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**METAPHORICAL CONCEPTUALIZATION OF "SADNESS" IN CHINESE IDIOMS***Xu Wen*\* *Junhao Chen* *Southwest University, Chongqing, China**Corresponding author\****Received:** 26.04.2022 **Reviewed:** 03.05.2023 and 05.05.2023**Similarity index:** 0%

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**Abstract:** "Sadness", as one of the most basic emotional experiences of human beings, is metaphorically conceptualized and manifests itself in language. Based on conceptual metaphor theory, this paper categorizes the metaphorical conceptualization of Chinese "sadness" idioms, and further analyzes their cognitive mechanisms and cognitive motivations. The study discovers that embodied experiences play a role in the metaphorical conceptualization of "sadness" idioms and it is restricted by the unique cultural background.

**Key words:** metaphor; emotion; conceptualization of "sadness"; Chinese idioms; embodied experience.

**1. Introduction**

As Vikan writes, "[s]cientists have prophesized that the present century will be the century for emotions. There are indications that this is already happening" (2017: vii). Emotions are abstract, vague and affective psychological states. In order to better express and understand the emotion concepts, humans usually employ metaphors to conceptualize those concepts. According to Kövecses (2000), metaphor plays a role in the conceptualization of emotions. The language that expresses emotions is always metaphorically conceptualized. From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, conceptual metaphor is not only a tool for expression but also a way of cognition and thinking. With



the rising of cognitive linguistics, researchers realize that metaphor is the key to explaining the relation among language, emotion and cognition. At the same time, conceptualization is the central topic in cognitive linguistics. Language structures rely on and meanwhile reflect conceptualization which is based on our bodily experiences (Wen 2022). Langacker (1990) pointed out that the term "conceptualization" has a very broad interpretation, including novel and fixed concepts, feelings, muscle movements and emotional experiences, and knowledge of immediate situations (social, material and linguistic). It is the process of meaning construction and this process works with metaphor. The basic function of metaphor is to facilitate the understanding of the experience of one domain using the experience of another and to conceptualize categories (Lakoff & Johnson 1980).

Emotion metaphors are a significant subject in the study of human cognition. Over the past years, research has shown that the conceptualization of emotions is constructed by metaphor on the basis of embodied experience. The Chinese idioms, as an indispensable part of the Chinese culture, are characterized by their conciseness in expression and incisive meaning. This research attempts to study the metaphorical conceptualization of "sadness" in the Chinese idioms so as to reveal how metaphor contributes to the conceptualization of "sadness" and help to better understand the formation of conceptualization of emotions in the Chinese idioms.

## **2. A brief literature review**

The study of emotions, at the very start, is a topic in psychological studies. This situation has changed with the efforts of linguistics and other inter-disciplinary researches. The study of emotion concepts from the perspective of cognitive linguistics began with Lakoff and Johnson (1980). In *Metaphors we live by*, they pioneered the study of emotion with conceptual metaphor theory, thus starting the study of emotional language from the perspective of cognitive linguistics. Another important figure is the Hungarian linguist Kövecses, who has done a lot of research on emotional languages from the perspective of conceptual metaphor and a systematic study on emotional expressions in English. Moreover, he has also conducted research on "emotion" by comparing other languages such as French, German and English. All his achievements are collected in his works *Emotion and metaphor: Language, culture and body* (2000). Most of researches in this field are derived from findings in the above study.

At the very beginning, scholars were interested in how emotion is embodied in metaphorical language. Kövecses (2000) argues that it is impossible to conceptualize most aspects of emotion in non-metaphorical terms. Many scholars such as Averill (1974), Holland and Kipnis (1994), Kövecses (2000), Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have researched on the metaphorical conceptualization of "emotion word", and the contributions of metaphor to conceptualization have been affirmed.

Chinese scholars have studied emotional language from the perspective of conceptual metaphor for more than 20 years. They were mainly devoted to introducing the latest research achievements in the West and trying to apply them to Chinese studies or comparative studies between English and Chinese. With the development of the research on the conceptualization of emotion, the researches on emotional metaphor have been combined with diverse topics.

