

A Study of Conceptual Metaphors in Chinese and English Inspirational Songs

Yuxuan Tao*. Min Chen

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai 200093, China

Email: 1678404405@qq.com

How to cite this paper: Tao, Y., & Chen, M. (2025). A study of conceptual metaphors in Chinese and English inspirational songs. *Literature, Language and Cultural Studies*, 1(2), 39–46. ISSN Print: 3079-5095, ISSN Online: 3079-5109.

<https://doi.org/10.63313/LLCS.9024>

Published: 2025-05-10

Copyright © 2025 by author(s) and

Erytis Publishing Limited.

This work is licensed under the Creative

Commons Attribution International

License (CC BY 4.0).

[http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

[4.0/](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)



Abstract

Based mainly on the conceptual metaphor theory of cognitive linguistics, this paper is a study of Chinese and English popular song lyrics with inspirational themes. Based on a self-constructed corpus of Chinese and English songs, this paper summarizes the types of inspirational metaphors in Chinese and English songs, conducts a comparative analysis of conceptual metaphors in Chinese and English inspirational songs, summarizes the similarities and differences, and explores the reasons behind the differences, thus demonstrating the cognitive nature of metaphors and enriching the cognitive connotation of meta-phors.

Keywords

Conceptual Metaphors; Inspirational; Chinese and English Songs

1. Introduction

In the 1980s, Lakoff and Johnson proposed the Conceptual Metaphor Theory in their book *Metaphor We Live by*, marking the birth of cognitive linguistics. According to Lakoff, metaphor is a mode of thinking, defined as a mapping from a source domain to a target domain (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). It represents a cognitive pattern where a concrete concept is used to understand an abstract one, involving cross-domain mapping. They explored the nature of language from the perspective of metaphor, demonstrating through extensive linguistic evidence the close correlation between language and metaphorical cognitive structures (Zhao Yanfang, 2000). In recent years, many foreign experts and scholars have applied Conceptual Metaphor Theory to conduct extensive analyses and research in the field of emotion studies, including the most basic emotion—love. Kovecses (1986) summarized a system of love conceptual metaphors through corpus analysis, conceptualizing love as physical forces, natural phenomena, journeys, containers, wars, etc. Lakoff & Johnson (1980) characterized love as journeys, wars, containers, plants, and so on. Domestic scholars have also launched related research, primarily analyzing and demonstrating the similarities and differences of love conceptual metaphors between Chinese and

Western cultures through poetic and everyday language corpora (Wang Conghui, 2005; Wang Lihao, 2005; Qi Zhenhai & Gong Yuhuan, 2006). Songs represent a special genre of metaphor, with inspirational songs often containing vivid metaphors. Current research on inspirational metaphors in songs remains limited, as previous studies have mostly focused on metaphors in inspirational TED talks, films, posters, etc. Although domestic scholars have systematically sorted out the cognitive functions of Chinese metaphors (Hu Zhuanglin, 2004; Shu Dingfang, 2008), research on inspirational songs has two shortcomings: existing achievements are mostly limited to Chinese analysis, lacking contrastive studies with English-Chinese parallel corpora; and they mainly rely on qualitative analysis, lacking "quantitative statistics" (such as metaphor density and cultural keyword frequency) based on large-scale corpora.

2. Research method

This study employs a corpus-based research approach, combining quantitative and qualitative analysis. A total of 100 Chinese and English songs are selected as corpus materials from QQ Music, with themes explicitly centered on "struggle," "dream," and "tackling tough challenges." Following Lakoff & Johnson's (1980) MIP (metaphor identification procedure), "source domains" (e.g., "wind and rain," "hell") and "target domains" (e.g., "difficulties," "challenges") in the lyrics are identified. Metaphor types are annotated according to Kövecses' (2010) classification system (structural metaphor, orientational metaphor, ontological metaphor), and the "occurrence frequencies" of various metaphors in Chinese and English songs are statistically analyzed. SPSS is used to compare the significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in metaphor types between Chinese and English. For qualitative analysis, the cognitive motivations behind metaphorical differences are interpreted by integrating Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimension theory.

