

The Concept of Waterways in Southern Vietnamese Folk Poetry

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Abstract

Southern Vietnam's cultural aspects have recently been well studied by many researchers and scholars. However, the cognitive domain of WATER/RIVER, especially in the Southern folk songs has not been paid much attention in those studies. This paper explores the cognitive domain of WATER/RIVER in the culture of the South of Vietnam. The results of this study identify some cognitive domains related to water/river such as domains RIVER; WATER, FISH AND FISHING; BOATS AND SHIPS and clarify that Southerners have reflected themselves on the water/river environment and regional nature of the South. To this end, our study helps readers identify the value of Southern regional cultural identities and the close relationship between "language - thinking and culture" through a specific genre - Southern folk songs.

Keywords: Cognitive Domain, Water/River Domain, Southern Folk Songs, Vietnam.

INTRODUCTION

Culture is a rich and complex system of values created and accumulated by humans throughout their existence and development. Due to this complexity, researchers have proposed various definitions and classifications of culture. However, there is a common agreement on recognizing one crucial component of culture: the cultural adaptation to the natural environment. In general, scholars refer to this as a sub-system. At a more specific level, the cultural adaptation to the natural environment is divided into two micro-systems: (i) the culture of utilizing the environment and (ii) the culture of coping with the environment (Nam, 2013). Thus, the waterways environment plays a significant role in shaping human beliefs, customs, traditions, perceptions, daily activities, and more.

According to Colman, a concept is a mental representation, an idea, or a thought corresponding to a distinct entity or a class of entities. It can also be a definition or a set of prototypical attributes of that entity or class of entities, which may be either concrete or abstract (Colman, 2015).

According to Ly Toan Thang, "A concept is not merely the result of a thinking process but rather the product of cognitive activity. It embodies human knowledge or understanding based on accumulated experience passed down through generations" (Thang, 2009). A concept is not only universal to all humankind but also culturally specific, as it is closely linked to the language and culture of a particular community.

Cognitive linguistics considers concepts as mental or psychological units of our consciousness, as content units of dynamic memory, mental vocabulary, and the brain, as well as representations of the entire worldview reflected in human cognition. The characteristics of concepts can be summarized as follows:

- i) Concepts are not fixed or unchanging; they evolve as human cognition adapts to historical and social conditions. For example, the concept of "beauty" changes over time.
- ii) Concepts do not exist in isolation but are interconnected, forming a conceptual system. Each conceptual system consists of foundational (originating) concepts and secondary (derived) concepts.
- iii) Concepts within a conceptual system do not have clear boundaries; instead, there is a phenomenon of blurred boundaries. Some concepts even overlap between different conceptual systems.

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According to Langacker, the structure of a concept typically consists of two components: the concept profile and the concept base (or concept frame). The concept profile refers to the specific concept expressed by a given word. The concept base is the background knowledge or conceptual structure presupposed by the concept profile-without which the concept profile would be meaningless. For example, the concept of weekend (concept profile) cannot be understood without the background knowledge (concept base) of the Gregorian calendar (in the Western system, a week is divided into seven days) and the socio-cultural conventions of Western society (a week is divided into workdays and weekends) (Langacker, 1991).

Therefore, the meaning of a linguistic unit must be determined by considering both the concept profile and the concept base. Cognitive linguists have different perspectives on the classification of concepts, but they can generally be grouped into three main categories:

- i) Concepts related to historical figures, social events, and national organizations.
- ii) Concepts associated with geographical locations.
- iii) Concepts pertaining to human spiritual and emotional life.

Tran Van Co, building on previous research, proposed a triadic classification of concepts based on the framework: human – movement in time – movement in space (Co, 2009).

In essence, the conceptual system emerges from the interaction of three main sources:

- (i) Interaction with the human body itself,
- (ii) Interaction with the environment, and
- (iii) Interaction with other people, all under the influence of a specific cultural context.

When people think of Southern Vietnam, they often picture a land blessed by nature, with vast, boundless rice fields, lush fruit orchards, and rivers rich with alluvial deposits. The sight of countless rivers, both large and small, stretching across the region is a common one, as these waterways have been an integral part of local life for generations.