On the one hand, some of the Chinese scholars studied the emotional metaphor in translation. Feng and Li (2017) investigate emotional metaphors as well as their English translations with grief, lovesickness and love as the target domain. The study shows that most of the emotion metaphors can be listed into three conceptual metaphors, i.e., EMOTION IS LIQUID, EMOTION IS PLANT, EMOTION IS OBJECT, and the last one is usually realized by unfamiliar collocations. On the other hand, some scholars studied conceptualization of emotions combined with corpora. Li and Xie (2018) found that although conceptualizations of emotions are dynamic, subjective, and dissimilar, the metaphorical thought of emotion *Bei* (sadness) in the medical classic of *Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor* is consistent with the emotion word "sad" proposed by the modern West, which is negative. The study sheds light on the understanding and translation of the medical classics. Moreover, there is also the comparative analysis of emotional conceptualization between two languages. Chen (2007) presented a contrastive study of HAPPINESS emotion metaphors between English and Chinese and tried to find the similarities and differences between them. Gu (2008) pointed out that the emotional concept "joy" in both English and Chinese has four metaphorical frameworks: "JOY IS UPWARD", "JOY IS LIGHT", "JOY IS SWEET SUBSTANCE" and "JOY IS FLUID". It can be seen that those conceptual metaphors exist in different cultures, and at the same time, there are commonalities in the cognition of different nationalities. Xue and Xiang (2009) put forward the idea that "happiness" is evolved on the basis of human's embodied experiences and consists of the same

and different cognitive prototypes. It is also concluded that the category and concept of "happiness" between English and Chinese is formed on the cognitive reference point of prototype by family resemblance and metaphorical cognitive mechanism.

Generally speaking, the study on emotion metaphors from the linguistic perspective in China is still unsystematic and incomprehensive. Furthermore, it is found that there are few papers researching metaphorical conceptualization of emotions combined with Chinese idioms.

### **3. Emotion metaphors of sadness in Chinese idioms**

The traditional study of metaphor has always regarded metaphor as a rhetorical device, and the rhetorical study of metaphor can be traced back to ancient Greek. In 1980, Lakoff and Johnson introduced the theory of conceptual metaphor, including its definition and working mechanism, in their work *Metaphors we live by*. They completely distinguished conceptual metaphor from traditional metaphor and opened the door to the study of metaphor from the perspective of cognitive linguistics. Metaphor is universal: conceptual metaphor can be seen everywhere in any language, spoken or written, poetry or prose. Metaphor is not only a rhetorical device, but also a cognitive tool. Painting, music and architecture are all products of metaphor. In these products, any simple or complex design expresses some ideas or views, which are expressed through metaphor. Cognitive metaphor theory regards metaphor as a way to understand and perceive the world.

The Chinese idioms about "sadness", as the impacted and incisive language peculiar to Chinese language, also reflect how metaphor contributes to the conceptualization of "sadness". We will study the emotion metaphors of sadness in Chinese idioms in terms of the three major types of conceptual metaphors adduced by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), that is, ontological metaphor, orientational metaphor, and structural metaphor.

#### *3.1 Ontological Metaphor*

Ontological metaphor is the way to map abstract concepts to the entities and materials related to our own experience, that is, to transform abstract and fuzzy thoughts, feelings and psychological states into tangible and concrete entities. According to our analysis, it is found that the ontological metaphor of "sadness" in Chinese idioms is based on "HUMAN BODY (ORGANS) IS CONTEAINER" and

"HUMAN BODY (ORGANS) IS FRAGILE SUBSTANCE".