3. Similar metaphors in Chinese and English inspirational songs

3.1 "Adversity" Metaphor

3.1.1 Weather Metaphor

Example 1: "阳光总在风雨后，请相信有彩虹。" (《阳光总在风雨后》 / 许美静)

Example 2: "他说风雨中这点痛算什么，擦干泪不要怕至少我们还有梦。" (《水手》 / 郑智化)

Example 3: "风雨里追赶，雾里分不清影踪。" (《海阔天空》 / Beyond)

Example 4: "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger, try before you knock it." (《What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger》 / Sonic Boom Six)

Example 5: "You can walk straight through hell with a smile." (《Hall of Fame》 / The Script)

Based on corpus statistics (100 Chinese songs and 100 English songs), the frequency of the metaphor of "wind and rain" in Chinese inspirational songs is 42, which is sig-

nificantly higher than the direct use of "wind and rain" in English songs (3.2). In Example 6, difficulty is conceptualized as "hell" and falls under the category of "structural metaphors" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

3.1.2 Journey Metaphor

Example 1: “在撒满星星的天空迎着风飞舞，凭着一颗永不哭泣勇敢的心。（《勇敢的心》/汪峰）

Example 2: “抬头的一片天，是男儿的一片天，曾经在满天的星光下做梦的少年，不知道天多高，不知道海多远。”（《星星点灯》/郑智化）

Example 3: "I will run, I will climb, I will soar... I'm undefeated... It's not until you fall that you fly."（《Dream It Possible》/Delacey）

Example 4: "'Cause baby you're a firework, come on show 'em what you're worth. Make 'em go 'Oh, oh, oh!' As you shoot across the sky-y-y."（《Firework》/Katy Perry）

From the above examples, we can see that the frequency of "sky" in Chinese English songs is 23, and Chinese songs often use the vast "sky" as a metaphor for freedom and the space of dreams, encouraging people to bravely pursue their ideals. English songs sometimes use the verbs "fly" (frequency 42) and "soar" to activate images of flying animals such as birds instead of directly stating "in the sky". Both Chinese and English songs involve journey metaphors, through a long journey, overcoming many difficulties on the way (such as Bumpy Road, Stormy Sea, etc.) to finally reach the destination. Even if you fall, you will regain your wings like a bird, showing your indomitable spirit, as in example 3.

3.2 "Dream" Metaphors

3.2.1 Star Metaphor

Example 1: “夜空中最亮的星，请照亮我。我祈祷拥有一颗透明的心灵，和会流泪的眼睛。”（《夜空中最亮的星》/逃跑计划）

Example 2: “这一天，我开始仰望星空发现，星并不远，梦并不远，只要你踮起脚尖。”（《仰望星空》/张杰）

Example 3: “So I'll dream, until I make it real, and all I see is stars.”（《Dream It Possible》/Delacey）

Example 4: “Cos ah ah I'm in the stars tonight. So watch me bring the fire and set the night alight... Shining through the city with a little funk and soul. So I' mma light it up like dynamite, woah.”（《Dynamite》/BTS）

The frequency number of the Chinese word "星辰" is 53, and it is used as an ORIENTATIONAL METAPHOR to construct the mapping of "GOAL IS UP" through the expression of "looking up at the starry sky" (Example 2), reflecting the ethical orientation of "aiming high" in Confucian culture (Hu Zhuanglin, 2004). As an "ORIENTATIONAL METAPHOR", through the expression of "looking up at the stars" (Example 2), the mapping of "GOAL IS UP" is constructed, reflecting the ethical orientation of "aspire to be high and far-reaching" in Confucian culture (Hu, 2004). The

English word "stars", with a frequency of 22, is used as an ONTOLOGICAL METAPHOR, such as in "Dynamite" (《Dynamite》), "light it up like dynamite" in "Dynamite", conceptualizing "success" as "SUCCESS IS LIGHT", emphasizing the visibility and explosiveness of individual achievement (Kövecses, 2010).

3.2.2 Animal Metaphor

Example 1: “有时候我觉得自己是一只小小鸟，想要飞却怎么也飞不高。”（《我是一只小小鸟》/赵传）

Example 2: “逆风的方向，更适合飞翔，我不怕千万人阻挡，只怕自己投降。”（《倔强》/五月天）

Example 3: “I believe I can fly. I believe I can touch the sky. I think about it every night and day. Spread my wings and fly away.”（《I Believe I Can Fly》/R. Kelly）

Example 4: “Goodbye my friend it's hard to die When all the birds are singing in the sky.”（《Seasons in the Sun》/Terry Jacks）

From the above examples, we can see how "birds" are used in Chinese and English songs. In Example 1, "small and struggling individuals in difficult situations" serves as the source domain, and the target domain is "little bird" which sometimes cannot fly high enough; in Example 3, I is metaphorically referred to as a bird, which involves vertical extent. In Example 1, "small and struggling individuals in difficult situations" is the source domain, and the target domain is "little bird" which sometimes cannot fly high enough; in Example 3, I is metaphorically referred to as a bird, which involves a vertical extent; in Example 2, it involves a horizontal extent; and in Example 4, "singing bird" is mapped to the positive me and the never-say-die me.