The people of Southern Vietnam often compare the intricate network of rivers and canals to the lifblood running through their land. Unlike in Northern Vietnam, where villages are traditionally marked by bamboo hedges and communal gates, the boundaries of Southern hamlets and neighborhoods are defined by rivers, canals, and streams. Perhaps this is why the people of the South cherish their rivers as vital lifelines that sustain their way of life.

The aim of this study is to explore the concept of waterways as a means of delving into the cognitive world of the Vietnamese people within the category of “waterways” Specifically, it seeks to examine the symbolic meanings of waterway-related concepts as expressed in Southern Vietnamese folk poetry and folk songs (Research corpus: Southern Vietnamese Folk Poetry and Folk Songs by authors Bao Dinh Giang, Nguyen Tan Phat, Tran Tan Vinh, and Bui Manh Nhi, published by Ho Chi Minh City Publishing House, 1984). Through this exploration, the study further investigates the intricate relationship between the triad of language, cognition, and culture in Vietnamese society, with a particular focus on Vietnamese people in Southern Vietnam.

Literature Review

Research on Southern Vietnamese Folk Poetry

Southern Vietnamese folk poetry is an essential part of Vietnamese folklore, reflecting the life, thoughts, and emotions of people in the riverine region. Various studies have analyzed:

- (i) Linguistic and Content Characteristics of Southern Vietnamese Folk Poetry – Research by Bao Dinh Giang et al., (1984), Nguyen Xuan Kinh (1992), Dinh Gia Khanh (1995), Vu Ngoc Phan (2017), and Tran Ngoc Them (2018) highlights the poetry’s free-spirited nature, authenticity, and vivid depiction of the distinctive natural scenery of the waterway region.

- (ii) Southern Vietnamese Folk Poetry in Cultural Life – Studies by Huynh Cong Tin (2006), Tran Van Nam (2008), and Tran Phong Dieu (2010) emphasize the role of folk poetry in reflecting customs, traditions, and beliefs.
- (iii) Comparisons with Other Regional Folk Poetry – Examining Southern Vietnamese folk poetry in contrast to other regions helps identify its unique characteristics in terms of natural imagery, human portrayals, and folk thinking.

Research on the Concept of Waterways in Culture and Language

Waterways are not merely a natural element but also carry profound symbolic meaning in Vietnamese thought. Some key research directions include:

- (i) Symbolism of Waterways in Folklore – Research by Tran Phong Dieu (2010), Nguyen Huu Hiep (2011), Nguyen Thi Thu Trang (2011), Nguyen Thi Thuy Hang (2012), Doan Thi Thuy Huong (2015), Van Nu Quynh Tram (2018), and Tang Tan Loc (2022) affirms that waterways serve as a central image in the consciousness of the people of the Mekong Delta, closely linked to daily life, beliefs, and worldviews.
- (ii) Waterways in Language and Thought – Studies by Nguyen Thi Thanh Phuong (1997), Tran Ngoc Them (2006), Tran Phong Dieu (2008), Ly Tung Hieu (2010), Huynh Cong Tin (2010), Nguyen Duc Ton (2010), Trinh Sam (2011a, 2011b), and Tang Tan Loc (2021) analyze how people use water imagery to express philosophies of life, love, fate, and life's transformations.
- (iii) Waterways from a Semantic Perspective – Research by Tran Thi Ngoc Lang (1995), and Nguyen Duc Dan (2016) examines the vocabulary related to water in folk poetry to reveal layers of metaphorical meanings.

Systematization of Related Studies

From these studies, several major research trends on the concept of waterways in Southern Vietnamese folk poetry can be identified:

- (i) How waterways reflect the lives of Southern Vietnamese people, from daily activities and labor to beliefs and worldviews.
- (ii) The symbolic meanings of waterways, encompassing human emotions, philosophies of life, and a deep connection with nature.
- (iii) The influence of river culture on language use, shaping the unique style of Southern Vietnamese folk poetry.