### *3.1.1 SADNESS IS SUBSTANCE IN CONTAINER*

The first metaphor derived from container metaphor is "SADNESS IS SUBSTANCE IN CONTAINER", which can be reflected in the following Chinese idioms (it should be noted that the idioms listed all refer to a state of "sadness", however, in order to show how "sadness" is conceptualized in these idioms, the examples listed are only literally translated):

- (1) 痛贯心膂 (the pain and sadness is deep into the heart and spine)
- (2) 痛彻心扉 (the heart is filled with sorrow)
- (3) 痛切心骨 (the pain and sorrow reaches to marrow)
- (4) 满腔悲愤 (one's chest is suffused with grief and anger)
- (5) 惆怅满腹 (the feelings of melancholy pervades abdomen)
- (6) 悲愤填膺 (someone's chest is full of grief and anger)
- (7) 哀思如潮 (the feelings of sorrow rage on like waves of sea)

Human body and its function are at the center of the interaction between people and the environment. We employ our bodies and sensory organs to perceive and experience the world. Emotion is the psychological experience of human body as response to entities or events.

The cognitive basis of "SADNESS IS SUBSTANCE IN CONTAINER" is based on "HUMAN BODY/ORGANS IS CONTAINER". Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 29) pointed out that "each of us is a container, with a bounding surface and an in-out orientation". Humans are physical beings. We perceived ourselves as bounded from the rest of the world by the surface of our skins, and we experience that the rest of the world is outside us. In interaction with the surrounding environment, the observed world is reflected, processed and stored by the brain to form a knowledge structure, or schema structure. The knowledge structure "HUMAN BODY/ORGANS IS CONTAINER" is formed in our interaction with the world. And "SADNESS IS SUBSTANCE IN CONTAINER" is derived from it and constructs the semantic structure of the "sadness" idioms.

Human body is like a container system, in which smaller "containers" like heart, liver, guts are also in part of it. Under normal circumstances, the "substance", in this case the "substance of sadness" in our body maintain balance of physical functions, because the emotion including sadness is our normal physiologic function (see Fig. 1).

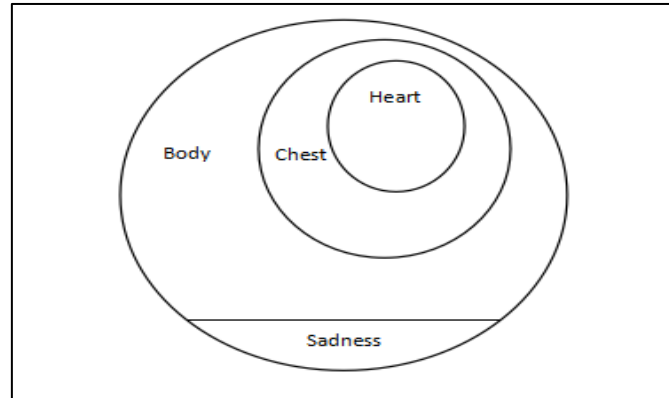


Figure 1. The substance of "sadness" in normal condition (Source: Own processing)

If the balance is broken, that is, the substance is increasing and infiltrating into other containers like hearts, liver and so on, the feelings of sadness is imposed on us (see Fig. 2).

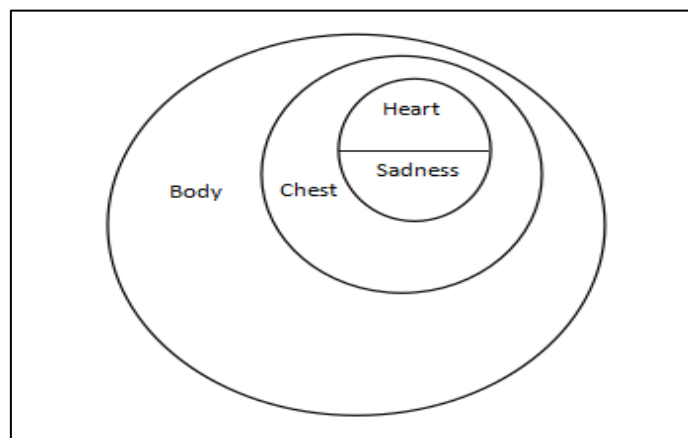


Figure 2. The substance of "sadness" flowing to heart (Source: Own processing)

