

A Study on the Functions of Conceptual Metaphors in the Chinese Government Work Report (2021-2025) from the Perspective of Conceptual Metaphor Theory

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Abstract: Under the background of globalization, political discourse plays a significant role in shaping a country's image and enhancing its international influence. As an authoritative political text, the Chinese Government Work Report features the use of conceptual metaphors to enhance the persuasiveness of its discourse. Based on the conceptual metaphor theory, this study will analyze the government work reports from 2021 to 2025, identify the types of conceptual metaphors in the texts and conduct frequency statistics and qualitative analysis, in order to explore the function of metaphors in political discourse. The research findings show that metaphor, as a cognitive tool, can not only simplify complex political concepts, but also evoke public emotions and shape the national image.

Keywords: Chinese Government Work Report; conceptual metaphor; political discourse

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1 Introduction

Against the backdrop of the deepening globalization and increasingly fierce competition for international discourse power, political discourse, as a crucial carrier of a country's ideology and policy propositions, holds pivotal significance in shaping the national image and enhancing the international influence. The Chinese Government Work Report, as an authoritative text outlining the annual governance blueprint, not only systematically expounds on the country's development strategies and policy measures, but also employs a rich array of linguistic strategies to bolster the persuasiveness and appeal of its discourse.

This paper aims to explore the types and functions of metaphors by analyzing the Chinese Government Work Reports from the latest five years, which will help enrich the application of conceptual metaphor theory within the political context. Analyzing the Government Work Report from the perspective of Conceptual Metaphor can offer a fresh angle for interpreting the report. Clarifying the usage characteristics and functions of metaphors not only enhances the readability and persuasiveness of the text but also deepens the public's understanding and identification of government work.

2 Literature Review

The research about metaphor has undergone a paradigm shift from rhetoric and semantics to cognitive linguistics. Aristotle, in his *Rhetoric*, regarded metaphor as a rhetorical device of "substituting one word for another", laying the foundation for traditional metaphor studies. In the 1980s, Lakoff and Johnson (1980), in their work *Metaphors We Live By*, proposed the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, arguing that the essence of metaphor lies in understanding and experiencing one thing through another similar thing, thereby inaugurating a new phase in cognitive research on metaphor.

In comparative studies on metaphors, Hu Chunyu and Xu Yuting (2017) conduct a contrastive analysis of Chinese and English economic metaphors using *The Economist* and *China Economic Weekly* as corpora. Zhang Yu and Yi Dan (2022), in comparing British and American media coverage of the "Belt and Road Initiative", observe that metaphor selection aligns closely with national interests and foreign policies. Meanwhile, Zhang Hui and Gai Feihong (2022) analyze the ecological orientation of metaphors from an ecolinguistic perspective based on a corpus of Sino-U.S. climate change news. Similarly, Qiu Jin and Wang Qingtang (2025) also discover widespread use of war metaphors and journey metaphors in Sino-U.S.

climate change reporting, though notable differences exist between the two countries in terms of climate policies, ideologies, and international stances.

In the field of translation studies on conceptual metaphor, scholars have conducted explorations based on diverse texts and theoretical frameworks. Lu Weizhong and Chen Hui (2020), drawing on the Conceptual Metaphor Theory of cognitive linguistics, systematically analyze the English translation strategies for metaphorical expressions in *Key Concepts to Understand China*. Feng Yu and Feng Qinghua (2022) employ the corpus tool Wmatrix to analyze metaphorical expressions related to Shanghai and their corresponding translation strategies.

The study of metaphors in political discourse has also yielded rich results. Lakoff (2002) analyzes how American liberals and conservatives construct political ideologies through differing family models. Charteris-Black (2004) employs corpus-based methods to study metaphors in politicians' speeches, revealing that metaphors serve both rational persuasion and emotional mobilization functions. Wang Weimin and Huang Ya (2012), using the Government Work Report (1978-2011) as corpus, point out that building metaphors and journey metaphors reflect shifts in governmental governance philosophies. Wen Xu (2014) emphasizes that political metaphors embody ideologies, and they are closely linked to national cultural traditions.

In summary, existing research has confirmed the significance of conceptual metaphors in political discourse. However, there remains a research gap in focusing on the Chinese Government Work Report from 2021 to 2025. This study aims to systematically examine the types, mechanisms and functions of metaphors employed in these reports.

Based on literature review, this study centers on the Chinese Government Work Reports from 2021 to 2025, and raises the following research questions:

1. What types of conceptual metaphor patterns are identified in the Chinese Government Work Reports from 2021 to 2025?
2. How are metaphors realized in the Chinese Government Work Reports?
3. What are the functions of the metaphors?

