



Rain Metaphors and Images in Tan Twan Eng's *The Gift of Rain*: Perspectives on The Sociology of Malaysian Chinese Identity

Seng Tong Chong¹, Zalina Mohd Kasim² & Yu Jin Ng¹

¹ Universiti Tenaga Nasional, ² Universiti Putra Malaysia

Corresponding Author: sengtongchong@gmail.com

Article Information

Keywords

Tan Twan Eng, Malaysian Chinese, Malaysian literature in English, Metaphor, Rain

Abstract

Tan Twan Eng is one of the contemporary Malaysian Chinese writers who won several literary prizes at international literary awards. One of his novels, *The Gift of Rain*, uses rain metaphor and images as the main setting in most of the plots. This novel is set during the Japanese occupation period and the Malayan era. This paper then seeks the roles and functions of rain metaphors and images in the sociology of Malaysian Chinese. The images and metaphors of rain act as an approach into the socio-cultural understanding of the Malaysian Chinese communities. The significance of rain metaphors is heavily influenced by the history of the early diasporic journey to Malaya. This paper examines the link between rain metaphors and images and the Malaysian Chinese history and identity.

INTRODUCTION

Rain metaphor has a long history in human civilisation. Rain is an ancient ecological entity, as ancient as time and it has been around since the beginning of time. From the biblical perspective, Genesis 7:4 of the Old Testament states that "Seven days from now I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights, and I will wipe from the face of the earth every living creature I have made." This biblical verse basically describes God as being angry with human beings and hence promised the judgment day, or the second coming. This rain metaphor is mapped to the domain of purification. The fact that rain is used to clean up the earth on judgement day informs the readers that rain has a purifying function.

On the other hand, the biblical reading of Joel (2:23), mentioned that rain also has another function, which is to give life to earth and sustain human beings,

Be glad, people of Zion, rejoice in the LORD your God,
for he has given you the autumn rains because he is faithful.
He sends you abundant showers, both autumn and spring rains, as before.

These biblical verses state the importance and functions of rain. It gives life to the human being and is the source of everything, from the animals to the plants, up till the abiotic ecosystem. Apparently, from Genesis, the researcher can see that the human race suffered from the heavy rain created by God. However, from the second verse, the researcher can see that the people as described in the bible are happy and "rejoice" in receiving rain

from the Lord God. It concludes that rain is a double-edged sword, where it can bring life and at the same time destroy life.

Rain has many functions in human's lives. On one of the positive functions is that it maintains the ecological balance in this nature, sustaining the nature at the equilibrium. (Campbell & Reece 2015). Human beings, from the ancient civilisation till now, are heavily dependent on rain - to eat, to cook, to wash and in sum, to live a life. Without rain, the world will be in drought and the whole surface of the earth will become a desert. With this scenario, the earth will be like a dead star in the gigantic Milky Way.

With the long history of interaction between rain and mankind, human beings invented and created various images of rain. These images emphasise the dependency of human beings on rain. In Chinese mythologies, the God of Rain is a powerful god. The ancient people worshipped this god so that this God will pour rain from the heaven to sustain life. Some clans even sacrifice children to please the rain god, with a fear that if the rain god stopped sending rain down to earth, there would be no crop and fearfully, famine would steal their lives. (See Eberhard 1964 for a discussion on rain god in China). The biological and cultural importance of rain cannot be under estimated.

The classical Chinese poem has numerous rain images. Du Fu's Welcome Rain on a Spring Night is an example. (Translation is taken from Watson 2002, p.85). In the poem above, the rain symbolises life giver. It also symbolises the origin of everything on earth.

春夜喜雨 Welcome Rain on a Spring Night
好雨知时节 The good rain knows its season
当春乃发生 When spring arrives, it brings life
随风潜入夜 It follows the wind secretly into the night
润物细无声 And moistens all things softly, without sound
野径云俱黑 On the country road, the clouds are all black
江船火独明 On a riverboat, a single fire bright
晓看红湿处 At dawn one sees this place now red and wet
花重锦官城 The flowers are heavy in the brocade city

In the western culture, Sharifian (2014, p.123) studies the rain metaphor in English from the intercultural perspectives. His findings reveals that the aboriginal Australian aboriginal English conceptualises rain differently. The aboriginal English views rain as THE ANCESTOR SPIRITS' ANGER AS RAIN and ANCESTOR SPIRITS' TEARS AS RAIN. His finding points out the relationship between the RAIN domain and the ANCESTOR domain. From the ANCESTOR domain, this rain metaphor invokes the idea of life.

Sherifian's (2014) finding pave the onset of the discussion of rain metaphors in the selected novels from the Malaysian Chinese culture perspectives. The following section discusses the roles of rain metaphors situated in the Malaysian Chinese cultures.

