese Dictionary), the *Kamus Peribahasa Indonesia*, and *KBBI* (Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia). The selection criteria are: i) containing the lexical item 水 (shuǐ) or air; ii) functioning as a proverb, idiomatic expressions, or peribahasa; iii) conveying metaphorical meaning; and iii) cross-validated through multiple authoritative sources.

Employing a qualitative comparative approach grounded in Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) conceptual metaphor framework—supplemented by Kövecses's (2002) culture-specific metaphor theory—this study analyzes the structural, orientational, and ontological dimensions of water metaphors. The analysis is expected to reveal significant convergences that reflect shared human experiences with water as a natural element, alongside culture-specific divergences that illuminate distinct Chinese and Indonesian worldviews. By doing so, this study contributes to the broader fields of cognitive linguistics, paremiology, and intercultural studies, while offering a validated bilingual corpus for future research.

2. METHODS

2.1 Corpus and Data Selection

The corpus used in this study consists of 40 water-related proverbial expressions, including 20 Chinese expressions and 20 Indonesian proverbs. The Chinese corpus comprises 10 Proverbs and 10 idiomatic expressions, while the Indonesian corpus consists of 20 proverbs.

The Chinese data were collected from authoritative reference sources, including the *Hanyu Yanyu Da Cidian* (Comprehensive Dictionary of Chinese Proverbs), the *Xiandai Hanyu Cidian* (Contemporary Chinese Dictionary), and other recognized Chinese proverb collections. The Indonesian data were obtained from *Kamus Peribahasa Indonesia*, *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (KBBI), and other reliable proverb references.

The data were selected based on the following criteria: i) the expression contains the lexical item 水 (shuǐ) or air (water); ii) it functions as a proverb or idiomatic expression; iii) it conveys metaphorical meanings related to human experience, social relations, morality, or cultural values; and iv) its meaning and usage can be verified through authoritative dictionaries or proverb references.

The final corpus was established through purposive sampling, focusing on expressions that explicitly employ water imagery as a source domain for conceptual metaphor analysis.

Table 1. Distribution of the Water-Related Proverb Corpus

Category	Mandarin	Indonesian
Proverbs (<i>Peribahasa</i>)	10	20
Idiomatic Expressions	10	0
Total	40	

Category	Number
Chinese Proverbs	10
Chinese Idiomatic Expressions	10
Indonesian Proverbs	20
Total	40