When "substance of sadness" infiltrates into the heart, we get "痛贯心膂"(the pain and sadness is deep into the heart and spine) and "痛彻心扉" (the heart is filled with sorrow); when it goes into a smaller and deeper container like bone, we get expressions like "痛切心骨" (the pain and sorrow reach to marrow) (these examples above also can be seen as the manifestations of the conceptual metaphor "SADNESS IS PAIN". The reasons for this classification will be explained in 3.3.4.); also, it can "flow" to a bigger container like chest and belly as in "满腔悲愤" (someone's chest is suffused

with grief and anger) and "惆怅满腹" (the feelings of melancholy pervades abdomen). It can be observed that organs are usually compared to "containers", and some organs (for example, hearts) are frequently used in this way. The further explanations will be discussed in 3.1.3.

### 3.1.2 SADNESS IS SHARP OBJECT

In this case, human body (organs) is viewed as a fragile substance and sadness is the sharp object that breaks our body and organs. The metaphor of this kind can be seen in the following examples:

- (8) 痛心入骨 (the pain is deep into the heart and bone)
- (9) 痛入心脾 (the pain is deep into the heart and spleen)
- (10) 心碎肠断 (the heart and intestines are broken)
- (11) 肝肠寸断 (liver and intestines are cut into inches)
- (12) 摧心破肝 (heart is damaged and the liver is broken)
- (13) 泪干肠断 (weeping one's eyes out and intestine-broken)
- (14) 回肠寸断 (the terminal section of intestines are cut into inches)
- (15) 泪迸肠绝 (bursting into tears and intestine-broken)
- (16) 凄入肝脾 (the cold and sadness entering into liver and spleen)
- (17) 牵肠割肚 (the intestines are pulled and the abdomen is cut)
- (18) 撕心裂肺 (heart is rent and lungs are cracked)
- (19) 刺心裂肝 (heart is pierced and liver is cracked)

Characters like "入 (be deep into/entering into)", "断/破 (to break/damage)", "割 (to cut)", "裂 (to crack)", "刺 (to pierce)", "撕 (to rend)" in these idioms all picture that "sadness" is seen as a sharp object that can hurt and intrude into human body.

### 3.1.3 The organ image

Whatever "sadness" is seen as "substance in container" or "sharp objects", the container or fragile substance, in the metaphorical expression, is always organs like heart, lungs, intestines, liver and spleen. These characteristics of "sadness" metaphor is culture-specific, that is, these metaphors grow in a certain cultural background: thoughts and theories in Chinese traditional medicine. For example,

many thoughts which relates emotion to organs can be found in *Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor*:

- (20) 怒伤肝，悲胜怒；风伤筋，燥胜风；酸伤筋，辛胜酸。（《素问·阴阳应象大论》）

Anger can hurt the liver, and grief can restrain anger; wind can hurt muscles, dryness can restrain wind; eating too much sour food can hurt muscles, while acrid taste can inhibit sour taste. (*Su-wen • Comprehensive Discourse on Phenomena Corresponding to Yin and Yang*)

- (21) 悲则心系急，肺布叶举，而上焦不通，荣卫不散，热气在中，故气消矣（《素问·举痛论》）

Too much sorrow will make the channels connecting the heart with other organs tight, affect the lungs, make the lung lobes open and lift, block the part from the throat to the chest diaphragm, nutrients and immune function cannot be distributed throughout the body, and "re qi" will be blocked in the chest, and over time it will turn into heat and consume the "qi of lungs", so it is said that sadness causes qi to disappear. (*Su-wen· Listing and Analyzing Pain-Disease*)

- (22) 怒伤肝、喜伤心、思伤脾、悲伤肺、恐伤肾。（节选自《素问·阴阳应象大论》）

Anger hurts liver; happiness hurts heart; anxiety hurts spleen; sadness hurts lungs; fear hurts kidney. (excerpt from *Su-wen • Comprehensive Discourse on Phenomena Corresponding to Yin and Yang*)

