

# Human, Nature and Life Consciousness: Systematic Representation of the Source Domain of Chinese Political Metaphor

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**Abstract.** Metaphor is one of the prominent features of Chinese political discourse. Through the analysis of Chinese political metaphors in the three volumes of The Governance of China and The Belt and Road Initiative, this study finds that the source domain of Chinese political metaphors presents a systematic representation, which can be divided into three categories: human, nature and life consciousness. This representation is closely related to traditional Chinese culture, especially the embodied cognition, the idea of harmony between man and nature and the respect of life. Only when we truly understand the cultural information behind Chinese political metaphor, can we accurately grasp its meaning in the specific context, and promote the smooth intercultural communication and the spread of Chinese culture.

**Keywords:** Chinese political metaphor; source domain; systematic representation; human; nature; life consciousness

## 1. Introduction

The research on metaphor has been gradually extended and expanded since Aristotle proposed that metaphor is a rhetorical device of language. The relevant researches cover various fields and disciplines including rhetoric, cognitive linguistics and pragmatics. Cognitive scientist Lakoff & Johnson [1] put forward the concept of conceptual metaphor, claiming that metaphor, which can be found everywhere in our life, is not only a rhetorical phenomenon, but also a way of thinking and behaving with the help of language. Metaphor is a structural mapping from one cognitive domain to another. It is a strategy for human beings to interpret cognition in a certain domain with the help of cognition in another field of the objective world. Metaphor has an inseparable centrality to human thinking mode, political response and the society. Therefore, taken as an ornament to language, it is widely used in politics, science and technology, culture, economy and other fields to simplify complex political problems and concretize abstract problems [2]. American political scientist Graber [3] believes that politics itself is composed of metaphor. Political metaphor carrying rich ideological ideas has become an important tool for politicians to spread ideas, express political stance and shape national image.

With the acceleration of China's pace towards the world, the macro context of "establishing China's image as a great country", "Chinese culture going out" and "strengthening cultural confidence" endows China's political discourse with new linguistic characteristics and flavor of the times. A large number of metaphors rich in Chinese historical and cultural heritage and national style help to build a unique Chinese political discourse system to vividly convey abstract political ideas to the public in a way close to life practice. What kind of systematic characteristics these Chinese political metaphors have is a topic worthy of attention. Considering their guiding significance for readers at home and abroad to understand the thought of socialism with Chinese characteristics and the construction idea of "Belt and Road", The study has taken the political discourses The Governance of China [4-6] and The Belt and Road Initiative [7] by Xi Jinping as the main research texts to explore the systematic features of Chinese political metaphors, expecting to provide some reference for the understanding and translation of Chinese political metaphors.

## 2. Review of Relevant Studies on Chinese Political Metaphor

In recent years, the study of metaphor in Chinese political discourse has attracted more and more attention. The existing researches can be classified into three categories: the research on the generation process of metaphorical meaning from the perspective of cognitive linguistics; the study on negotiation function of metaphor from the perspective of pragmatics and the study on construction function of metaphor from the perspective of sociolinguistics. The targeted research materials are mainly from the speeches of national leaders, government work reports and editorials of important Chinese newspapers and periodicals [8-10]. Most of these studies have sorted out conceptual metaphors in political discourse based on the classification proposed by Lakoff, and to a certain extent also explained the cognitive mechanism and meta-functions of metaphor. For instance, Zhang Qingmin [11] thinks that in The Selected Works of Mao Zedong, there are numerous and diverse kinds of metaphors, with more than 20 types and a total of 180 times of frequency. Li Daren points out that the main types of metaphor in The Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping include architectural metaphor, travel metaphor, human metaphor, war metaphor, water metaphor and plant metaphor. Qian Yufang and Yin Zhiping [12] hold that metaphor is an innovative feature of Xi Jinping's foreign discourse. Cao Lingmei and Wang Hong [13] also claim that the typical metaphors in Xi Jinping's discourse are easy to understand, playing a role in visualizing abstract political concepts and promoting readers' cognition and are consistent with social and political changes.