Table 2. Corpus of Chinese Water-Related Proverbs and Idiomatic Expressions

No.	Chinese Expression	Pinyin	English Meaning	Potential Conceptual Metaphor	Type
1	水能载舟，亦能覆舟	Shuǐ néng zài zhōu, yì néng fù zhōu	Water can carry a boat, but it can also overturn it	Power Is Water	Proverb
2	滴水穿石	Dī shuǐ chuān shí	Dripping water penetrates stone	Persistence Is Water	Idiomatic Expression
3	吃水不忘挖井人	Chī shuǐ bù wàng wā jǐng rén	When drinking water, do not forget the one who dug the well	Gratitude Is Water	Proverb
4	水落石出	Shuǐ luò shí chū	When the water recedes, the rocks appear	Truth Is Emerging from Water	Idiomatic Expression
5	水乳交融	Shuǐ rǔ jiāo róng	Water and milk blend together perfectly	Harmonious Relationships Are Mixing Water	Idiomatic Expression
6	水深火热	Shuǐ shēn huǒ rè	Deep water and scorching fire	Suffering Is Water	Idiomatic Expression
7	水到渠成	Shuǐ dào qú chéng	When water arrives, the channel is formed	Success Is Flowing Water	Idiomatic Expression
8	流水不腐	Liú shuǐ bù fǔ	Flowing water never becomes stagnant	Vitality Is Flowing Water	Idiomatic Expression
9	水至清则无鱼	Shuǐ zhì qīng zé wú yú	If the water is too clear, there will be no fish	Social Harmony Is Balanced Water	Proverb
10	水火无情	Shuǐ huǒ wú qíng	Water and fire show no mercy	Natural Forces Are Water	Idiomatic Expression
11	远水救不了近火	Yuǎn shuǐ jiù bù liǎo jìn huǒ	Distant water cannot put out a nearby fire	Help Is Water	Proverb
12	井水不犯河水	Jǐng shuǐ bù fàn hé shuǐ	Well water does not interfere with river water	Social Boundaries Are Water	Proverb
13	一碗水端平	Yì wǎn shuǐ duān píng	Hold a bowl of water evenly	Fairness Is Balanced Water	Proverb
14	水涨船高	Shuǐ zhǎng chuán gāo	When the water rises, the boat rises	Development Is Rising Water	Idiomatic Expression
15	水往低处流，人往高处走	Shuǐ wǎng dī chù liú, rén wǎng gāo chù zǒu	Water flows downward, people strive upward	Human Aspiration Is Water Movement	Proverb
16	水火不相容	Shuǐ huǒ bù xiāng róng	Water and fire are incompatible	Conflict Is Water–Fire Opposition	Idiomatic Expression
17	覆水难收	Fù shuǐ nán shōu	Spilled water cannot be gathered again	Irreversible Events Are Spilled Water	Idiomatic Expression
18	近水楼台先得月	Jìn shuǐ lóu tái xiān dé yuè	A pavilion near water gets the moonlight first	Opportunity Is Proximity to Water	Proverb

No.	Chinese Expression	Pinyin	English Meaning	Potential Conceptual Metaphor	Type
19	逆水行舟，不进则退	Nì shuǐ xíng zhōu, bù jìn zé tuì	Sailing against the current; if you do not advance, you retreat	Life Is Navigation on Water	Proverb
20	近水知鱼性，近山识鸟音	Jìn shuǐ zhī yú xìng, jìn shān shí niǎo yīn	Near water one learns the nature of fish; near mountains one learns the songs of birds	Understanding Is Approaching Water	Proverb

Table 3. Corpus of Indonesian Water-Related Proverbs

No.	Indonesian Expression	English Meaning	Potential Conceptual Metaphor	Type
1	<i>Air beriak tanda tak dalam</i>	Noisy water is shallow	Superficial Knowledge Is Shallow Water	Proverb
2	<i>Air tenang menghanyutkan</i>	Still water can sweep one away	Hidden Strength Is Deep Water	Proverb
3	<i>Air susu dibalas dengan air tuba</i>	Milk repaid with poison	Kindness Is Pure Water	Proverb
4	<i>Air mendung tidak selalu turun hujan</i>	Cloudy weather does not always bring rain	Appearance Is Water Condition	Proverb
5	<i>Adakah dari telaga yang jernih mengalir air yang keruh</i>	Clear springs do not produce muddy water	Moral Character Is Water Quality	Proverb
6	<i>Air jernih ikannya jinak</i>	Clear water breeds tame fish	Social Harmony Is Clear Water	Proverb
7	<i>Bagai air di daun talas</i>	Like water on a taro leaf	Instability Is Moving Water	Proverb
8	<i>Sekali air dalam, sekali pasir berubah</i>	Deep water changes, sand changes	Life Change Is Water Movement	Proverb
9	<i>Air pun ada pasang surut</i>	Water also has tides	Fortune Is Water Level	Proverb
10	<i>Bukan air muara yang ditimba, sudah disauk dari hulunya</i>	Draw water from the source before the estuary	Prevention Is Controlling Water	Proverb
11	<i>Air yang dingin juga yang dapat memadamkan api</i>	Cool water extinguishes fire	Gentleness Is Water	Proverb
12	<i>Selama air hilir selama gagak hitam</i>	As long as water flows downstream	Permanence Is Flowing Water	Proverb
13	<i>Seperti air dalam kolam</i>	Like water in a pond	Stability Is Still Water	Proverb
14	<i>Air cucuran atap jatuhnya ke pelimbahan juga</i>	Roof water falls to the drain below	Inheritance Is Water Flow	Proverb