3.3 "Character" Metaphor

3.3.1 Expressing Inspiration with Heroes

Example 1: “灿烂星空，谁是真的英雄，平凡的人们给我最多感动。”（《真心英雄》/成龙）

Example 2: “There's a hero If you look inside your heart. And then a hero comes along with the strength to carry on.”（《Hero》/Mariah Carey）

We can see the use of "hero" in the above examples. Based on the theory of conceptual metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), the source domain in Example 1 is the ordinary person (an individual who demonstrates goodness and bravery in daily life); the target domain is the hero (a symbol of extraordinary ability in traditional culture). By deconstructing the "sacredness" of traditional heroes and constructing a metaphorical framework of Collective Heroism, we reflect the Confucian ethical view that "everyone can be Yao and Shun" (Hu & Johnson, 1980) and "everyone can be a hero" (Hu & Johnson, 1980). The metaphorical framework of Collective Heroism is constructed to reflect the Confucian ethical view that "everyone can be Yao, Shun and Shun" (Hu, 2004).

4. Divergent Inspirational Metaphors in Chinese and English Inspirational Songs

4.1 Characteristic Expressions of Inspirational Metaphors in Chinese Songs

4.1.1 Journey Metaphor

Example 1: “我要一步一步往上爬，在最高点乘着叶片往前飞”。（《蜗牛》/周杰伦）

In Example 1, the source domain is journey and the target domain is dream, which involves the path schema of "start-path-finish" and the projection of the snail's crawling against gravity to the individual's motivational schema of overcoming external pressures (e.g., social competition).

4.1.2 Hope Metaphor

Example 1: “黑夜过去，黎明会抵达。”（《新的心跳》/邓紫棋）

In example 1, the source domain is the dawn and the target domain is the hope that comes from the light. There is a container schema involved: night is conceptualized as a "closed container", symbolizing the "wrapping" and limitation of the dilemma. There is also the path schema: a linear time path from night to dawn → a metaphor for the process of moving from dilemma to hope.

4.2 Characteristic expressions of inspirational metaphors in English songs

4.2.1 Journey Metaphor

Example 1: "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger, try before you knock it." ("What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger"/Sonic Boom Six)

Example 1 involves a force schema: a dynamic balance between external forces (adversity) and individual resistance → a metaphor for the adversarial interaction between the individual and the environment. Reconstructs adversity as a "necessary step in the process of forging", giving a positive meaning to suffering (e.g. Nietzsche's "What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger").

4.2.2 Hope Metaphor

Example 1: "I got the eye of the tiger, a fighter dancing through the fire." ("Roar" / Katy Perry)

In the English song "Roar", after the fighter is given the power of the tiger, power can be converted into hope. fire is hope. the source domain is the tiger (the predator's sharp vision and aggressiveness); the target domain is the fighter (the individual's alertness and fighting ability in adversity); this metaphor is rooted in the Western concept of "survival of the fittest". The metaphor is rooted in Western "survival of the fittest" Darwinism (Hofstede, 1980), in contrast to the collective resilience of the Chinese "thick virtue carries things".

5. Reasons for Similarity and Difference of Inspirational Metaphors in Chinese and English Songs

5.1 Reasons for the Similarity of Inspirational Metaphors in Chinese and English Songs

First, the similarity of inspirational metaphors in Chinese and English songs is based on the commonality of physical experience. Physiologically, the shared physical perceptions of human beings (e.g., "upward" symbolizes progress, "light" symbolizes hope) form the cross-cultural commonality of the metaphors. On the basic emotional level, the universality of emotional experiences such as fear, hope, and pain leads to the overlap of goal domains (e.g., "overcoming fear" and "pursuing freedom"). Second, the similarity of inspirational metaphors in Chinese and English songs is based on the universality of survival needs. Regardless of cultural backgrounds, human beings need to cope with the core propositions of "adversity, death anxiety, and self-actualization," so Chinese and English songs share the common themes of "perseverance," "rebirth," "unity," and so on. Therefore, Chinese and English songs share the same target domains of "perseverance", "rebirth", and "unity". Finally, based on the cognitive commonality of metaphor generation, according to Lakoff's (1980) theory of conceptual metaphor, human beings understand abstract concepts (target domains) through concrete experiences (source domains), and this mechanism is cross-culturally universal.