It can be seen from the literature mentioned above that domestic scholars have probed into Chinese political metaphor in a variety of ways and with a variety of methods, the cognitive characteristics and pragmatic functions of metaphor usually being the focus. However, there are also limitations: most of the studies are too detailed, failing to summarize the internal relationship between the different types of metaphors and lacking a logical research system. We believe that in the light of the basic connotation of conceptual metaphor by Lakoff, the classification of metaphor can be expanded endlessly, resulting in endless categories. This method seems to have no concentration point, which is not conducive to in-depth research. In fact, in the field of pragmatics, many substantive issues still need to be considered, such as a more scientific and systematic classification of metaphor, the pragmatic effects of metaphor translation in the context of international discourse and so on. It is for this reason that the study of political metaphor should break through the tradition and open up a broader vision in accordance with the changing pragmatic characteristics. In view of this, this paper will discuss the characteristics of metaphor in representative Chinese political discourse.

## 3. The Origin of Chinese Political Metaphorical Thinking

Metaphorical thinking is a creative way of thinking, because of which, people create metaphorical discourse of "what they say is not what they mean" [14]. Shu Dingfang and Tang Benqing [15] claim that there are always some key expressions in a culture that are bound to be metaphorical, like the tip of an iceberg floating on the water. Through them, we can find the whole conceptual system of the culture hidden below. Metaphorical thinking has distinct national features. A nation's mode of metaphorical thinking is closely related to the linguistic forms of representation, which condenses the essence of national culture [16]. Chinese metaphorical thinking has long epitomized Chinese culture and value. Since the beginning of the pre-Qin era, a large number of philosophers and thinkers have formed their own metaphorical views, which has laid a linguistic philosophical foundation for the use of contemporary metaphors. To a great extent, Chinese traditional culture itself is a metaphorical culture, and the derivation of this culture is inseparable from its social and political context. The autocracy of feudal society forced the ancients to use metaphor to implicitly express their political ideas, while in current society, both the features and roles of metaphor in Chinese political discourse change with the stage of national development. To correctly understand its practical significance, we should not only combine the background of its

occurrence and grasp the characteristics of the times, but also understand the essence of the hidden traditional culture.

#### **4. Systematic Representation of the Source Domain of Chinese Political Metaphor**

Although, as previous studies have shown, metaphorical expressions may originate from words in all fields, it does not mean that things taken as the source domain of metaphors are arbitrary. The differences in cultural traditions, customs and linguistic contexts will lead to the different choice of metaphorical sources in different languages, thus presenting the unique metaphorical style of the language. Through an analysis of typical Chinese political discourse, it is found that there exist mainly three types of metaphor: human metaphor, nature metaphor and metaphor of life consciousness.

##### **4.1 Human Metaphor**

Body is the first concrete thing that human beings are familiar with, and it is also the most outstanding source domain of metaphor. People usually take the familiar physical structure and physical experience as the starting point of cognition, insinuate the cognition of the body to other abstract things, and gradually form a metaphorical thinking system related to human. For example, "head" indicates the top or the beginning; "waist", "back", "ridge" and "foot" refer to the different positions of a mountain; needles and potatoes have "eyes", cups and pots have "mouth"; trees have a "body", corn ears have "beard", shoes have the "tongue", bottles have the "neck", tables and chairs have the "legs", and so on [17]. In the political context, it is often the choice of politicians to interpret political phenomena from the perspective of physical body. "Body politics" or "political body" has gradually become a distinguishing feature of Chinese political ideology. There are many Chinese political metaphors with human physiological structures such as flesh, bones and organs, as well as human physiological functions and behaviors as the source domain, playing their pragmatic and cognitive role in domestic and international political occasions.

"Backbone" is an important part of human body, usually regarded as the embodiment of human emotion and spirit. When people are calm, excited and brave, they often straighten their spine; however, when they are timid, confused and depressed, they often bow their waist and collapse their back. Therefore, "backbone" carries "feeling" [18] and can make the audience experience the courage of the Communists to face difficulties and dangers when Xi uses it to refer to their firm beliefs. "Lips and teeth" are indispensable parts of the human body and complement each other. They are employed in Xi's speech to emphasize and highly appraise the close relationship between China and ASEAN countries, which reflects the importance the speaker places on this relationship.