No.	Indonesian Expression	English Meaning	Potential Conceptual Metaphor	Type
15	<i>Air yang tenang jangan disangka tiada buaya</i>	Still water may hide crocodiles	Danger Is Deep Water	Proverb
16	<i>Air besar batu bersibak</i>	Flood water exposes stones	Truth Is Revealed by Water	Proverb
17	<i>Air lalu kubangan tohor</i>	Water passes, puddles dry up	Time Is Flowing Water	Proverb
18	<i>Air yang jernih keruhnya tak sekali</i>	Even clear water may become muddy	Human Imperfection Is Water Turbidity	Proverb
19	<i>Air dicencang tidak akan putus</i>	Water cannot be cut apart; family ties cannot be broken	Kinship Is Water	Proverb
20	<i>Air laut asin sendiri</i>	The sea is salty by its own nature	Character Is Water Nature	Proverb

The Mandarin corpus consists of 20 expressions (10 Proverbs and 10 idiomatic expressions), whereas the Indonesian corpus consists of 20 *peribahasa*. All data were selected based on their explicit use of water imagery and validated through authoritative dictionaries and proverb references.

2.2 Data Classification

For analytical purposes, the corpus was classified into two linguistic categories: proverbs and idiomatic expressions. The Chinese corpus consists of 10 Proverbs and 10 idiomatic expressions, whereas the Indonesian corpus consists entirely of proverbs. This classification was adopted to distinguish different types of proverbial expressions and to avoid conflating proverbs with idiomatic expressions in the comparative analysis.

2.3 Data Validation

The validity of all Mandarin data was confirmed through consultation with the *Hanyu Yanyu Da Cidian* (Comprehensive Dictionary of Chinese Proverbs), the *Xiandai Hanyu Cidian* (Contemporary Chinese Dictionary), and the Indonesian data through *Kamus Peribahasa Indonesia* and KBBI.

2.4 Data Analysis

The analysis was guided by Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) as proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). Each expression was subjected to a source-domain–target-domain mapping procedure, allowing for the systematic identification of conceptual metaphors embedded in the water-related imagery of both Mandarin and Indonesian proverbs.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Findings

The analysis identified a series of conceptual metaphors in which water serves as the source domain for understanding various aspects of human experience. Based on the corpus of 40 expressions, the metaphorical mappings can be grouped into several major conceptual domains, including social relationships and moral values, life and change, power and danger, as well as knowledge and truth. Although Chinese and Indonesian proverbs originate from different linguistic and cultural traditions,

both corpora demonstrate a strong tendency to employ water imagery as a cognitive tool for conceptualizing abstract social and cultural experiences.

This finding is consistent with Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), which argues that abstract concepts are commonly understood through more concrete and embodied experiences. In this framework, water functions as the source domain, while concepts such as morality, social relationships, power, and knowledge constitute the target domains. The metaphorical mappings identified in the corpus demonstrate how speakers of both languages rely on everyday experiences with water to structure their understanding of complex social and cultural realities.

Furthermore, Kövecses (2010) emphasizes that conceptual metaphors are shaped not only by universal human experiences but also by cultural contexts. As a natural element closely associated with survival, agriculture, transportation, and social life, water occupies an important position in both Chinese and Indonesian societies. Consequently, many water-related metaphors reflect shared human experiences, while others reveal culture-specific values and worldviews embedded in each linguistic tradition.

From a cognitive linguistic perspective, metaphor is not merely a stylistic device but a fundamental mechanism of thought that influences how people perceive and interpret reality (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Therefore, the water-related expressions examined in this study should be understood as manifestations of underlying conceptual structures rather than isolated figurative expressions. By analyzing the source-domain–target-domain mappings, it becomes possible to uncover the cultural knowledge and cognitive patterns encoded in the proverbs of both languages.