3 Theoretical Framework

3.1 The Definition of Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory, introduced in their seminal work *Metaphors We Live By*, posits that metaphor is not merely a linguistic device, but a fundamental mechanism of cognition that shapes how individuals perceive, reason about, and communicate about the world.

3.2 The Mapping Mechanism of Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Conceptual metaphor is the process of "mapping" some features of the "source domain" onto the "target domain", thereby fostering a new understanding of the target domain (Lakoff & Turner, 1989). Generally speaking, the source domain is more explicit and concrete, hence easier to comprehend; while the target domain is relatively abstract and difficult to grasp. The correspondence relationship between the source domain and the target domain is termed as "mapping". By mapping concrete domains of experience to abstract domains, that is, from source domain to target domain, metaphors facilitate conceptual understanding and enable individuals to make sense of complex and abstract concepts.

4 Methodology

4.1 Data Collection

This paper selects the original texts of Chinese Government Work Reports from 2021 to 2025 as the corpus, which is sourced from the official website of the Chinese government. The reasons for selecting this corpus are as follows: The period from 2021 to 2025 marks a crucial phase for China, encompassing the implementation of the 14th Five-Year Plan and the stride towards the second centenary goal. During this period, the Government Work Reports are confronted with multiple tasks, including elucidating the new development philosophy, fostering social consensus, and addressing both internal and external challenges.

4.2 Research Method

This study adopts a mixed research method that combines quantitative research and qualitative research, taking the Chinese government work reports from 2021 to 2025 as the corpus to explore the types, quantities and functions of conceptual metaphors within them.

4.2.1 Quantitative Research Section:

A statistical analysis is conducted on the text of the Government Work Reports over the five-year period to identify and classify the types of conceptual metaphors that appear. Through quantitative research, the occurrence frequency of each type of metaphor is calculated to determine the high-frequency metaphor types, providing data support for the subsequent qualitative analysis.

4.2.2 Qualitative Research Section:

Based on the quantitative analysis, the top five metaphor types with the highest frequency of occurrence are selected. For each metaphor type, typical examples are chosen for in-depth textual analysis.

4.3 Research Tool

This study primarily utilizes the Wmatrix corpus tool for data analysis and metaphor identification. Wmatrix is a powerful corpus analysis tool capable of performing semantic domain classification and keyword extraction on texts.

4.4 Research Procedure

4.4.1 Utilizing Wmatrix for Semantic Domain Classification

The first step is text uploading: Import the preprocessed text into the Wmatrix corpus. The second step is semantic annotation: Execute the semantic annotation function of Wmatrix to generate semantic domain classification results for the text. The third step entails metaphorical sentence screening: Based on the semantic domain labels, filter out sentences that contain potential metaphors.

4.4.2 Metaphor Identification Procedure

This study employs the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) proposed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007) for manual metaphor annotation. The specific steps are as follows:

The first step is to read through the text thoroughly to grasp the overall context and political theme. The second step involves identifying lexical units within the text and distinguishing between their literal meanings and contextual meanings. The third step is to compare the basic meaning of the lexical units with their contextual meanings. If a significant discrepancy exists between the two and the expression can be understood through a mapping relationship, it is then identified as a metaphorical expression.

4.4.3 Identifying the Quantity and Types of Metaphors

The first step is to count the number of metaphors. Based on the results of manual identification using the MIP, the author tallies the various types of metaphors and their quantities found in the government work reports over five years, and presents the research findings using statistical charts.

The second step involves analyzing metaphor types. The author selects the top five most frequently occurring metaphor types. For each type, the author will choose examples for in-depth analysis, exploring their specific usage in the text, underlying cognitive mechanisms, and political intentions.

The third step is qualitative interpretation. Combining the specific content and political context of the government work reports, the author conducts a textual analysis of the identified metaphors. The author will examine how these metaphors serve functions such as simplifying complex content, establishing the national image and evoking readers' resonance.

5 Results and Discussion

5.1 Research Results

By applying the Metaphor Identification Procedure proposed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007), a total of 1,843 metaphorical expressions are identified from the original texts of the five-year Chinese government work reports.