DISCUSSION

The Gift of Rain is novel set during the Japanese Occupation in the Malayan era. It is a novel of love, family and betrayal. Interestingly, rain is prevalent throughout the narrative. For instance, in the beginning, Tan Twan Eng writes,

[1] I was born with the gift of rain, an ancient soothsayer in an even more ancient temple once told me.... I know her words had truth in them, for it always seemed to be raining in my youth. There were days of cloudless skies and unforgiving heat, but the one impression that remains now is of rain, falling from a bank of low floating clouds, smearing the landscape into a Chinese brush painting. Sometimes it rained so often I wondered why the colours around me never faded, were never washed away, leaving the world in mouldy hues (TTE, p.1).

The ancient soothsayer told him (Philip) that he was born with the gift of rain. In those days when the weather were arid, rain plays an important such as bringing everything alive. This symbolises that Philip was born as a

gift from God. There are also many other occasions in the narrative that happen with rain. For instance, when Philip first met Michiko Murakami;

[2] The day I met Michiko Murakami, too, a tender rain had dampened the world. It had been falling for the past week and I knew more would come with the monsoon. Already the usual roads in Penang had begun to flood, the sea turning to a sullen grey (TTE, p.13)

Michiko Murakami is an old friend of Endo-san, the man who teaches Philip Japanese martial arts. Endo-san has a strong relationship with Philip. Ironically, Endo-san is also the key personnel in the Japanese regime who planned the Japanese Occupation. Michiko came from Japan to meet Philip, to enquire about Endo-san. It seems that the rain brings Michiko from Japan to Malaysia to meet Philip.

[3] On this one evening the rain had momentarily lessened to an almost undetectable mist, as though preparing for her arrival. The light was fading and the scent of wet grass wove through the air like threads entwining with the perfume of the flowers, creating an intricate tapestry of fragrance. I was out on the terrace, alone as I had been for many years, on the edge of sleep, dreaming of another life (TTE, p.1).

On this occasion, the rain seems to be able to help lessen the pain of Philip. The pain of the shared memories with Endo-san and the fact that Endo-san has gone. In the narrative, Philip and Endo have shared memories because they have known each other for a long time. Rain is then a symbol of giving life to the memories of Philip towards Endo-san. Coincidentally, when Philip first met Endo-san, it was also a rainy day;

[4] It was an early dusk in the second week of April and a slight rain was falling, soft as the seeds blown off wild grass by the wind a deceptively gentle warning of the monsoon season soon to come (TTE, p.41).

The first time Philip met Endo-san was in early 1939, when Philip was sixteen. His father has already leased out the island which later becomes a secret yet meaningful place for Philip and Endo-san. The island is where Philip learns the Japanese martial arts from Endo-san. Ironically, the island is also where Endo-san stays and examines the geography of Malaya and reports to the Japanese commander and plans for the Japanese occupation. The first meeting, under the rain, is also metaphorically symbolising that a life is beginning. Philip's life has changed tremendously after the first meeting. He started to learn the Japanese martial arts and that changes his entire life. Thus, in the conceptual metaphor, the rain is mapped to the domain of life.

At the end of the story, the rain metaphor appears once again. The Gift of Rain starts the narrative with rain, and also ends with rain,

[5] The fortune-teller, long since dead, had said I was born with the gift of rain. I know now what she meant. Her words had not been a curse, nor had they been words of blessing. Like the rain, I had brought tragedy into many people's lives but, more often than not, rain also brings relief, clarity, and renewal. It washes away our pain and prepares us for another day, and even another life. Now that I am old I find that the rains follow me and give me comfort, like the spirits of all the people I have ever known and loved (TTE, p. 443).

In the end, rain brings everything to an end and yet brings a new beginning to everyone. It is a cycle and there is no ending. The rain washes away the olden days, but the memories remained. Yet, the rain gives courage for the human being to start anew, every day.

From the above, the first excerpt says that Philip was born with the gift of rain. The second excerpt metaphorically describes that Michiko Murakami was brought to meet Philip in Malaysia by rain. The third excerpt delineates that with the coming of Michiko, rain seems to bring back all the memories Philip had with Endo-san. The fourth mapping is done from rain to renewal. All the excerpts suggest that the roles of rain can be summed up to a conceptual metaphor, RAIN GIVES LIFE metaphor. The domain of rain is mapped to life.

Interestingly, the RAIN GIVES LIFE metaphor also appears in Malay cultures. One example is Muhammad Haji Salleh, a Malaysian literature laureate who describes rain in the following poem;

Branches crowd
The narrow dry sky
Brushes held by the painter's nicotine fingers
Reaching to craft the monotonous glare of the blue
Leaves fall
Latex rushes to the buds
Life returns with the rain.