5.2 Reasons for the Difference of Inspirational Metaphors in Chinese and English Songs

Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions contains five dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, and long-term orientation versus short-term orientation. The theory aims to reveal the differences between cultures in different countries and regions and provides an important theoretical basis for cross-cultural research. Metaphors in cultures with large power distances reflect hierarchical differences and vice versa for equality. Metaphors in individualistic cultures highlight individual uniqueness, while metaphors in collectivistic cultures emphasize collective cohesion. Metaphors in cultures with high uncertainty avoidance seek stability, while metaphors in cultures with low uncertainty avoidance accept change. Metaphors in masculine cultures emphasize competition, while metaphors in feminine cultures focus on harmony and caring. Metaphors in long-term-oriented cultures reflect planning for the future, while metaphors in short-term-oriented cultures are more concerned with the present. First, the differences between inspirational metaphors in Chinese and English songs are based on differences in philosophical traditions and worldviews. In terms of time, Chinese metaphors tend to favor cyclical time (Taoism's "the cycle of the week and the beginning" and Buddhism's "the cycle of cause and effect"), while English metaphors tend to favor linear time (Christianity's "Creation - Doms-

day"), Evolution "one-way progress"). In terms of the relationship between human and nature, the Chinese metaphor tends to favor the unity of heaven and man (Confucianism, "Praise for the Nurturing of Heaven and Earth"); the English metaphor tends to favor the subjugation of nature (Bacon, "Knowledge and Power"). In terms of the cognition of suffering, the Chinese metaphor tends to be dialectical transformation (Taoism "Fortune and misfortune depend on each other"); the English metaphor tends to be confrontation and conquest (Nietzsche's "philosophy of the superman"). Second, it is based on historical experience and social structure. Chinese culture originated from agricultural civilization, so we rely on natural rhythms (e.g., "spring planting and autumn harvesting"), and metaphors prefer plant growth and celestial cycles. We have collective traumatic memories: our recent history of humiliation reinforces collective narrative metaphors such as "darkness-dawn" and "a hundred rivers flowing into the sea". English culture has its roots in maritime civilization and colonial expansion, so they have a sense of adventure and individual heroism, preferring metaphors of navigation, battlefields, and athleticism. They have the legacy of the Industrial Revolution, so they worship mechanical rationality and efficiency, mostly using metaphors of steel forging and gear operation.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, through the study of conceptual metaphors in Chinese and English inspirational songs, we have learned that human beings share a body-based mechanism of metaphor generation, but also move towards "harmony and difference" due to differences in cultural genes. Understanding this mechanism can provide cognitive-linguistic support for cross-cultural communication and foreign language teaching. Compared with TED Talks, song metaphors pay more attention to emotional resonance and artistic ambiguity, and TED Talks often make use of "technological metaphors" (e.g., "the brain is a circuit board") or "data visualization narratives" (e.g., "the brain is a circuit board"). TED talks often use "technological metaphors" (e.g. "the brain is a circuit board") or "data visualization narratives" (e.g. "success graphs"), emphasizing logical persuasion and instant enlightenment, while songs use melodies to strengthen the multiple meanings of the metaphors and the stickiness of the memory (e.g. the crawling imagery of "The Snail" is engraved into the listener's consciousness along with the rhythm over and over again). Compared to metaphors in everyday communication, the metaphorical system of inspirational songs is more culturally coded and ritualized. Metaphors in everyday conversations (e.g., "work is like fighting a war") are often fragmented, instantaneous, and context-dependent, whereas song metaphors, such as the Chinese phrase "Hundred Rivers Entering the Sea" or the English phrase "Iron and Steel Hardening", are essentially cultural prototypes that are carried in a collective emotion. "The essence of song metaphors is the poetic reproduction of cultural archetypes. Future research can further expand to multimodal metaphors. Only through a deeper understanding

of the cultural roots and cognitive mechanisms of metaphors can we achieve a true dialogue of "inspirational discourse" in the midst of globalization - respecting differences and activating resonance at the same time.

References

- [1] Hofstede,[G].Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications1980.
- [2] Kövecses. [Z] . Metaphor: A Practical Introduction. Oxford: Oxford University Press2010.
- [3] Kövecses, [Z] . Metaphors of anger, pride, and love: A lexical approach to the structure of concepts. John Benjamins Publishing Company1986.
- [4] Lakoff, G. & Johnson, [M] . (1980). Metaphors We Live By. Chicago: University of Chicago Press1980.
- [5] 胡壮麟, 认知隐喻学 [M] . 北京: 北京大学出版社. 2004.
- [6] 齐振海.巩玉环, “爱情”隐喻的认知阐释 [J] .《西华大学学报》2006 (2) : 82-84.
- [7] 束定芳, 隐喻学研究 [M] . 上海: 上海外语教育出版社. 2000
- [8] 束定芳, 隐喻与认知 [M] . 上海: 上海外语教育出版社. 2008.
- [9] 孙亚莉.英汉情歌中爱情隐喻的认知对比分析 [D] . 中国优秀硕士学位论文.2000.
- [10] 王聪会.英汉爱情概念隐喻的认知研究 [J] .《北京林业大学学报》2005 (4) : 69-72.
- [11] 赵艳芳, 认知语言学概论 [M] . 上海: 上海外语教育出版社. 2001.