

Book Review | **Open Access** | Peer Reviewed



A Cross-Cultural Journey of Moral Metaphors in English and Chinese

(Review of *The Moral Metaphor System: A Conceptual Metaphor Approach* by Ning Yu, 2022. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 310 pp. ISBN: 9780192866325.)

Lihong Shi¹ and Chun Lan²

¹ English Department, Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication; No.1 Xinghua Street, Daxing District, Beijing 102600, China; shilihong@bigc.edu.cn.

² School of English and International Studies, Beijing Foreign Studies University; No. 2 West Sanhuan Road, Haidian District, Beijing 100089, China; beiwailanchun@126.com.

ORCID iD

¹ <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-8094-6022>

Address for Correspondence:

Lihong Shi, English Department, Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication; No.1 Xinghua Street, Daxing District, Beijing 102600, China. (shilihong@bigc.edu.cn; 0086+15001047539)

Copyright and Permission:

© 2025. The Author(s). This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), which permits sharing, adapting, and building upon this work, provided appropriate credit is given to the original author(s). For full license details, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Article History:

Received: 24 April 2025; Accepted: 2 July 2025; Published: 6 July 2025

Volume 12, 2025

Publisher: The Brooklyn Research and Publishing Institute, 442 Lorimer St, Brooklyn, NY 11206, United States.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30845/ijll.v12p6>

Reviewers

Dr. Pinfan Zhu, Texas State University, United States; ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7277-3318>; Email: pz10@txstate.edu.

Dr. Jonida Bushi, University of Tirana, Sheshi Nënë Tereza 4, Tiranë 1010, Albania; ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0156-4065>; Email: jonida.bushi@unitir.edu.al.

Citation: Shi, L., & Lan, C. (2025). A Cross-Cultural Journey of Moral Metaphors in English and Chinese [Review of the book *The Moral Metaphor System: A Conceptual Metaphor Approach*, by Ning Yu]. *International Journal of Language & Linguistics*, 12, 63-68. <https://doi.org/10.30845/ijll.v12p6>

1. Introduction

As one of the most influential theories in cognitive linguistics, the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), initially introduced by Lakoff & Johnson (1980/2003), has been validated, criticized and developed by many scholars (Lakoff, 1987, 1993, 2008; Johnson, 1987; Grady, 1997; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Kövecses, 2000, 2005, 2010; Fauconnier & Turner, 2002). Over the past four decades, CMT has not only be applied to economic (Henderson, 1986) and political texts (Lakoff, 1996a; Musolff, 2004, 2016; Charteris-Black, 2011), but also to many other realms such as education (Cameron, 2003), religion (McFague, 1982), emotion (Yu, 1995; Kövecses, 2000) and medicine (Semino, 2008). In 2022, Professor Ning Yu released a new monograph entitled *The Moral Metaphor System: A Conceptual Metaphor Perspective* published by Oxford University Press, elevating metaphorical research of morality to a new level. This book delves deeply into the moral metaphors of English and Chinese and sheds inspiring insights into English and Chinese moral networked metaphors in terms of their systematicity.

Moral metaphors have always been a multidisciplinary subject involving psychology, linguistics, ethics, philosophy and sociology (Johnson, 1993). In the past few years, a substantial body of empirical studies have uncovered the psychological reality of metaphorical connections between moral concepts and other concepts, such as spatial concepts of up-down, left-right, and concepts of temperature, color, cleanliness, brightness, hardness-softness, weight, taste, and smell (Hill & Lapsley, 2009; Lee & Ritter, 2012; Cramwinckel, et al, 2013; Zhai, et al, 2018). However, related theoretical studies are scant. This book is a timely and significant contribution to the theoretical metaphor research on MORALITY.

The primary goal of this book is to explore metaphors on MORALITY in English and Chinese and raise the awareness of cultural influences on such metaphors. It emphasizes the systematicity and interconnections of moral metaphors and attempts to investigate the conceptualization. It illuminates and vindicates the interplay between language, cognition, and culture within the sociocultural context. This article will first introduce its main content and then provide a brief review.

2. Book Overview

This monograph is divided into seven chapters: The first chapter outlines the relationship between moral cognition and embodied metaphors and clarifies the sources of the corpus for this study. The second chapter reviews its theoretical foundation: the basic tenets of CMT and its latest developments, highlighting the systematicity and hierarchy of conceptual metaphor, which characterize the modern metaphorical research. Chapters 3 to 5 detail the three subsystems of the moral metaphor system in both English and Chinese. Chapter 6 introduces the decomposition methods of moral metaphors and their multimodal forms. The final chapter epitomizes the relationships between metaphor, language, cognition and culture.