The following sections examine these conceptual metaphor patterns through source-domain–target-domain mappings and compare their manifestations in Chinese and Indonesian proverbial expressions.

3.1.1 Water as a Metaphor for Social Relationships and Moral Values

The analysis reveals that one of the most productive conceptual domains in both corpora is the association between water and social relationships and moral values. In these expressions, water functions as the source domain through which speakers conceptualize a wide range of abstract social and ethical concepts, including gratitude, fairness, harmony, kinship, inheritance, and moral character. Drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory, these mappings demonstrate how concrete experiences with water are used to structure and understand complex aspects of human interaction and social life. Because water is an essential element for survival and is closely connected to everyday experience, it provides a familiar and culturally meaningful source domain for expressing values that regulate interpersonal relationships and community life.

The prevalence of these metaphors suggests that both Chinese and Indonesian speakers perceive social relationships as dynamic systems that require balance, continuity, and mutual support, much like the characteristics of water itself. Water can flow smoothly, connect separate spaces, sustain life, and maintain equilibrium, making it an effective metaphorical resource for representing harmonious social relations and ethical behavior. At the same time, qualities such as clarity, purity, and stability are frequently associated with positive moral attributes, while imbalance or contamination may imply social or moral deficiencies.

Furthermore, the recurring use of water imagery in both corpora reflects the cultural significance of collective values and social responsibility. Rather than focusing solely on individual experiences, many of the expressions emphasize obligations toward others, respect for social norms, and the maintenance of harmonious relationships within families and communities. This metaphorical pattern indicates that water is not merely a physical substance in proverbial discourse but also a powerful cognitive and cultural symbol through which speakers interpret and communicate fundamental principles of social cohesion and moral conduct.

Table 4. Conceptual Metaphor Mappings of Water in Social Relationships and Moral Values across Mandarin and Indonesian Proverbs

Expression	Conceptual Metaphor
吃水不忘挖井人 (chī shuǐ bù wàng wā jǐng rén)	Gratitude Is Water
水乳交融 (shuǐ rǔ jiāo róng)	Harmonious Relationships Are Mixing Water
井水不犯河水 (jǐng shuǐ bù fàn hé shuǐ)	Social Boundaries Are Water
一碗水端平 (yī wǎn shuǐ duān píng)	Fairness Is Balanced Water
水至清则无鱼 (shuǐ zhì qīng zé wú yú)	Social Harmony Is Balanced Water
Air susu dibalas dengan air tuba	Kindness Is Pure Water
Air dicencang tidak akan putus	Kinship Is Water
Air cucuran atap jatuhnya ke pelimbahan juga	Inheritance Is Water Flow
Air jernih ikannya jinak	Social Harmony Is Clear Water
Adakah dari telaga yang jernih mengalir air yang keruh	Moral Character Is Water Quality

3.1.2 Water as a Metaphor for Life, Change, and Human Experience

The second major conceptual domain identified in the corpus is the association between water and life, change, and human experience. In these expressions, water functions as the source domain through which speakers conceptualize abstract aspects of existence, including personal growth, life transitions, fortune, persistence, instability, and the passage of time. Because water is inherently dynamic, constantly moving, and subject to natural fluctuations, it provides an effective experiential basis for understanding the changing conditions of human life. Through conceptual metaphorical mappings, physical experiences with flowing, rising, receding, or still water are projected onto human experiences of development, struggle, success, and uncertainty.