Methodology

Documentary Research Method

This method helps collect and process relevant sources to establish a theoretical basis for the study. Specifically:

Searching for documents: Gathering research works on Southern Vietnamese folk songs (ca dao), riverine culture, and conceptual metaphors in language from books, newspapers, theses, dissertations, and scientific journals.

Analyzing documents: Reading, selecting, and systematizing information from collected sources to serve as a foundation for analyzing ca dao.

Comparing with previous studies: Evaluating scientific perspectives on the concept of rivers and water in folk literature to identify research gaps that need further exploration.

Analytical and Synthetic Method

Analyzing language and imagery in Southern Vietnamese ca dao to identify conceptual metaphors related to rivers and water (e.g., water symbolizing life, love, fate, change, etc.).

Synthesizing the characteristics of water-related concepts in ca dao and categorizing them into key thematic groups that reflect the mindset and culture of the Southern Vietnamese people.

Comparing with the socio-cultural context to examine how ca dao reflects the daily lives of riverine communities in Southern Vietnam.

Statistical and Classification Method

Collecting and categorizing Southern Vietnamese ca dao that contain water-related elements from ca dao anthologies, research books, and oral sources.

Interdisciplinary Approach

Applying linguistics: Analyzing the use of words and metaphorical images related to rivers and water in ca dao of Southern Vietnam.

Integrating cultural studies: Examining the concept of water in relation to customs, traditions, and beliefs of the Southern Vietnamese people.

Results

The Concept of “RIVER” (SÔNG)

According to the Vietnamese Dictionary, a river (sông) is defined as “a relatively large natural watercourse that flows continuously on the surface of the earth, usually navigable by boats. A river has its bends, just as a person has their ups and downs” (Phe, 2010). “A river or flowing water is simultaneously a symbol of the potential of all things, the constant movement of all forms, fertility, death, and renewal. The flow of a river represents both life and death. Descending from high places, meandering through valleys, and eventually merging into lakes and seas, a river symbolizes human life, with its continuous stream of desires, emotions, intentions, and the countless twists and turns along the way” (Chevalier, Jean & Gheerbrant, 2002).

“A river originates from its source, formed by the convergence of hundreds of streams and creeks. As it flows through various stages, the farther it moves from the source, the weaker its force becomes, until it ultimately dissolves into the vast ocean. Human life is not so different-born from the waters of the mother, growing up, maturing, aging, and finally passing away, returning to the divine waters, the realm of Buddha (returning to the golden stream, the nine springs)” (Sam, 2011).

In Vietnamese folk poetry, the concept of the river often symbolizes homeland and nation. In Southern Vietnamese folk poetry, however, the river represents not only homeland but also culture, character, customs, and traditions. Rivers are considered the lifeblood of transportation, with river mouths serving as market hubs and many residents living on or along the water. The traditional housing arrangement in Southern Vietnam is typically radial, with houses facing the river, making the riverfront the primary façade. This settlement pattern distinguishes Southern villages from those in Central and Northern Vietnam. People in the South not only settle along rivers but also along the coast, as reflected in the folk verse:

“Mắm trước, được sau, tràm theo sát,

Sau hàng dừa nước, mái nhà ai”.

(Fermented fish first, mangroves behind, followed closely by melaleuca,

Beyond the nipa palms, whose house is that?)

This verse not only describes the distribution of plant ecosystems in mangrove forests but also reflects the historical process of land reclamation and coastal expansion, carried forward by alluvial deposits and resilient vegetation. At the same time, it highlights the deep harmony between people and their water-based environment. The picturesque river landscape serves as a catalyst for creativity, inspiring young men and women to compose folk songs and playful melodies, teasing one another while easing the hardships of labor. As a result, the river environment becomes a place of social interaction, meetings, and heartfelt expressions of love:

“Sông sâu sóng bủa lảng cò,

Thương em vì bởi câu hò có duyên”.