- (23) “心者，君主之官也，神明出焉……肝者，将军之官，谋虑出焉……大肠者，传道之官，变化出焉。小肠者，受盛之官，化物出焉。”（《素问·灵兰秘典论》）

The heart, which dominates the whole body, is the official of the monarch, from which the spirits, consciousness and thinking activities of human beings emerge.....The liver, the master of anger, is as brave as a general. It is called the officer of a general. The strategy comes from this... The large intestine is the organ of transmission. It can transfer



the dross of food and change it into feces and excrete it out of the body. The small intestine is the organ that receives the food, and it bears the food from the stomach and further differentiates the clear and turbid. (*Su-wen-Linglan's Secret Scripture*)

Sadness leads to the elimination of "qi" (a core concept in Chinese medical culture, which refers to the substance that maintains life and the driving force of body function). Traditional Chinese medicine believes that excessive sadness is most likely to cause heart and lung diseases.

The lungs control "qi" and are responsible for breathing, so the first clinical symptoms are related to breathing, such as poor breathing, cough, expectoration and even hemoptysis. However, numerous veins connect the lungs, which is closely related to the function of the heart. The operation of the heart blood needs the promotion of the "qi of lungs", so the lack of "qi of lungs" will cause cough and asthma weakness, even chest distress. The lungs and intestines are also closely related, and chronic grief can also cause changes in the digestive system, such as dyspepsia, anorexia and even abnormal defecation. Through this, it shows that sadness will impose some certain effects on from organs to whole body, with the organs systems co-related with each other.

That is the cultural explanation for the frequent occurrence of some particular organs in the expressions related to sadness. The influence of Chinese traditional medical culture gives resources to the metaphor of sadness, which differentiates it from that of other cultures.

### *3.2 Orientational metaphor*

Orientational metaphor is based on our spatial experience. Here we usually conceptualize "sadness" as "down". Conceptual structure reflects embodied experience. Orientational metaphor derives from UP-DOWN image schema, which is viewed as a rudimentary concept as a result of our interaction with reality: the asymmetry of the body's vertical axis, which interacts with gravity, gives rise to UP-DOWN image schema (Johnson 1987). When we are sad, our body position appears to be "down": we low down our body, head, which map onto our spirit. In Chinese idioms, we can find the expressions below:

- (24) 泣不可仰 (someone is crying so hard that he/she can-not raise head)
- (25) 垂头丧气 (hanging one's head in dismay)
- (26) 萎靡不振 (be low in spirits and body posture)
- (27) 垂首丧气 (hanging one's head in dismay)
- (28) 垂头塌翼 (lowering head with wings hanging low)
- (29) 心低意沮 (be low in spirits)

Downward postures usually co-exist with sadness and depression as opposed to upright postures that denote positive vitality. The metaphor is embodied and the orientational metaphor of "sadness" is based on our cognition of spatial relation. For example, when people receive bad news, they will be sad and thus lower their head down; when people encounter news or information they can't bear, they will suddenly faint or fall to the ground (down); when people suddenly get sick because of sadness, they will lie down in bed. Not only our physical experience, our interaction with surroundings also offers evidence. In literature, the withered flower is usually used as an image for sadness. "Withered flower" usually includes the images like fallen leaves, blossoms as well as rotted trunk, which all represent "DOWN". In English, we may use "in low spirit", "down in the mouth" to express sadness. It can be concluded that "SADNESS is DOWN" is the most common conceptual metaphor in human language in that human share the same physical experience as response to the emotion of sadness.

### 3.3 Structural metaphor

Structural metaphors are those in which "one concept is metaphorically structured in terms of another" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 14). According to our data, metaphors of this kind are SADNESS IS ILLNESS, *SADNESS IS COLD*, *SADNESS IS DARK AND GRAY*, and *SADNESS IS PAIN*.