The Chinese corpus demonstrates a strong tendency to conceptualize life as a process of continuous movement and self-improvement. Expressions such as 水到渠成 (“when water arrives, the channel is formed”), 流水不腐 (“flowing water never becomes stagnant”), and 逆水行舟, 不进则退 (“sailing against the current; if you do not advance, you retreat”) portray life as an active journey that requires perseverance and constant effort. Similarly, 水涨船高 (“when the water rises, the boat rises”) associates development and success with rising water levels, while 覆水难收 (“spilled water cannot be gathered again”) highlights the irreversible nature of certain life events. These metaphors reflect a worldview in which human progress is achieved through persistence, adaptation, and continuous engagement with changing circumstances.

Comparable patterns can also be observed in the Indonesian corpus. Proverbs such as Air pun ada pasang surut (“water also has tides”) and Sekali air dalam, sekali pasir berubah (“deep water changes, sand changes”) conceptualize life as a fluctuating process characterized by cycles of success and difficulty. Other expressions, including Bagai air di daun talas (“like water on a taro leaf”) and Air lalu kubangan tohor (“water passes and puddles dry up”), emphasize instability, impermanence, and the passing of time. Unlike many Chinese expressions that stress perseverance and progress, Indonesian proverbs tend to place greater emphasis on adaptability and acceptance of change as a natural part of life. Nevertheless, both traditions share the understanding that human existence is inherently dynamic and that water provides a powerful metaphorical framework for interpreting the uncertainties and transformations of lived experience.

Table 5. Conceptual Metaphor Mappings of Water in the Domain of Life, Change, and Human Experience across Mandarin and Indonesian Proverbs

Expression	Conceptual Metaphor
水到渠成 (Shuǐ dào qú chéng)	Success Is Flowing Water
流水不腐 (Liú shuǐ bù fǔ)	Vitality Is Flowing Water
水涨船高 (Shuǐ zhǎng chuán gāo)	Development Is Rising Water
逆水行舟，不进则退 (Nì shuǐ xíng zhōu, bù jìn zé tuì)	Life Is Navigation on Water
覆水难收 (Fù shuǐ nán shōu)	Irreversible Events Are Spilled Water
水往低处流，人往高处走 (Shuǐ wǎng dī chù liú, rén wǎng gāo chù zǒu)	Human Aspiration Is Water Movement
水深火热 (Shuǐ shēn huǒ rè)	Suffering Is Deep Water
远水救不了近火 (Yuǎn shuǐ jiù bù liǎo jìn huǒ)	Help Is Distant Water
Air pun ada pasang surut	Fortune Is Water Level
Sekali air dalam, sekali pasir berubah	Life Change Is Water Movement
Bagai air di daun talas	Instability Is Moving Water
Air lalu kubangan tohor	Time Is Flowing Water
Seperti air dalam kolam	Stability Is Still Water
Selama air hilir selama gagak hitam	Permanence Is Flowing Water

3.1.3 Water as a Metaphor for Power, Danger, and Natural Forces

Water is not only a source of life but also a force of immense power and potential danger. In both Mandarin and Indonesian proverbs, water is frequently employed to conceptualize power, risk, and the dual nature of natural forces—capable of both sustaining and destroying. This metaphorical domain draws upon the physical properties of water: its capacity to carry, submerge, erode, and overwhelm. Through conceptual mappings, these properties are projected onto human experiences of authority, conflict, risk, and the uncontrollable aspects of nature and society.

In the Mandarin corpus, the most emblematic expression in this domain is 水能载舟，亦能覆舟 ("water can carry a boat, but it can also capsize it"), which conceptualizes power as a dual-edged force. While this proverb is historically associated with political authority—the ruler as the boat and the people as the water—it also captures the broader cognitive understanding that water (and by extension,

power) can be both supportive and destructive. Similarly, 水火无情 ("water and fire show no mercy") emphasizes the relentless and impartial nature of natural forces, reflecting a worldview in which humans are subject to the overwhelming power of nature. 水火不相容 ("water and fire are incompatible") further extends this metaphorical logic to conceptualize conflict and opposition as the inherent incompatibility between water and fire.