(The deep river waves ripple far and wide,

I love you for your charming folk tune)

“Nước chảy liu liu, lục bình trôi liú rú,

Anh thấy em nhỏ xíu anh thương”.

(The water flows gently, the water hyacinths drift closely,

I see you small and delicate, and my heart fills with love)

“Sông sâu cá lội biệt tăm,

Anh đi biệt xứ biết năm nào về?”

(Deep river, fish swim out of sight,

I leave this land-who knows when I'll return?)

Beyond being a means of transportation, the river also acts as a natural boundary that separates people, leaving them to wait and hope for reunion. The image of rivers and waterways serves as a backdrop that enhances the beauty of love and happiness, acting as a witness to vows and a bridge connecting romantic relationships:

“Sông dài cá lội biệt tăm,

Phải duyên chồng vợ ngàn năm cũng chờ”.

(The long river, fish swim out of sight,

If destined as husband and wife, we'll wait a thousand years)

The word “tăm” refers to the tiny bubbles left by fish underwater. Based on this metaphorical connection, the Vietnamese language has developed expressions such as “biệt tăm biệt tích” (disappearing without a trace), “bóng chim tăm cá” (as elusive as a bird's shadow or a fish's bubbles), and “chờ tăm đợi cá” (waiting in vain, longing for someone to return).

The Concept of “NƯỚC” (WATER)

“Nước” is a purely Vietnamese word and a polysemous term (having multiple meanings). It exhibits a high degree of independence, as it can combine with various word classes such as adjectives, verbs, and nouns, following different syntactic orders. According to the Vietnamese Dictionary (Phe, 2010), the word “nước” has three homonymous forms (words that sound the same but have different origins). Among them, “nước₁” belongs to the conceptual domain under study and is a polysemous word (having multiple meanings).

Type	1	2
Meaning	1.1. A colorless, odorless, and transparent liquid when pure, naturally found in rivers, lakes, and oceans. 1.2. A liquid in general. 1.3. An instance or turn of using water. 1.4. A coating or outer layer. 1.5. A natural glossy appearance.	A territory where people of one or multiple ethnic groups live together under a common socio-political system and belong to a specific state.

The riverine environment has left a profound mark on the speech and daily communication of Southern Vietnamese people. A vast array of words is used to describe objects, phenomena, and concepts related to water:

- i) To refer to bodies of water (kinh, lạch, xẻo, lạng, xáng, bung, bầu, đĩa, vũng, trấp, lung, rạch, vàm, bùng binh...).
- ii) To denote landforms surrounded by water (cù lao, cồn, bãi, bưng, biển, trấp...).

iii) To describe the movement of water (nước lớn, nước ròng, nước đứng, nước nằm, nước bò, nước lặn, nước nhảy, nước chảy, nước rong (nước rông), nước quay, nước nhúng, nước rọt, nước ương, nước rặt, nước quàu, nước cà từng, nước sụt, nước giựt, nước chùng, nước chết, nước sát, nước rọt rẹt, nước re...).

iv) To refer to water-based means of transportation and related vessels (ghe, xuồng, tàu, đò, tam bản, vỏ lãi, tắc ráng...).

Naturally, these words have found their way into Southern Vietnamese folk poetry, bringing it to life with vivid expressions. The presence of water symbolizes the laws of life:

“Có ai nước cũng bằng bờ,

Không ai nước cũng cầm cơ mực này”.

(Water levels are always even with the shore for some,

While others struggle to hold their ground)

Water also represents strength:

“Ân tình này đã hết trôi,

Ngãi nhân như nước tràn đồng khó ngăn”.

(When love and gratitude fade,

Kindness is like a flood-it cannot be restrained)

In daily life and social interactions, Southern Vietnamese people understand the rhythms of the tides. When the water rises, they set out; when it recedes, they return. Both journeys follow the current, making travel convenient:

“Chiều chiều con nước lên cao,

Thuyền anh cập bến cấm sào thăm em”.

(Every evening, as the tide rises,

My boat docks so I can visit you)

“Nước ròng rồi nước đi xa,

Chèo mau anh đợi thuyền ta cùng về”.