#### 3.3.1 SADNESS IS ILLNESS

This conceptual metaphor can be found in the Chinese idioms below:

- (30) 哀毁瘠立 (the grief brought by the death of parents causes someone to be emaciated)
- (31) 痛入骨髓 (pain is deep into marrow)
- (32) 痛心入骨 (the pain is deep into the heart and bone, which refer to an extreme sadness)
- (33) 痛入心脾 (the pain is deep into the heart and spleen, which refer to an extreme sadness)

- (34) 急痛攻心 (severe pain attacking heart, which refers to a feeling of extreme anxiety and grief)
- (35) 悲痛欲绝 (almost dying of grief)
- (36) 五内俱崩 (so sad that the viscera are broken down)
- (37) 疾首痛心 (having a headache with pain in heart)
- (38) 抑郁成疾 (so sad that one gets ill)

Sadness, as a negative emotion, will cause some damage to our health if it lasts for a long time. If we do not control this emotion in time and let it control our body, it is very likely that symptoms of some diseases appear. In fact, the word "抑郁 (depression)" refers to a disease, that is, a person is very unhappy and anxious, and even loses the ability to live a normal life. Therefore, sadness is an illness that needs to be treated seriously. In English, it is often said that "time heals all sorrow". It can be concluded that sadness is sometimes regarded as an illness and this conceptual metaphor has the nature of cognitive universality.

### 3.3.2 SADNESS IS COLD

Sadness sometimes is conceptualized as cold, as in:

- (39) 心灰意冷 (the heart is like ashes and spirits are "cold", which refers to a feeling of disappointment and frustration)
- (40) 心寒齿冷 (a cold on teeth out of sighing for long)
- (41) 百念灰冷 (all kinds of thoughts are cooled down and vanish)
- (42) 寒心酸鼻 (an impulsion to cry with a chill on heart)
- (43) 凄入肝脾 (the cold infiltrates into liver and spleen)

Here, temperature is employed as the source domain. To a large extent, human's emotions are expressed through the metaphors based on our physical experience. Here "physical experience" refers to the interaction between the body and the outside world, and knowledge of our body and world gained from it. The knowledge gained from our experience of temperature is an important part of our understanding of the world. Therefore, our physical experience of temperature contributes to the conceptualization of "sadness". When we feel sad, depressed or disappointed, we often want to stay away from the outside world and do nothing. Therefore, we will reduce our movements, which will

cause our body temperature to drop, so we will feel cold. Since our experience of heat is basic and exhibits a strong relation between temperature and emotion, the metaphorical concept of "sadness is cold" is structured.

### 3.3.3 *SADNESS IS DARK AND GRAY*

The visual experience also constitutes to the conceptualization of "sadness":

(44) 黯然神伤 (putting on a gloomy look on face)

(45) 黯然无神 (gloomy and listless)

(46) 黯然销魂 (putting on a gloomy look as if losing soul)

(47) 愁云惨淡 (the sky is darkened by over cast clouds, which can refer to the scene that makes people feel blue)

(48) 面若死灰 (putting on a gloomy and gray look like ashes)

Human beings can express rich and delicate abstract emotions with colour. When people are sad and depressed, their faces are usually dull and dark. Therefore, there is a conceptual metaphor of "SADNESS IS DARK AND GRAY" in both English and Chinese. On the basis of the repeated experience of the "dark", human beings have produced the mental image of "gloom and depression". It should be noted that in English, there is a conceptual metaphor "SADNESS IS BLUE", in which the mapping between BLUE and SADNESS is unique to English. This word was originally used to refer to blues music, which is a kind of music style from the south of the United States. Later, it was used to refer to sad feelings.

### 3.3.4 *SADNESS IS PAIN*

Here, sadness is regarded as pain in human's body, as in:

(49) 心如刀割 (feeling like heart is cut with a knife)

(50) 心如刀绞 (feeling as if a knife were being twisted in one's heart)

(51) 痛入骨髓 (the pain is deep into marrow)

As is mentioned in 3.1.3, the organ image, as an important part of Chinese traditional medical culture, deeply influences our conceptualization of "sadness". When people feel depressed, some uncomfortable physiological reactions may occur. Thus, that kind of "discomfort" is conceptualized as "sadness".