Specifically, Chapter 1 undertakes a comprehensive and systematic review of moral metaphor studies. It begins with the definition of morality, the fundamental framework to distinguish “good” from “bad,” “right” from “wrong”, serving as an eternal theme in human development. To understand this abstract concept involves conceptual metaphors. Based on bodily experience, the moral metaphor takes morality as its object situated in social cultures. Moral metaphors, accordingly, can reflect the cognitive patterns of the culture in which they are immersed. Yu (2022) believes that the moral metaphor systems in both English and Chinese are composed of three subsystems: PHYSICALITY, VISUALITY, and SPATIALITY. His data come from two bilingual dictionaries and two large corpora: COCA and CCL.

Chapter 2 gives a clear and synoptic summary of the basic tenets of CMT and its latest developments, highlighting the systematicity and hierarchy of conceptual metaphor. CMT posits that the conceptual metaphor is essentially a cognitive mechanism. Conceptual metaphors exist within a hierarchical structure, where lower-level metaphors inherit the mapping structures from higher-level metaphors. Meanwhile, metaphors at the same level are interlinked, collectively forming an intricate network that constitutes the system of conceptual metaphors. The latest developments in CMT entail the Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory (ECMT), which refines the internal structure of conceptual metaphor into four levels of abstraction: image schemas, domains, frames, and mental spaces, and examines metaphors within the contexts of situational context, discourse context, conceptual cognitive context, and bodily context.

Chapter 3 presents a detailed elaboration on physical moral metaphors and its frame structure. This subsystem consists of five dimensions: BEAUTY, STRENGTH, SOUNDNESS, WHOLENESS, and HEALTH (e.g. MORALITY IS BEAUTY), with positive

and negative poles in each dimension (i.e. BEAUTIFUL-UGLY, STRONG-WEAK, SOUND-ROTTEN, WHOLE-BROKEN, HEALTHY-ILL) corresponding to MORAL and IMMORAL, respectively, producing five pairs of subordinate metaphors (e.g. MORAL IS BEAUTIFUL, IMMORAL IS UGLY). Altogether, these five dimensions construct the perception of five physical properties. The affective valence that they evoke are intrinsically associated with moral valence, thereby projecting the source concept “PHYSICALITY” onto the target “MORALITY”, contributing to moral metaphors. For instance, in “真善美” (truth, kindness, beauty), “美” as a source concept refers to the physical property of beauty, which brings about “good” feelings, associated with “good” in moral valence. In this fashion, “beauty” as a source can be mapped onto the target concept of MORALITY. The significance of this chapter consists in the clear presentation of the source frame for the physical subsystem as shown in the diagram (p.72), which succinctly visualizes the interconnections among different frame roles and the target in the first subsystem of moral metaphors.

Chapter 4 offers a thorough exploration into the visual subsystem and its structure. This subsystem includes four dimensions: BRIGHTNESS, CLARITY, CLEANNES, and PURITY, each with two values (LIGHT-DARK, CLEAR-MURKY, CLEAN-DIRTY, PURE-IMPURE), thus forming four basic metaphors (e.g. MORALITY IS BRIGHTNESS) and four pairs of subordinate metaphors (e.g. MORAL IS LIGHT, IMMORAL IS DARK), through which people project their visual perceptions onto MORALITY. Yu (2022) notes that there is a high degree of similarity in visual moral metaphors between the two languages, which he attributes to the similar cultural interpretations of visual experiences in both languages. According to him, the difference between the two languages lies in the prominent feature of Chinese that the source concepts are usually lexicalized as compound words consisting of two elements that instantiate two different source concepts, such as “高洁” (high-clean), with “high” indicating the spatial concept and “clean” the visual concept (p. 145). Such a feature is exclusive to Chinese.

Chapter 5 addresses the spatial subsystem. This subsystem consists of five dimensions: HEIGHT, UPRIGHTNESS, LEVELNESS, STRAIGHTNESS, and SIZE, each of which entail bi-polar values: HIGH-LOW, UPRIGHT-SLANTED, LEVEL-UNLEVEL, STRAIGHT-CROOKED, BIG-SMALL. Spatial moral metaphors use perceptions of spatial properties to describe MORALITY, forming a mapping from SPATIALITY to MORALITY. The image schemas involved in spatial-moral metaphors include VERTICALITY, BALANCE, and SIZE, which exist in both English and Chinese. However, due to different cultural backgrounds, there are certain differences in the expression of spatial-moral metaphors between the two languages. For example, Chinese moral metaphor expressions based on the BALANCE schema (e.g. 平等, 公平) are relatively more common, while the corresponding English expressions are very limited.