(As the tide recedes and the water drifts away,

Row quickly-I'll wait for our boat to return together)

When the tide is favorable, even heavily loaded boats move swiftly-so fast that a person running on foot might not keep up:

“Nước ròng chảy thẩu Nam Vang,

Sầu đâu chín rụng sao chàng ở đây?”

(The receding tide flows all the way to Nam Vang,

Yet the sorrowful fruit falls-why are you still here?)

“Nước lớn rồi lại nước ròng,

Đố ai bắt được con còng trong hang?”

(The tide rises and falls,

Who can catch the crab hiding in its burrow?)

The following folk verse describes the movement of water while also expressing the emotions of those in love:

“Nước rong nước chảy tràn đồng,

Tơ duyên sẵn có chỉ hồng chưa se”.

(The flood tide rises, overflowing the fields; our destined love is ready, yet the red thread remains unspun)

“Nước rong” (or “nước rông”) refers to an exceptionally high tide, higher than other regular high tides in a month or year. It can overflow the banks, flooding areas that other tides do not reach. In this context, it metaphorically suggests that the love between the couple has reached maturity, yet fate has not yet sealed their bond, leaving them longing in solitude. Other verses continue this theme of love and waiting:

“Nước sông lững đững lờ đờ,

Thương người nói vậy biết chờ hay không”.

(The river flows lazily and sluggishly,

I express my love-will you wait for me or not?)

“Nước dưới sông lững đững,

Mây đưa gió dật dờ.

Tơ duyên đã buộc sạm sờ,

Qua đây bầu đó còn ngờ đâu xa”.

(The river flows unhurriedly, the clouds drift with the wind; our fates are already entwined, yet you still hesitate as if we were worlds apart)

The term “lững đững” describes water in an in-between state-neither full nor low. On a deeper level, it conveys subtle disappointment, a gentle reproach that the other person has not fully reciprocated or committed to the relationship, leaving feelings uncertain and unresolved.

The Concept of “FISH - FISHING”

It is no coincidence that the concept of “FISH - FISHING” appears frequently in Southern Vietnamese folk poetry and proverbs. Based on our observations, out of 100 folk verses, proverbs, and idioms mentioning aquatic animals, the term “fish” occurs most frequently, making up 26 out of 100 instances (Phuong, 1997). Moreover, in Vietnamese cuisine, fish is considered a rich source of protein. This belief is reflected in the saying: “Đắt cá hơn rẻ thịt” (It’s better for fish to be expensive than for meat to be cheap).

In the structure of Vietnamese meals, fish remains the top choice, especially for residents of the Mekong Delta. As a result, the concept of “fish” in both their material and spiritual life is rich and diverse:

“Tiếc công đào ao nuôi cá,

Ba bốn tháng trời người lạ đến câu”.

(I regret the effort of digging a pond to raise fish,

Only for a stranger to come and fish them out after a few months)

“Cá không ăn câu thật là con cá dại,

Vác cần câu về nghĩ lại con cá khôn”.

(A fish that refuses the bait is truly foolish; the fisherman leaves, reflecting on the wisdom of the fish).

In these verses, “fish” symbolizes a young woman, while “fishing” represents a young man or his emotions and approach in love.

The concept of “fishing” (câu) is deeply ingrained in the culture of river-dwelling communities, as it is a common method of catching fish and shrimp. A fishing hook (lưỡi câu) is a small metal hook, often baited and tied to the end of a fishing line. From this basic meaning, the word “câu” has given rise to various extended meanings, such as “câu độ” (betting), “câu giờ” (stalling for time), “câu mánh” (scheming), “câu mâu” (seeking conflict), and “câu lưu” (soliciting patronage). Observe the following verses:

“Anh ngồi bực lở anh câu,

Khen ai khéo mách cá sấu không ăn”.

(He sits by the eroded riverbank, fishing,

Yet wonders who cleverly warned the sorrowful fish not to bite)

“Câu vàng lưỡi bạc nhợ tợ,

Câu thời câu vậy cá chờ có nơi”.