The Indonesian corpus offers parallel expressions. Air yang tenang menghanyutkan ("still water can sweep one away") conceptualizes hidden danger beneath a calm surface, suggesting that power and risk are not always visible. This proverb implies that individuals who appear gentle or unassuming may possess formidable strength or harbor latent threats. Air besar batu bersibak ("flood water exposes stones") similarly conceptualizes danger as a revealing force: just as floodwater removes the cover from stones, crises or powerful events expose hidden truths and underlying realities. The expression Air yang dingin juga yang dapat memadamkan api ("cool water can extinguish fire") adds a nuanced dimension to this domain, suggesting that power can also take the form of gentleness and restraint—that calmness itself can be a force capable of overcoming aggression.

Across both corpora, the metaphor of water as power and danger reveals a shared cognitive recognition of nature's ambivalence. Water sustains life, yet it can also destroy; it appears calm, yet it can overwhelm. These metaphorical mappings reflect not only universal human experiences with natural forces but also culturally embedded attitudes toward authority, risk, and resilience. In Mandarin, water's power is more frequently framed in relational terms—between rulers and subjects, between opposing forces—while in Indonesian, the emphasis leans toward the hidden, the unpredictable, and the revelatory aspects of water's force.

The following table summarizes the metaphorical mappings identified in this domain:

Table 6. Conceptual Metaphor Mappings of Water in the Domain of Power, Danger, and Natural Forces in Mandarin and Indonesian Proverbs

Expression	Conceptual Metaphor
水能载舟，亦能覆舟 (Shuǐ néng zài zhōu, yì néng fù zhōu)	Power Is Water
水火无情 (Shuǐ huǒ wú qíng)	Natural Forces Are Water
水火不相容 (Shuǐ huǒ bù xiāng róng)	Conflict Is Water–Fire Opposition
滴水穿石 (Dī shuǐ chuān shí)	Persistence Is Penetrating Water
Air yang tenang menghanyutkan	Hidden Danger Is Deep Water
Air besar batu bersibak	Truth Is Revealed by Water
Air yang dingin juga yang dapat memadamkan api	Gentleness Is Cooling Water
Air yang tenang jangan disangka tiada buaya	Danger Is Deep Water

3.1.4 Water as a Metaphor for Knowledge, Truth, and Understanding

Water is also pervasively used in both Mandarin and Indonesian proverbs to conceptualize knowledge, truth, and understanding. This metaphorical domain draws upon the physical properties of water related to clarity, depth, surface appearance, and the gradual uncovering of what lies beneath. Just as clear water allows one to see the bottom, and receding water reveals hidden rocks, water serves

as an intuitive source domain for conceptualizing the acquisition of knowledge, the revelation of truth, and the distinction between superficial and deep understanding.

In the Mandarin corpus, 水落石出 ("when the water subsides, the rocks emerge") is the most direct instantiation of this conceptual metaphor. The expression maps the physical process of water receding to expose submerged rocks onto the cognitive process of truth eventually surfacing after confusion or concealment. This metaphor implies that truth, like rocks beneath water, is objective and permanent—it merely awaits the right conditions to be revealed. Another expression, 近水知鱼性，近山识鸟音 ("near water one learns the nature of fish; near mountains one learns the songs of birds"), conceptualizes knowledge as a product of proximity and immersion. This proverb suggests that understanding arises not from distant observation but from close, sustained engagement with one's environment—a metaphor that resonates with experiential theories of learning and cognition.

In the Indonesian corpus, *Air beriak tanda tak dalam* ("rippling water indicates shallowness") serves as a counterpart to the Mandarin emphasis on depth and clarity. This proverb conceptualizes knowledge (or the lack thereof) through the visual cue of surface disturbance: just as ripples on water indicate a shallow depth, boastful or loud behavior indicates superficial knowledge. The metaphor implies that true knowledge is deep, calm, and not easily disturbed. Similarly, *Adakah dari telaga yang jernih mengalir air yang keruh* ("clear springs do not produce muddy water") conceptualizes moral and intellectual integrity as a direct correlation between source and output—pure knowledge or character originates from pure sources. *Air jernih ikannya jinak* ("clear water breeds tame fish") extends this logic to social and cognitive harmony, suggesting that clarity of understanding fosters harmonious outcomes.