The poet unearths the idea of ecosystem in the poem “Leaf Fall” (Muhammad Haji Salleh 2000) when he notes that life will return when the rain comes and the whole ecosystem will come into an equilibrium where old leaves died and new leaves germinate from the branches of a tree. Again, this poem also suggests RAIN GIVES LIFE.

In English culture, the Victorian poet Christina Rossetti also mapped the domain of rain to life in her poem “Winter Rain” as below;

Every valley drinks,
 Every dell and hollow:
Where the kind rain sinks and sinks,
 Green of Spring will follow.

Yet a lapse of weeks
 Buds will burst their edges,
Strip their wool-coats, glue-coats, streaks,
 In the woods and hedges;

Weave a bower of love
 For birds to meet each other,
Weave a canopy above
 Nest and egg and mother.

Here, only the first three stanzas of the poem are reproduced here for discussion. Rossetti describes that winter rain gives life to all the organism in the nature. The winter rain brings life to the spring, and all other organism will start a new life. This is symbolized in the last stanza when “birds meet each other” and have a happy family.

It is convincingly to be able to conclude that the RAIN GIVES LIFE metaphor is almost universal. Not only does it appear in the Chinese cultures, the Malaysian Chinese cultures, the Malay cultures, but also the English cultures. On the issue of universality, precaution has to be made as suggested by Kovecses (2005, p.35) when he says that although the number of examples is relatively small, they examples can still suggest at least the possibility of universal or near-universal. The important claim here is that, according to Kovecses (2005, p.35), “given the universal experiences on which they are based, the metaphors can potentially be universal, but we should not expect them to show up in all languages and cultures”.

Apart from RAIN GIVES LIFE, there are other metaphorical linguistic expressions which may suggest RAIN BRINGS HAPPINESS metaphor. When Philip visits his grandfather in Ipoh, his grandfather brings him for a trip. It rains throughout the journey;

[6] The day before I was to return home, my grandfather ... drove us out of town to the limestone hills. Close to, the hills did not seem as bare as I had thought. Shrubs and trees clung to them like mould and, in certain parts, the vegetation was thick and smooth as a bear's pelt. Half an hour's drive out of the town, the sky darkened as it prepared to rain (TTE, p.139).

From the excerpt, when Philip visits his grandfather, the relationship is symbolically strengthen by mapping the images of “the hills are not bare”, “scrubs and trees clung together like mould”, “vegetation was thick and smooth”. In the backdrop, most importantly, it is going to rain. The love between Philip and his grandfather is mapped to the domain of happiness where each raindrop resembles every drop of happiness. They are showered in love through the bonding. Towards the end of the trip, Philip’s grandfather says;

[7] He looked to the sky. 'It is good that the rain has come. I used to come here whenever it rained and sit under those words and watch the water run down the side of the rocks. You have brought the rain, and for this I thank you.' I understood he meant more than that. He was grateful I had come to visit him and that I seemed to understand him better now (TTE, p.141).

Similarly, during the first meeting between Philip and Endo-san, Endo-san invites Philip to his little hut on the island. They become like old friends. The relationship between Endo-san and Philip is also being described with the rain images as below;

[8] This was the first time I heard someone describe what I felt. I stopped, uncertain what to say. Just a few simple words had encapsulated my feelings for the sea. It was heartbreakingly beautiful. We stood silently for a few minutes, joined by a common love. There was no movement except for the rain and the waves. Veins of

lightning flared and throbbed behind the wall of clouds, turning the bruised sky pink, and I felt I was being granted glimpses of blood pulsing silently through the ventricles of an immense human heart (TTE, p.43).

In the excerpt, Philip, for the first time in his life, feels that Endo-san is the only person who really understands him when Endo-san says “the sea can break one’s heart, neh?”. It is the first time Philip feels that Endo-san can be his best friend, or his soul mate because Endo-san can read n share his feelings.

[9] And then we were on the sand. There was only the roar of the sea and the wind. No other sound existed. Even the birds were gone from the sky. The wind was now stirring up the sea, streaking it white and whipping the unending rain into our faces and hair. At this moment, it was good to be alive (TTE, p.43).

At the end of the narrative, when the locals start to threaten Philip for helping the Japanese, Philip has decided to resign from working for the Japanese. However, his request is rejected. He has no choice but to meet Towkay Yeap and decided to betray the Japanese. After the negotiation, Philip meets his master, Endo-san at the hut on the island;

[10] My breathing was stilled, for his face was suffused with both love and sorrow, mingling like the wind and the rain (TTE, p.317).

Although this meeting does not signify a happy ambient, rather, both Philip and Endo-san are experiencing some cognitive resonance. They are happy to meet, but at the same time they are sorrow. Philip is sorrow for he is about to betray Endo-san and his bosses. Endo-san is sorrow because he knows he brings disastrous life to Philip. However, when they meet, they feel happiness. The setting is in a rainy day, as if rain brings happiness to them.