(A golden hook, a silver lure, and a silk line-he casts his bait, yet the fish waits for the right place)

“Cá không ăn câu thật là con cá dại

Bởi câu anh cầm câu ngãi câu nhân”.

(A fish that refuses the bait is truly foolish; for in my hands, the hook holds love and loyalty)

“Bậu chê anh quân tử lở thì,

Anh tở như con cá ở cạn chờ khi hóa rồng.

Ngày nào nên ngãi vợ chồng,

Đôi lứa ta như thể cá hóa rồng lên mây”.

(You reject me, thinking I am an outdated gentleman; but I am like a stranded fish awaiting the moment to transform into a dragon. When fate unites us as husband and wife, we shall rise together like the fish that becomes a dragon and ascends to the clouds)

The image of “cá hóa rồng” (a fish transforming into a dragon) in folk poetry is closely linked to a unique aspect of Vietnamese culture-the reverence for the carp (cá chép, also called cá lý ngư). According to legend, the carp can transform into a dragon and ascend to the heavens, serving as a sacred messenger carrying messages from the human world to the gods.

In Southern Vietnamese folk poetry, “cá hóa rồng” symbolizes progress and self-improvement, striving for something greater. In some cases, “cá ở cạn” (a fish stranded on land) represents an individual with hidden potential or noble character, awaiting the right opportunity to flourish.

While “cá hóa rồng” is associated with spiritual beliefs and sacred transformations, the saying “lia thia quen chậu” reflects a more ordinary and relatable aspect of daily life:

“Chim quyen ăn trái nhãn lồng,

Lia thia quen chậu, vợ chồng quen hơi”.

(The nightingale eats the caged longan fruit; the fighting fish grows accustomed to its bowl, just as a husband and wife grow familiar with each other)

Here, “lia thia” (a type of small fighting fish) represents domestic harmony and adaptation, emphasizing the idea that relationships, like all things, develop through familiarity and mutual understanding. Unlike the Southeast region, the Southwest is recognized as the land of waterway transportation:

“Sài Gòn là xứ ngựa xe,

Mỹ An là xứ xuồng ghe dập diu”.

(Saigon is the land of horses and carriages,

While My An is the land of bustling boats and sampans)

Closely associated with this riverine environment is the image of “fish - fishing”, a recurring theme in Southern folk poetry. These images reflect the daily routines and labor of river-dwelling communities, portraying a simple yet warm and affectionate way of life shared among family members:

“Cha chài mẹ lưới con câu,

Chàng rể đóng đáy, con dâu ngồi nò”.

(Father casts the net, mother sets the trap, the son fishes,

The son-in-law secures the stakes, and the daughter-in-law tends the bamboo fish weir)

“Chiều chiều ông Lữ đi câu,

Bà Lữ đi xúc, con dâu đi mò”.

(Every evening, Mr. Lu goes fishing,

Mrs. Lu scoops shrimp, and the daughter-in-law dives for shellfish)

This scene, though ordinary, is strikingly beautiful-not through elaborate words or poetic embellishment but through its simplicity and authenticity. It captures the warmth, closeness, and mutual care among family members. Beyond that, this imagery highlights a tightly-knit community where responsibilities are distributed sensibly. Each person contributes their effort with enthusiasm, ensuring productive and harmonious labor. The folk verses not only illustrate the rhythm of daily life but also celebrate the spirit of diligence, cooperation, and familial love that defines the cultural essence of the Southwest region.

The concept of “FISH - FISHING” in folk poetry reflects an aspect of material culture-specifically, the practice of fishing and aquaculture. This is expressed through concrete activities such as raising fish, fishing, and selling fish.

The Concept of “BOATS - SHIPS” and “GHE - XUỒNG”

In daily life, boats and ships are ranked according to different social value hierarchies. This classification is not based on the vessels themselves but on the status of their users:

- *Thuyền rồng* (dragon boat) – Symbolizing nobility and royal privilege:

“Trai ơn vua cỡi thuyền rồng,

Gái ơn chồng bồng con thơ”.