Meanwhile, using the source domain of metaphors as the classification criterion, this study categorizes the metaphorical patterns into nine types of conceptual metaphors, namely journey metaphor, building metaphor, war metaphor, human metaphor, machine metaphor, plant metaphor, family metaphor, disease metaphor and climate metaphor. The usage of the conceptual metaphors are statistically illustrated in the following table:

Table 1: The Conceptual Metaphors in the Chinese Government Work Reports (2021-2025)

Types of Metaphor	The Frequency of Occurrence	Proportion	Keywords
Journey Metaphor	761	41.29%	前进; 进一步; 逐步; 前行; 迈向; 路线; 道路...
Building Metaphor	596	32.34%	夯实; 搭建; 建筑; 基础; 巩固; 平台...
War Metaphor	268	14.54%	攻坚战; 保卫战; 共赢; 战斗力; 部署; 战略...
Human Metaphor	72	3.91%	活力; 倾听; 健康; 携手; 血脉...
Machine Metaphor	69	3.74%	系统; 动力; 驱动; 运行...
Plant Metaphor	51	2.77%	根本; 复苏; 萌芽; 蔓延...
Family Metaphor	23	1.25%	家园; 同胞
Disease Metaphor	2	0.10%	标本兼治; 乏力
Climate Metaphor	1	0.05%	风高浪急
The Total Number of Metaphors	1843	100.00%	

As can be seen from Table 1, journey, building and war metaphor are the three most frequently occurring conceptual metaphor patterns, accounting for 41.29%, 32.34% and 14.54% of the total usage respectively. In contrast, family, disease and climate metaphor are the three least frequently used metaphor types, representing 1.25%, 0.10% and 0.05% of the overall usage respectively. Additionally, to present the data more intuitively, the author has created corresponding statistical charts based on the statistical results, as shown in Figure 2 and Figure 3.

