

Cognitive Analysis of Multimodal Metaphors in Chang An

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Abstract: Chang An, an animated film blending historical narrative with poetic and painterly aesthetics, achieves cross-media transmission and cognitive reconstruction of cultural imagery. Based on conceptual metaphor theory and multimodal discourse analysis, this study explores how the synergistic interaction of visual, auditory, and linguistic modalities constructs metaphorical meaning, while analyzing its cognitive mechanisms and cultural connotations. Findings reveal that the film predominantly employs visual-textual multimodal combinations, often contrasting different representations of the same object to convey meaning. The research highlights the cognitive function of multimodal metaphors in historical-cultural films, offering theoretical insights into the modern translation of traditional cultural symbols.

Keywords: multimodal metaphor, cognitive analysis, traditional culture dissemination, Chinese animation

1. Introduction

Lakoff and Johnson, in *Metaphors We Live By*, introduced the concept of cognitive metaphor, demonstrating its pervasive role in human communication. With technological advancements, multimodal systems—images, music, videos, and more—have enriched expression and interaction. Multimodal metaphor theory expands traditional conceptual metaphor theory, providing a new lens for research. This study analyzes metaphorical phenomena and modal interactions in the Chinese animated film *Chang An*, aiming to decode its metaphorical constructs and foster synergy between traditional culture and modern media^[1].

2. Theoretical Framework

With the advancement of digital technologies, an increasingly diverse array of communicative media has permeated human interaction. Forceville posits that language constitutes merely one among multiple semiotic resources for communication. Additional modalities including sound, color, spatial organization, and other sensory channels similarly facilitate conceptual construction and representation. Building upon conceptual metaphor theory, Forceville thus proposed multimodal metaphor theory, which extends the analytical framework beyond linguistic manifestations to encompass visual, auditory^[2], and other sensory dimensions, marking a significant theoretical advancement in metaphor studies. He defines a modality as "a semiotic system interpretable through specific perceptual processes," thereby anchoring modalities to human sensory faculties. His classification system initially identifies five primary modalities: (1) pictorial/visual, (2) auditory/acoustic, (3) olfactory, (4) gustatory, and (5) tactile. However, recognizing the inherent complexity of real-world communication where modalities frequently intersect (e.g., written text and gestures both constituting visual modalities, while speech and music belong to the auditory domain), Forceville further delineates nine more precise semiotic modes for analytical clarity: (1) images, (2) written text, (3) spoken language, (4) gestures, (5) sound effects, (6) music, (7) smell, (8)

taste, and (9) touch. The critical distinction between unimodal and multimodal metaphors operates as follows: Unimodal metaphors employ a single modality (e.g., exclusively visual or textual) to instantiate both source and target domains. Multimodal metaphors, conversely, manifest in two principal forms: in the restricted sense, they involve varied representational configurations within the same modality^[3]; in the broader conception, they entail the collaborative meaning-making across two or more distinct modalities. This theoretical differentiation enables more precise analysis of how different semiotic resources interact in metaphorical meaning construction.

Recent scholarship has productively applied multimodal metaphor theory across diverse domains including graphic design, film studies, and cultural diplomacy. As cinematic works inherently integrate text, visuals, and music, they represent particularly fertile ground for multimodal analysis.

3. Analysis

3.1 Corpus Overview

Released in July 2023, *Chang An* depicts the Tang Dynasty's decline through the memories of general Gao Shi, who recalls his friendship with poet Li Bai. This study selects the film as its primary subject not merely for its popular acclaim, but for its conceptual depth^[4]. Grounded in Tang historical verisimilitude, the work presents a collective portrait of Tang poets, interweaving numerous celebrated verses with masterful visual and auditory elements to create immersive historical veracity. This synthesis fosters intense audience-character identification while deepening appreciation of classical poetry. This successful integration of traditional literary heritage with contemporary cinematic technology represents a significant advancement in China's cultural dissemination paradigms^[5].