In Chapter 6, the author employs the Decompositional Approach to Metaphorical Compound Analysis (DAMCA) (Yu, 2008, 2009) to deconstruct the moral metaphors summarized in the previous three chapters and illustrates the multimodal instantiations. The author posits that the target domain of moral metaphors can be divided into three levels: the first level of GOOD and BAD is the most general; the second level of MORAL and IMMORAL is subordinate and inherits the structural characteristics of the first level; the third level is composed of concepts that represent specific moral qualities, such as HONEST and DISHONEST, CHASTE and UNCHASTE, UNSELFISH and SELFISH, GENEROUS and UNGENEROUS, which have a part-to-whole relationship with the second level. The author points out that moral metaphors are metaphorical compounds that can be decomposed into complex metaphors, primary metaphors, propositions, metonymies, and pre-metaphors. Take MORAL IS LIGHT as an example. This complex metaphor is comprised of two propositions (MORAL IS GOOD FOR PUBLIC WELLBEING, LIGHT IS GOOD) and a pre-metaphor (GOOD IS LIGHT). At the end of this chapter, the author also illustrates the multimodal moral metaphors contained in online images.

In Chapter 7, the author provides a comprehensive structural analysis of the moral metaphor systems in English and Chinese and discusses the relationship between language, culture, body, and thought. He points out that moral metaphors in English and Chinese are mappings from source frames to target frames, where the three roles in the source frame (observer, physical characteristics, and emotional valence) correspond to the three roles in the target frame (moral judge, human behavior, and moral valence). The three subsystems of moral metaphors belong to the physical features in the frame roles. Once perceived, the affective values that they evoke, namely “good” or “bad”, become associated with moral values to produce moral metaphors. The author concludes that the metaphorical conceptualization process involves three levels from low to high: experiential level, conceptual level, and linguistic level. The experiential level remains the foundation, encompassing cultural and bodily experiences. Conceptual metaphors belong to the cognitive level, involving the source domain and the target domain. Metaphorical expressions belong to the linguistic level. Within a specific cultural context, the lower-level structures influence the upper-level structures to produce metaphorical expressions, and meanwhile, the upper-level structures can also affect the lower-level structures through linguistic representations. This chapter presents a panoramic view of the

moral metaphor system and meanwhile theoretically expands CMT from “one-way traffic” to “two-way traffic” by emphasizing the bidirectional influence between language, cognition and thought, rather than merely the one-way influence of cognition on language advocated by classical CMT.

3. Review and Evaluation

This book provides valuable insights in moral metaphor systems in English and Chinese within the framework of CMT, enhancing the cognitive understanding of MORALITY, revealing both the universality in cognitive processes and contrasts between the two languages. Focusing on the bodily perceptions, the book systematically showcases a network of moral metaphors. It contributes significantly to the theoretical development of CMT and complements the existing corpus research on metaphor. It also vindicates the effectiveness of conceptual metaphors in understanding and expressing such abstract concepts as MORALITY, emerging as a notable achievement in this field following the works of Johnson (1993, 2014) and Lakoff (1996a, 1996b). This book is distinguished by its clear structure, in-depth analysis, and strong logical coherence, with the following highlights:

Firstly, this book pioneeringly employs frame mapping to expose the working mechanism of moral metaphors by constructing a psychological model. Specifically, it depicts the structural correspondences between the source and target on the level of frame. Such a fine-grained analysis does not only expose mappings between the source and the target as proclaimed by classical CMT, it also foregrounds the framing structures within respective domains. Different frame roles in the source corresponding to those in the target indicate how the transference process from the source onto the target is achieved. For example, in the spatial subsystem, the source frame is comprised of three roles: human perceiver, entity property (e.g. high or low) and affective valence (i.e. good or bad), which correspond to moral judger, human behavior and moral valence (i.e. moral or immoral) in the target frame, respectively. The meaning focus between the two frames is the valence value. The source frame manifests human’s interactions with the physical environment, while the target frame indicates those with the social environment. As valence values remain the meaning focus, namely good and bad, the affective valence initially evoked by bodily perception may hence trigger the moral values aroused in social interactions. In this fashion, the model provides a more nuanced and detailed account of the specific processes involved in metaphorical mapping, thereby effectively promoting the cognitive understanding of moral metaphor systems.