It should be noted that some examples listed above, such as 痛心入骨 (the pain is deep into the heart and bone) and 痛入心脾 (the pain is deep into the heart and spleen), which belong to the conceptual metaphor "SADNESS is SUBSTANCE in CONTAINER", can also be a sub-category of this metaphor. They are distinguished so as to provide a clearer picture of emotional metaphors. Therefore, it is worth mentioning that conceptual metaphors that facilitate conceptualization of "sadness" should not have a clear boundary. It is better to say that some conceptual metaphors are co-related together in order to conceptualize "sadness".

#### 4. Conclusion

According to the findings, the metaphors that contribute to the conceptualization of "sadness" can be classified as: 1) materialization of sadness, including "SADNESS IS SUBSTANCE in CONTAINER" and "SADNESS IS SHARP OBJECTS", which is based on the metaphor of our body "BODY IS CONTAINER" and "BODY IS FRAGILE OBJECTS"; 2) spatial experience. Our spatial experience helps to conceptualize "SADNESS IS DOWN"; 3) our perception of body, including perception for color, temperature, sense of pain, disease, which relates to sadness with complex mind mappings (see Fig. 3).

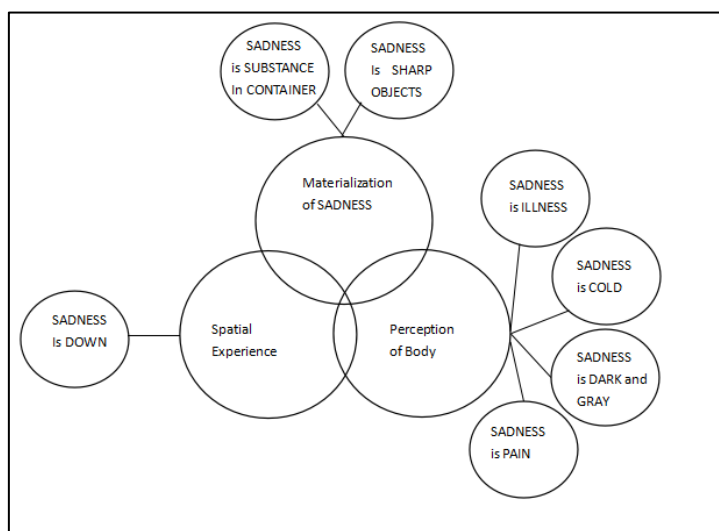


Figure 3. Metaphorical conceptualization of "sadness" in Chinese idioms (Source: Own processing)

Through the research on the metaphor of sadness in Chinese idioms, this paper draws the following conclusions: 1) the metaphorical conceptualization of "sadness" is embodied. The cognition of this abstract emotional concept in Chinese idioms is mainly based on the human physical experience of the emotion (such as downward, disease, darkness, cold, etc.) and the perception of the human body (such as sadness is substance, like fluid, in a container). This confirms the view that human cognition is gradually developed based on the understanding of human body and the interaction with outside world. 2) The conceptualization of "sadness" in Chinese idioms is culture-specific. Conceptualization is embodied and human share some similar or even the same physical experiences and interaction with the world, so the conceptualization of "sadness" has something in common. However, cultures can make a difference. Due to the influence of cultures, the sadness emotion in the Chinese idioms is connected with specific body images (such as broken intestines and lungs) while the sadness in English is mostly related to "blue". The former can be explained from the perspective of the underlying idealized cognitive model based on the theory of traditional Chinese medicine. The latter can be attributed to the idealized cognitive model of the word "blues" in the British and American cultural background. Therefore, it can be concluded that the metaphorical conceptualization of "sadness" has the nature of cultural relativity as well as cognitive universality. 3) The metaphors that underlie conceptualization of "sadness" have no clear boundary, and they seem to be inter-related to contribute to the construction of "sadness".

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