The use of body metaphors such as spine, lips and teeth, bone, body and blood can produce empathic effect in the audience and effectively improve the discourse effect. Moreover, considering the universality of human body perception, it is not that difficult for both domestic and foreign audience to appreciate the implied meaning when reading this kind of metaphor. However, in order to reduce the obstacles of understanding caused by the lack of cultural context, taking the specific situational context into consideration, it is still more inclined to adopt free translation rather than literal translation. Consequently, "唇齿相依" (lips and teeth depend on each other) can be translated as "intimate friends", "刮骨疗毒" (scrape bone to heal disease) "be braced for the pain", and "气滞血瘀" (Chi and blood stasis) "stagnation" when it is applied to refer to economic situation.

Additionally, expressions related to human physical experience and behavior can also be projected into the abstract cognitive domain to form metaphors, such as "削足适履" (cutting feet to fit shoes), "搬起石头砸自己的脚" (lifting stones to hit your own feet), "照镜子、正衣冠、洗洗澡、治治病" (looking in the mirror, dressing properly, taking a bath, treating diseases), etc. Owing to

the roughly same structure as the human body, architecture metaphor, tools metaphor, machine metaphor and travel metaphor are also widely used in the political field to help express the speaker's views and attitudes. For example, “歇歇脚” (rest your feet), “大踏步走” (take a big step), “往上攀” (climb to the top), “开快车” (drive fast) and “定向把舵” (directional steering) are used to indicate the different developmental stages of the country.

## 4.2 Nature Metaphor

In Metaphor, Geng Zhanchun said that the basis of metaphor lies in the similarities or the equivalence between man and nature [17]. Thus, in the evolution of language and culture, metaphor always follows this basic rule: the unity of man and nature. "Benevolence is integrated with all things in heaven and earth" advocated by Confucianism, and Taoists' proposition that "Tao follows nature" all reflect the symbiosis and interaction between man and nature.

Nature metaphor mainly involves weather metaphor, animal metaphor, plant metaphor and landscape metaphor. “风雨” (wind and rain), “风云” (wind and cloud), “阴霾” (haze) and “春寒” (spring cold) can present the complexity and variability of the world situation, just like the variability of the climate. Belt and road initiative is a bird whose wings are all around the world, with which can birds fly faster and better. The relationship between countries is regarded as a big tree, which needs careful attendance to flourish. Actually, animal metaphors such as “ox nose”, “tiger” and “sparrow” are very common in Chinese political texts, implying different connotations and emotional colors. The author has analyzed the use of “ox nose” in the second volume of *The Governance of China* and found that the term has been used six times and translated into “the key” or “the critical point”, which is associated with the important role of “ox” in Chinese traditional culture.

## 4.3 Metaphor of Life Consciousness

“Life” has been an eternal topic since human beings began to think. The original meaning of “life” is that plants and trees grow out of the soil, which can be extended to fertility, production, occurrence, as well as survival, existence or the state of existence [19]. Hence, we interpret life as life and similar concepts. There are many metaphors of life consciousness in Chinese political discourse. The growth process of plants, human life and death, and attributes related to life can be mapped into the political field to realize the materialization of abstract concepts. Accordingly, the process of sowing, budding, flowering and fruiting, and withering of plants can map the stage of occurrence and development of abstract things; “蜕变的阵痛” (throes of transformation) refers to the difficulties experienced in the development of human civilization; while “如火如荼” (in full swing) mapped the characteristics of life on non-human and inanimate things to reveal the state of things, unfolding before people’s eyes the vigorous breath of life.

## 5. Conclusion

Metaphorical thinking has a long history in Chinese politics. No matter in ancient or modern times, the formation and interpretation of Chinese political metaphor has been greatly influenced by Chinese traditional culture. Whether we can make an accurate and effective understanding of the metaphors in the representative political discourses becomes the key to correctly interpret the relevant discourse. By tracing the origin of Chinese political metaphorical thinking and analyzing the metaphors in the political texts, this study believes that the source domain of Chinese political metaphor presents a systematic representation, with human, nature and life consciousness being the main source domain. Specifically, human organs and human behavior, natural images such as climate, animals and plants, and expressions related to vitality and life consciousness may become the source domain of Chinese political metaphor. This representation originates from the embodied cognition, the unity of nature and man and the respect of life in Chinese traditional culture. Accurately grasping the cultural information hidden behind is conducive to the understanding and

cross-cultural translation of Chinese political metaphor, and to promote the dissemination of Chinese traditional culture.

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