A notable convergence between the two corpora is the shared association between water clarity and epistemological reliability. Both traditions conceptualize clear water as a metaphor for truth, transparency, and genuine understanding, while murky or disturbed water symbolizes confusion, deception, or intellectual shallowness. However, a subtle difference emerges in the emphasis: Mandarin proverbs tend to focus on the process of revelation (truth emerging over time), while Indonesian proverbs place greater weight on surface indicators (behavior as a sign of underlying knowledge or character).

The following table summarizes the metaphorical mappings identified in this domain:

Table 7. Conceptual Metaphor Mappings of Water in the Domain of Knowledge, Truth, and Understanding in Mandarin and Indonesian Proverbs

Expression	Conceptual Metaphor
水落石出 (Shuǐ luò shí chū)	Truth Is Emerging from Water
近水知鱼性，近山识鸟音 (Jìn shuǐ zhī yú xìng, jìn shān shí niǎo yīn)	Understanding Is Approaching Water
近水楼台先得月 (Jìn shuǐ lóu tái xiān dé yuè)	Opportunity Is Proximity to Water
<i>Air beriak tanda tak dalam</i>	Superficial Knowledge Is Shallow Water
<i>Adakah dari telaga yang jernih mengalir air yang keruh</i>	Moral Character Is Water Quality
<i>Air jernih ikannya jinak</i>	Social Harmony Is Clear Water
<i>Air mendung tidak selalu turun hujan</i>	Appearance Is Water Condition

3.1.5 Cross-Cultural Similarities and Differences

The preceding analysis reveals that the use of water as a source domain for conceptual metaphor in Mandarin and Indonesian proverbs exhibits more convergences than divergences, despite the distinct linguistic, ecological, and philosophical backgrounds of the two cultures. This section synthesizes the cross-cultural patterns observed across all metaphorical domains and discusses their cognitive and cultural implications.

Table 8. Comparative Summary of Water Metaphor Domains

Conceptual Domain	Mandarin	Indonesian	Degree of Overlap
Social Relationships & Moral Values	✓	✓	High
Life, Change & Human Experience	✓	✓	High
Power, Danger & Natural Forces	✓	✓	High
Knowledge, Truth & Understanding	✓	✓	High

3.2 Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that water functions as a highly productive source domain in both Mandarin and Indonesian proverbs, supporting the central premise of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) that abstract concepts are systematically understood through concrete bodily and environmental experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Across the four conceptual domains identified—social relationships and moral values, life and human experience, power and danger, and knowledge and truth—water serves as a cognitive resource for organizing complex social, moral, and philosophical concepts. These findings reinforce the argument that metaphor is not merely a linguistic ornament but a fundamental cognitive mechanism through which speakers conceptualize reality. The widespread use of water imagery in both languages reflects the universal significance of water as an essential element of human life while simultaneously revealing culturally embedded patterns of meaning.

The comparison further indicates that the metaphorical representations of water exhibit substantially more similarities than differences across the two linguistic traditions. Many metaphorical mappings, including Gratitude Is Water, Life Is Water Movement, Truth Is Revealed by Water, and Social Harmony Is Clear Water, appear in both corpora despite the absence of historical linguistic relatedness between Mandarin and Indonesian. This convergence supports Kövecses' (2010) proposition that many conceptual metaphors originate from shared embodied experiences. As water is universally associated with survival, movement, purification, and adaptation, both Chinese and Indonesian speakers naturally employ it to conceptualize social interaction, morality, and human experience. Similar observations have been reported in comparative metaphor studies, which argue that natural elements frequently generate universal conceptual structures because they derive from common human interactions with the physical environment (Wierzbicka, 1997; Mieder, 2004).