(A man repays the king by riding a dragon boat,

A woman repays her husband by caring for their child)

- *Thuyền chài* (fishing boat) – Representing hardship and toil:

“Bà chúa phải gai bằng thuyền chài đổ ruột”.

(Even a queen can suffer pain when reduced to a fishing boat’s struggles)

- Thuyền thúng (basket boat) – Symbolizing playfulness and contrast:

“Vừa ăn, vừa chơi, vừa thả thuyền thúng vừa bơi thuyền rồng”.

(Eating and playing, letting a basket boat drift while rowing a dragon boat)

This pattern highlights a fundamental cultural principle: boats are categorized not by their physical form but by their users. The folk verse:

“Chiếc thuyền kia nói có,

Chiếc ghe nọ nói không.

Phải chi miếu ở gần sông,

Em thề một tiếng kéo lòng anh nghi”.

(That boat says yes, this canoe says no; if only the temple were near the river, I would swear to ease your doubt)

At the core of these classifications lies a deeper principle: the perception of humans as physical entities within their environment. In other words, we interpret and categorize the material world through human experiences, using familiar objects as metaphors to understand social and cultural structures. Within this mental and cultural framework, let's examine the following verses:

“Bớ chiếc ghe sau chèo mau anh đợi,

Kéo giông khói đèn bờ bụi tối tăm”.

(Oh, the boat behind, row quickly,

For I am waiting-lest the storm and the lamplight fade into the darkened shore)

“Đừng theo cái thói ghe buôn,

Khi vui thì ở, khi buồn thì đi”.

(Do not be like a merchant boat-staying when pleased, leaving when sorrowful)

“Em biểu anh đừng đi bạn ghe chài,

Cột buồm cao, bao lúa nặng, sợ ngày dài anh xa em”.

(I ask you not to sail with the fishing boat-the mast is high, the rice sacks are heavy, and I fear the long days of separation)

“Mồ cha đũa đốn cây bần,

Không cho ghe cá đậu gần ghe tôm”.

(Curse the one who cut down the mangrove,

For it prevents the fishing boat from docking near the shrimp boat)

“Anh có thương em thì thương cho trọn,

Có bỏ thì bỏ cho luôn.

Đừng làm theo lối ghe buôn,

Lờ đờ nước hển cho lòng em đau”.

(If you love me, love me fully; if you leave, then leave completely-do not be like a merchant boat, drifting idly like a lazy tide, causing me heartache)

“Ngồi trên mũi ghe chài lớn,

Cầm lái về kinh xáng Thới Lai.

Nhìn khói đốt đồng mù mịt lên khơi,

Bây giờ anh mới biết chán đời đi ghe”.

(Sitting on the deck of the large fishing boat, steering toward the Thoi Lai canal, I see the smoke rising from the burning fields. Only now do I realize the weary life of a boatman)

These verses continue to employ conceptual metaphors, as analyzed earlier. However, what stands out is the distinctive way Southern Vietnamese people categorize waterway transport. While the overarching semantic category (boats and ships) may be universal, the basic and subordinate levels of classification reveal unique structuring of thought. The distinction is not only in how different types of watercraft are categorized but also in the way imagery is imposed onto these vessels. For instance, a merchant boat symbolizes instability and fleeting attachment, while a fishing boat embodies perseverance and endurance. This highlights a key cultural-linguistic trait: the Southern Vietnamese mindset conceptualizes their material world in deeply human terms, framing abstract emotions, relationships, and social dynamics through the lens of their everyday waterborne reality.

In the life of Southern Vietnamese people, ghe (boats), xuồng (small boats), tàu (ships), and đò (ferries) have played a crucial role for centuries. Almost no household in the countryside is without a “xuồng”. “Đò” and “tàu” are mainly used for passenger transport, while ghe is typically used for carrying goods.

“Phong Điền chợ nổi ven sông,

Bềnh bồng mặt nước chợ đông sớm chiều”.