3.2 Unimodal Metaphors

3.2.1 Calligraphy

The character "拙" (zhuō, "clumsiness") appears twice in the film. First, in young Gao Shi's messy handwriting, reflecting his early struggles. Later, it reappears in neat strokes, showing his growth. This visual contrast marks time's passage and Gao's development. The choice of "拙" references the idiom "勤能补拙" ("diligence overcomes clumsiness"), conveying his father's teaching and Gao's own perseverance.

3.2.2 Elephant

The elephant appears twice, mirroring *Chang'an's* fate. Initially, a lavishly adorned elephant performs at court, symbolizing the Tang Dynasty's golden age. Later^[6], the same elephant flees through burning streets after the empire's collapse, its terrified eyes and burning trappings marking the dynasty's demise. As rare northern creatures, elephants represented imperial prestige - their panicked escape visually encapsulates the Tang's fall from prosperity to ruin^[7].

3.3 Multimodal Metaphors

3.3.1 Roc (大鹏)

The mythical roc motif recurs six times throughout the film, each appearance carrying layered symbolic significance. The narrative first introduces the roc as Gao Shi's battlefield vision, foreshadowing Li Bai's poetic persona. This imagery develops through Li Bai's own invocations, from his triumphant declaration "In this golden age, we should become rocs" expressing Tang Dynasty optimism^[8], to his graveside lament for Wu Zhinan "The roc died young, never soaring" memorializing unfulfilled potential. The roc's symbolic meaning evolves dynamically: it represents personal ambition in Li Bai's farewell promise to Gao Shi ("The roc will pierce the clouds someday"), then despair in his later confession ("This roc can fly no more"). The cycle culminates in the epilogue's soaring roc above *Chang'an*, transforming into a metaphor for cultural permanence - the enduring legacy of Tang poetry transcending political collapse. This graduated symbolism traces an arc from individual aspiration to collective cultural memory, with each appearance carefully timed to reflect the protagonists' evolving relationship to their historical moment.

3.3.2 Invitation to Wine (将进酒)

The film reaches its emotional zenith in a climactic sequence following Li Bai's Taoist ordination, where his spontaneous composition of the celebrated poem "Invitation to Wine" (将进酒) unfolds as a masterful cinematic synthesis. As the poet leads his companions in drunken revelry toward imagined celestial gates, the scene achieves remarkable

multimodal harmony - the poem's defiant verses intertwine with lavish visuals of cosmic ascent, while the musical score swells from melancholic strains to triumphant crescendos^[9]. This artistic convergence creates a powerful emotional metaphor that simultaneously channels Li Bai's personal anguish as an unappreciated genius, his unwavering conviction in his talents ("Heaven gave me gifts, they'll be used!"), and his characteristic disdain for aristocratic pretension. Through this sensory-rich portrayal, the film vividly resurrects the paradoxical spirit of the High Tang era - that singular historical moment brimming with both worldly disillusionment and unbridled creative exuberance, activating in modern audiences a profound connection to China's cultural golden age^[10]. The sequence's technical brilliance lies in its ability to translate complex historical consciousness into immediate audiovisual experience, making tangible the enduring tensions between individual aspiration and societal constraints that characterized Tang intellectual life^[11].

4. Conclusion

Multimodal metaphors significantly expand the analytical dimensions of conceptual metaphor theory. This study applies multimodal metaphor theory to examine the metaphorical constructions in the film *Chang An*. The analysis reveals that visual modalities predominantly facilitate metaphorical meaning-making in the film, with source domains primarily drawn from quintessential Chinese cultural elements. These include classical poetry, symbolic animals like elephants and the mythical roc (大鹏), ink-wash painting transitions, and the collective recitation of Tang-era verses in the finale. The interplay of these modalities enriches the cinematic imagery and intensifies its emotional resonance. Through such multimodal synergy, audiences gain enhanced cognitive engagement, achieving deeper comprehension of the film's thematic intentions and cultural significance. Modal interactions deepen emotional resonance, enabling audiences to grasp cultural themes intuitively. This study underscores multimodal metaphors' role in bridging tradition and modernity.

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