Despite these similarities, the analysis also reveals culturally specific elaborations that distinguish the two metaphorical systems. Mandarin proverbs tend to emphasize social order, collective responsibility, perseverance, and hierarchical relationships, reflecting the long-standing influence of Confucian philosophy on Chinese cultural cognition. Expressions such as 水能载舟，亦能覆舟 ("Water can carry a boat, but it can also overturn it") and 一碗水端平 ("Hold a bowl of water evenly") conceptualize power, fairness, and governance through water imagery, illustrating the importance of social balance and ethical leadership. In contrast, Indonesian proverbs more frequently associate water with hidden danger, adaptability, moral vigilance, and acceptance of life's uncertainties. Proverbs such as Air tenang menghanyutkan ("Still water can sweep one away") and Air pun ada pasang surut ("Water also has tides") reflect a worldview that emphasizes caution, resilience, and the dynamic nature of human existence. These differences support Kramsch's (1998) argument that language embodies

cultural perspectives, allowing metaphorical expressions to preserve culturally specific systems of knowledge and values.

From a cognitive linguistic perspective, the study demonstrates that identical source domains may generate different target-domain mappings depending on cultural context. Although both linguistic communities conceptualize water as movement, purity, and natural force, the underlying cultural interpretations vary according to historical experience, philosophical traditions, and social norms. This finding aligns with Kövecses (2002), who argues that conceptual metaphors are simultaneously universal and culture-specific. Universal experiential foundations explain why similar water metaphors appear across languages, whereas cultural models determine how these metaphors are elaborated and interpreted. Consequently, the comparison presented in this study extends previous single-language research by illustrating that metaphorical cognition reflects an interaction between embodied experience and sociocultural knowledge rather than either factor alone.

The study also contributes to the broader fields of cognitive linguistics, paremiology, and intercultural communication. Proverbs function as repositories of collective cultural memory, preserving values, beliefs, and traditional knowledge across generations (Honeck, 1997; Mieder, 2004). By systematically comparing Mandarin and Indonesian water-related proverbs, this study provides a validated bilingual corpus that may support future cross-cultural linguistic research and language education. The findings have practical implications for teaching Mandarin and Indonesian as foreign languages, where conceptual metaphors can be incorporated into intercultural learning to enhance learners' understanding of culturally embedded meanings. Nevertheless, the present study is limited by the relatively small corpus and its exclusive focus on proverbial expressions. Future research should expand the corpus to include additional discourse genres, such as literary texts, political discourse, and everyday communication, while also employing corpus-based and experimental approaches to further investigate the cognitive processing of conceptual metaphors across different linguistic communities.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that water imagery constitutes a shared cognitive resource in the metaphorical systems of both Mandarin and Indonesian, despite the distinct linguistic, ecological, and philosophical backgrounds of the two cultures. The analysis of 40 water-related proverbs reveals that conceptual metaphors of water in both traditions exhibit more convergences than divergences across four major domains: social relationships and moral values, life and human experience, power and danger, and knowledge and truth, as analyzed in Sections 3.1–3.4 and summarized in Table 5. These parallels reflect universal human experiences with water, while the nuanced differences—such as the Confucian emphasis on social order in Mandarin versus the Indonesian focus on hidden depths and moral vigilance—are products of distinct cultural contexts and philosophical traditions. The results carry pedagogical implications for language instruction and cross-cultural communication training, and the validated bilingual corpus provided by this study offers a resource for future research in cognitive linguistics, paremiology, and intercultural metaphor studies.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The corpus is limited to 40 expressions and may not fully represent water metaphors in either language, and the analysis focuses exclusively on proverbs, excluding other genres such as poetry or everyday conversation. Future research could expand the corpus to include other genres and other natural elements—such as fire, earth, or wind—and incorporate native speaker intuition through experimental methods.

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