Secondly, the book thought-provokingly highlights the systematic nature of conceptual metaphors and adopts a multi-level view of moral metaphors, treating them as a structured interwoven network. Such an innovative view sheds much light on moral metaphor study. Obviously, Yu (2022) is greatly influenced by Kövecses’ ECMT and takes a dynamic view of moral metaphors. Nevertheless, he also successfully breaks down the confinement of ECMT and throws moral metaphors in a light of system via emphasizing both the horizontal and vertical connections between moral metaphors. Horizontally, these moral metaphors take the embodied experience as their source domains, embodied in three subsystems: PHYSICALITY, VISUALITY, and SPATIALITY. Vertically, the moral metaphor systems are comprised of layers in a hierarchy with the top layers as super-ordinates and the bottom layers as subordinates. Take the subsystem of VISUALITY as an example. MORALITY and VISUALITY are connected as the target and source domain. Meanwhile, under VISUALITY are BRIGHTNESS, CLARITY, CLEANNESS, PURITY, which indicate four aspects of VISUALITY, serving as subordinates to VISUALITY. They are directly connected with MORAL (e.g. MORAL IS LIGHT), a subordinate of MORALITY, contributing to a horizontal thread of the moral metaphor network.

Thirdly, the book adopts DAMCA to analyze moral metaphors, depicting disparate componential elements constituting the process of conceptualization. This method throws invaluable insights on compounds of complex metaphors, displaying “the major elements, relations, and frames involved in the mappings of complex metaphors” (p. 207), in order to clarify more clearly what elements are involved, why they are selected and how the mapping is achieved. The author posits that moral metaphors are metaphorical compounds, synthesized from several parts such as complex metaphors, primary metaphors, propositions, metonymies, and pre-metaphors. For instance, the metaphor MORAL IS LEVEL can be decomposed into various components: MORAL IS GOOD FOR PUBLIC WELLBEING (proposition), MORAL STANDS FOR EQUAL (metonymy), MORAL FOR EQUAL IS LEVEL (complex metaphor), EQUAL IS HAVING SAME STATUS (proposition), LEVEL IS HAVING SAME HEIGHT (proposition), STATUS IS HEIGHT (primary metaphor), EQUAL IS LEVEL (primary metaphor), GOOD IS UP (primary metaphor). This approach of deconstruction allows for a deeper understanding of how moral metaphors work at different levels of abstraction and how they are expressed in various modes beyond just language, like visual representations, which include images, symbols, and gestures that convey moral concepts in a multisensory manner. It aids in elucidating the process and motivations behind the formation of moral metaphors, showcasing how source concepts and moral concepts are associated with bodily experiences and

emotional valences through propositions, metonymies, and primary metaphors, thus producing moral metaphors within a certain cultural context. It also reflects how a particular moral metaphor connects with other moral metaphors and the reasons for its central position within the metaphor network.

Overall, the book features an innovative topic, clear argumentation, and a well-organized structure. It incorporates new perspectives from the field of CMT and expands the scope of cross-cultural metaphor research. However, the book also has some shortcomings. Firstly, the discussion on the differences between moral metaphors in English and Chinese is quite limited. The moral metaphors listed in the book are largely consistent in both languages, which is certainly due to the universality of embodied metaphors. However, factors such as culture, society, context, and individual differences can also bring about variations in embodied metaphors across different languages. Take the color of red as an example. In Chinese culture, red symbolizes positive qualities, such as loyalty, patriotism, integrity, as indicated in “唱红脸”. In English culture, on the other hand, red is often associated with blood, cruelty, danger, i.e., negative circumstances as in “in the red”. Regrettably, the author fails to probe deeply into this aspect. Secondly, a culture’s moral concepts are inherently related to its philosophical backgrounds, religious beliefs, and historical development. For instance, “上善若水” from *Tao Te Ching* (《道德经》), a Chinese classic, denotes that supreme goodness is like water. A good man should behave like water, cultivating qualities of modesty, flexibility, justice, and vitality, which is also embraced as a fundamental philosophy exclusive to Chinese. This book, however, does not incorporate perspectives from these aspects, which limits the depth of the author’s exploration of moral metaphors and prevents a more extensive comparison of moral metaphors in English and Chinese within a broader context. Despite these shortcomings, the book remains enlightening in its study of moral metaphors and is well worth an in-depth reading.