(Phong Dien's floating market by the river-bustling and lively from dawn till dusk)

“Không xuồng nên phải lội sông,

Đói lòng nên phải ăn ròng bẹ môn”.

(Without a boat, one must wade through the river; when hungry, one must eat taro stems continuously)

The nomadic life of river merchants, constantly moving from place to place, is filled with hardships. At times, it evokes feelings of melancholy:

“Đạo nào bằng đạo đi buôn,

Xuống biển lên nguồn gạo chợ nước sông”.

(No path is as uncertain as the path of merchants-traveling from the sea to the headwaters, selling rice in floating markets and river towns)

“Nước lên cá đuối ăn theo,

Lái buôn hết gạo bỏ neo cầm chừng”.

(As the waters rise, the stingrays follow; when merchants run out of rice, they must drop anchor and wait)

These verses not only reflect the deep connection between the Southern people and their waterways but also depict the struggles and resilience of those who depend on rivers for their livelihood. The imagery of boats, markets, and flowing water serves as a metaphor for the transience and unpredictability of life.

In Southern Vietnamese folk poetry, the imagery of “thuyền-chèo” (boat-rowing) often symbolizes poverty and hardship:

“Chồng chèo thì vợ cũng chèo,

Hai đứa cùng nghèo lại đụng với nhau”

(If the husband rows, the wife must row too-two poor souls meeting in hardship)

Additionally, the conceptual metaphor “PLANTS ARE PEOPLE” is skillfully employed in Southern folk poetry. Human fate is likened to floating duckweed, drifting aimlessly with the current, symbolizing an unstable and uncertain existence (thân phận bèo trôi, thân phận bọt bèo- the fate of floating duckweed and foam):

“Thiếp than cha mẹ thiếp nghèo,

Thiếp than phận thiếp như bèo trôi sông”.

(I lament my parents' poverty,

I lament my fate-like duckweed floating on the river)

“Thân em như thể bèo trôi,

Sóng dập gió dồi biết tấp vào đâu”.

(My life is like floating duckweed-battered by waves and winds, not knowing where to land)

Similarly, the imagery of water currents, water hyacinths, and boats in Southern Vietnamese folk poetry symbolizes a wandering, unstable human existence:

“Thân em như lục bình trôi,

Gió dập sóng dồi biết tấp vào đâu?”

(My life is like a drifting water hyacinth-tossed by wind and waves, unsure where to settle)

Life in the river regions of the Mekong Delta is inherently tied to movement and change. Like water hyacinths carried by the current, the people of the South often live a transient life, constantly adapting to the ebb and flow of the rivers that shape their existence.

The conceptual metaphors analyzed above partly demonstrate that Southern Vietnamese folk poetry is deeply rooted in the riverine culture, making it distinct from other regions. The presence of rivers and waterways plays a crucial role in both the material and spiritual life of the people in this land. It shapes their cultural identity, influences their way of life, and fosters customs and traditions that reflect the essence of a water-bound existence. The imagery of water, boats, fish, and floating plants in Southern folk poetry is not just a literary motif but a testament to the intimate relationship between the people and the waterways that sustain them.

CONCLUSION

From a cognitive perspective, in human thought, the most familiar entities appear first, most frequently, and have the greatest impact. As cognitive subjects, people often project their own image onto the riverine environment, and through interaction, this environment inevitably reflects back onto human life and society.

In Southern Vietnamese folk poetry, the close connection between people and water is evident in how natural elements like rivers, boats, fish, and tides are used as metaphors to express emotions, social relationships, and life experiences. This reciprocal relationship highlights the profound influence of the water-based landscape on the worldview, culture, and identity of Southern Vietnamese communities.

In other words, through interactive experiences, humans often use their knowledge and experiences from one conceptual domain to understand another. While the above analysis does not fully encapsulate all water-related conceptual metaphors in Southern Vietnamese folk poetry, it demonstrates that the riverine worldview has consciously or unconsciously influenced many thoughts and actions of Southern Vietnamese people. This influence extends beyond folk poetry to various other art forms, which we will explore in future research.

*Surveyed Data:

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