The excerpt suggests that the RAIN domain is mapped to the HAPPINESS domain. When Philip feels that it is good to be alive, the HAPPINESS domain is mapped to the RAIN domain in which he is feeling the rain on his faces. Each drop of rain resembles each particle of love. To sum this part up, what the soothsayer says might be able to strengthen the RAIN BRINGS HAPPINESS;

[12] 'You were born with the gift of rain. Your life will be abundant with wealth and success. But life will test you greatly (TTE, p.62).

Philip was born with the gift of rain. The rain brings him happiness and love, as well as abundant and success. Generally, anyone with wealth and success is a happy person. Hence, mapping the domain of RAIN to HAPPINESS symbolises each raindrop as every moment of happiness.

In The Gift of Rain, there is one description on the serendipity of an idyllic scene. The following describes the scenes;

[13] I drove into a clump of high lalang and the waving, almost head-high wild grass hid the car from view. At this hour, as the sun set, the frogs were calling out to each other, loving the rain that still fell in soft furry lines, the sort of rain that even a kitten would have loved playing in (TTE, p.330).

The evening scene is pastoral and idyllic. The rain seems to bring life and happiness to all the organism living in the ecosystem. The lalang is in good condition with the description of “a clump of high lalang” suggesting that the lalang is growing rapidly because it gets all the nutrients and oxygen brought by the rain. The sunset is magnificent and the rain seems to be calling all organisms such as the frog and cat out to play in the rain. The picturesque is in happiness, harmony and balance.

In sum, RAIN GIVES LIFE metaphor and RAIN BRINGS HAPPINESS metaphor are prevalent in the selected novels. For RAIN GIVES LIFE, the researcher shall begin the discussion by examining the water cycle in the biological ecosystem and how this cycle becomes the source of all life.

CONCLUSION

RAIN GIVES LIFE and RAIN BRINGS HAPPINESS metaphors are mostly derived from the scientific value in the typology of biophilia hypothesis. Rain comes from the water cycle. Water cycle is one of the biogeochemical cycles which sustain the nature. It makes sure that the water level on this Earth is at sustainable level (Campbell & Reece 2005). It is this cycle that keeps the ecosystem balanced and at its equilibrium. Rain is also the source of water especially clean water. It is the source of freshwater from the mountains.

Hence, rain metaphor carries the symbolism of giving life. This metaphorical symbolism also resembles baptism in Christianity, during which the baptised' sins are washed away and the person is believed to have a new life (Battle 2007). Robinson (1997) suggests that baptism has three functions as stipulated in the liturgical texts. The three functions are birth, death and washing. In this discussion, it is vivid that the metaphor of baptism as giving birth to a new life is the most prevalent through RAIN GIVES LIFE metaphor.

In the RAIN GIVES LIFE metaphor, the rain entails life where seed germination is also pictured in the excerpt above. Not only does rain wash away sins and the old, it also gives new life - a whole new beginning. Life begins with water. The germination of seed requires water for it to push forward and upward. (Campbell & Reece 2005). This is another example of how water from the rain can serve as a life giver to the nature.

Human being lives with this water cycle and utilises it. Hence, the biophilic value of rain is most appropriately mapped to the matrix of Kellert's (1993) utilitarian typology. Human's interaction with the rain, in its utilitarian sense, are prominent and pervasive in human's daily life. It is the human's utilitarian functionality that renders the Malaysian Chinese the knowledge of rain, hence making rain a purifying agent. Such interaction, then, is significant especially to the researcher's conceptual and cognitive systems. Rain symbolism is a means of communicating the human's thoughts, and the way humans construe their cognitive system. The symbolism of rain, in this case, is related to the human's experience of rain and how rain helps to sustain lives. It is the source of life, may it be in the forms of spirituality or physicality.

REFERENCES

- Battle, J.A. (2007). The significance of the mode of Baptism. *WRS Journal*, 14(1), 9-20.
- Campbell, N. A., & Reece, J.B. (2005). *Biology*. (7th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Pearson.
- Eberhard, W. (1964). *The local cultures of South and East China*. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill Archive.
- Kellert, S.R., & Wilson, E.O. (Eds.). (1993). *The biophilia hypothesis*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press.
- Muhammad Haji Salleh. (2000). *Rowing down two rivers*. Bangi: Penerbit UKM.
- Robinson, P.J.A. (1997) *Baptism in ritual perspective: Myth, symbol and metaphor as anthropological foundations for a baptismal theology*, (Unpublished doctoral thesis). Durham University, Durham, UK.
- Sharifian, F. (2014). Conceptual metaphor in intercultural communication between speakers of Aboriginal English and Australian English. In A. Mussolff, & F. MacArthur (Eds.) *Metaphor and intercultural communication* (pp. 117-130). London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Tan, T. E. (2007). *The gift of rain*. Newcastle, UK: Myrmidon Books.