Conflict of Interest: None declared.

Ethical Approval: Not applicable.

Funding: The General Project of Beijing Municipal Education Commission Research Plan (SQSM201710015004); The Special Project for Discipline Construction and Graduate Education of Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication 2025 (21090325005).

References

- Cameron, L. (2003). *Metaphor in Educational Discourse*. London: Continuum.
- Charteris-Black, J. (2011). *Politicians and rhetoric: The persuasive power of metaphor*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cramwinckel, F. M., de Cremer, D., & M. H., van Dijke. (2013). Dirty hands make dirty leaders?! How the touching of dirty objects leads to higher rewards for unethical followers. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 115(1), 93-100.
- Fauconnier, G. & M. Turner. (2002). *The Way We Think*. New York: Basic Books.
- Grady, J. (1997). *Foundations of Meanings: Primary Metaphors and Primary Scenes*. Doctoral Dissertation: University of California.
- Henderson, W. (1986). Metaphor in Economics. In M. Coulthard (ed.), *Talking about Economics Text*. Birmingham: University of Birmingham English Language Research. 109-127.
- Hill, P. L., & D. K. Lapsley. (2009). The ups and downs of the moral personality: Why it’s not so black and white. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 43(3), 520-523.
- Johnson, M. (1987). *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Johnson, M. (1993). *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kövecses, Z. (2000). *Metaphor and Emotion: Language, Culture, and Body in Human Feeling*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kövecses, Z. (2000). The scope of metaphor. In A. Barcelona (ed.) *Metaphor and Metonymy at the Crossroads: A Cognitive Perspective*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. 79-92.

- Kövecses, Z. (2005). *Metaphor in Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kövecses, Z. (2010). *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lakoff, G. (1987). *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lakoff, G. (1993). The contemporary theory of metaphor. In A. Ortony (ed.). *Metaphor and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 202-253.
- Lakoff, G. (1996a). *Moral Politics: What Conservatives Know That Liberals Don't*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lakoff, G. (1996b). The moral system for morality. In Goldberg. (ed). *Conceptual Structure, Discourse and Language*. San Diego: University of California.
- Lakoff, G. (2008). The neural theory of metaphor. In R. W. Gibbs (ed.). *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 17-38.
- Lakoff, G. & M. Johnson. (1980). *Metaphors We Live By* (2nd ed, 2003). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lakoff, G. & M. Johnson. (1999). *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*. New York: Basic Books.
- Lee Preston, J., & R. S. Ritter. (2012). Cleanliness and godliness: Mutual association between two kinds of personal purity. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 48(6), 1365-1368.
- McFague, S. (1982). *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Musolff, A. (2004). *Metaphor and Political Discourse*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Musolff, A. (2016). *Political Metaphor Analysis: discourse and scenarios*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Semino, E. (2008). *Metaphor in discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Yu, N. (1995). Metaphorical expressions of anger and happiness in English and Chinese. *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity*, 10(2), 59-92.
- Yu, N. (2008). Metaphor from body and culture. In Raymond W. Gibbs (ed.), *The Cambridge handbook of metaphor and thought*, 247-261. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Yu, N. (2009). *The Chinese HEART in a cognitive perspective: Culture, body, and language*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Zhai, D., Guo, Y. & Z. Lu. (2018). A Dual mechanism of cognition and emotion in processing moral-vertical metaphors. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9: 1554.

Author Biography

Prof. Shi is an associate professor in the English Department of Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication. She receives her Ph.D. in linguistics from Beijing Foreign Studies University. Her research interests include cognitive linguistics, genre analysis and second language acquisition. She has published over 30 peer-reviewed articles.

Prof. Lan is a prestigious professor and doctoral supervisor at the School of English and International Studies, Beijing Foreign Studies University. She receives her Ph.D. in the Department of English at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. She has been a visiting scholar at the University of Nottingham, UK and Lancaster University, UK. Her monograph *Introduction to Linguistics* has been selected as a National Twelfth Five-Year Plan Textbook, and her book *Introduction to Language* has been recognized as an Outstanding Higher Education Textbook in Beijing. Prof. Lan has received the Chen Meijie Award for Basic Stage Teaching at BFSU on multiple occasions. Her research interests include cognitive linguistics, pragmatics, and phonetics.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The views, opinions, and data presented in all publications are exclusively those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position of BRPI or its editorial team. BRPI and the editorial team disclaim any liability for any harm to individuals or property arising from the use of any ideas, methods, instructions, or products mentioned in the content.