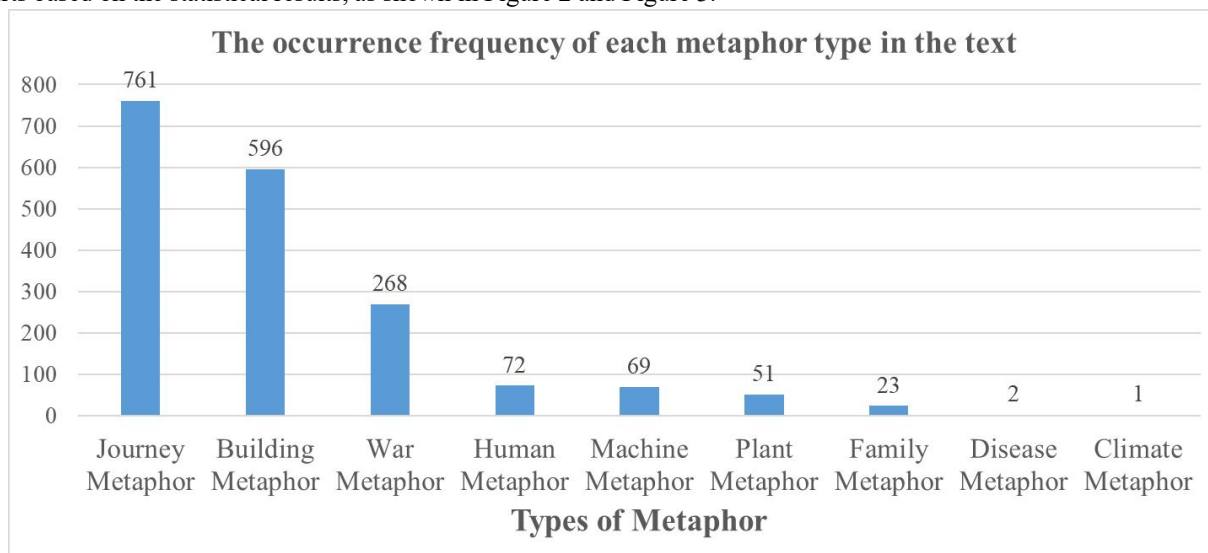


Figure 2: The occurrence frequency of each metaphor type in the text

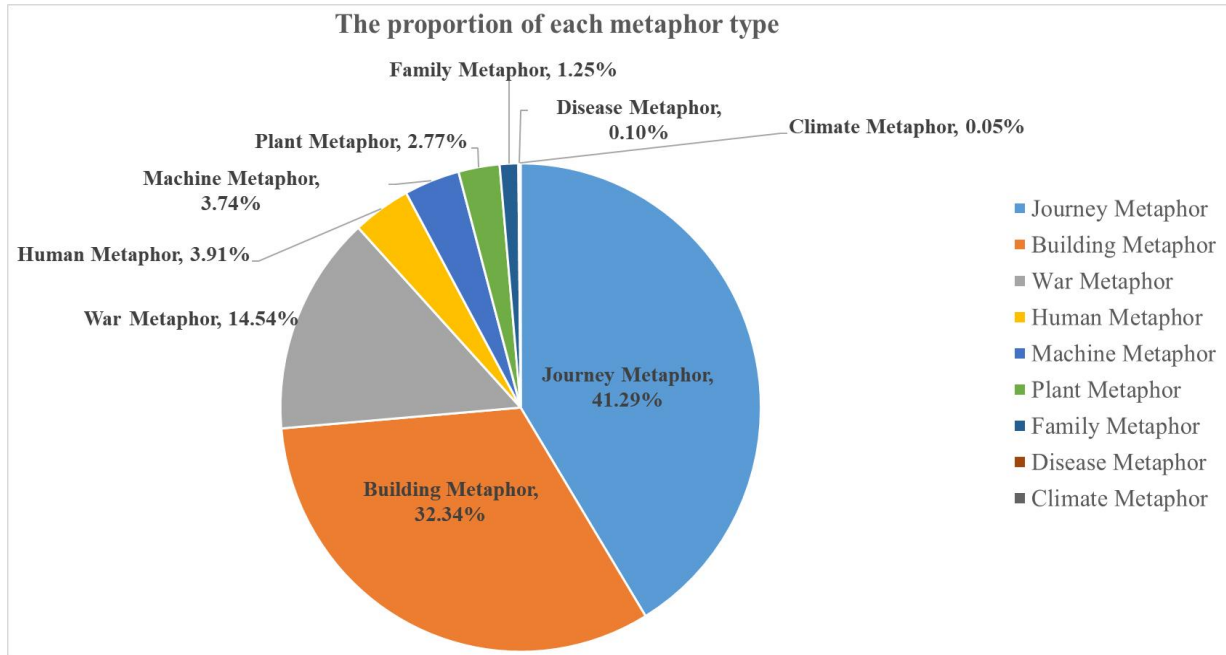


Figure 3: The proportion of each metaphor type

5.2 Qualitative Analysis of Major Types of Metaphors

5.2.1 Journey Metaphor

The journey metaphor involves mapping abstract concepts or processes onto concrete concepts related to travel. In this metaphor, elements like the starting point, destination, route, and direction of a journey are employed to construct an understanding of these abstract notions.

Example 1:

我们要坚持独立自主的和平外交政策，坚定不移走和平发展道路。(2022)

By employing the journey metaphor of “Dao Lu”, the peaceful development of foreign policy adhered by China is likened to a journey with a clear direction and well-defined goals. In addition, by transforming the abstract political concept of “the path of peaceful development” into the concrete and familiar notion of a travel process, complex political issues are rendered more comprehensible and acceptable.

5.2.2 Building Metaphor

The building metaphor takes elements related to architecture as the source domain and maps them onto abstract target domains such as society and institutions, using the process and structure of architectural construction to comprehend abstract concepts.

Example 2:

深入开展健康中国行动和爱国卫生运动，筑牢人民群众健康防线。(2024)

In this sentence, where the target domain is the people’s health defense line, “Zhu Lao” is used metaphorically to denote the strengthening and consolidation of the people’s health security system, making it more robust and reliable so that it can effectively withstand various health risks.

By employing the building metaphor of “Zhu Lao”, the process of constructing a health protection system is likened to the process of reinforcing foundations in architectural engineering. This metaphor renders the abstract concept of health security more tangible and comprehensible. People can more readily grasp the necessity for the health security system to be as stable and reliable as a building, thereby enhancing their understanding of the significance of the Healthy China Initiative.

5.2.3 War Metaphor

The war metaphor takes war-related concepts as its source domain and maps them onto abstract target domains like challenges and competitions, employing war strategies and a confrontational perspective to comprehend relevant matters.

Example 3:

我们经受了世界变局加快演变、新冠疫情冲击、国内经济下行等多重考验，如期打赢脱贫攻坚战。(2023)

The term “Gong Jian Zhan” metaphorically likens the process of poverty alleviation to a war, underscoring the arduousness, complexity and urgency of this task. In the battle against poverty, it requires the government and all sectors of society to rally their efforts, adopt effective measures, and surmount various difficulties and challenges to ultimately realize the goal of eradicating poverty.

War is a concept that is widely familiar to people and can easily evoke strong emotions. By comparing poverty alleviation to a “Gong Jian Zhan”, it can stimulate a resonance with the valiant and indomitable spirit displayed in wars, thereby enhancing people’s sense of identification with and support for poverty alleviation efforts.

5.2.4 Human Metaphor

The human metaphor involves mapping abstract concepts onto the characteristics and behaviors of human individuals or groups. In this metaphor, elements including human physiological structures, behavioral traits and emotions are employed to construct an understanding of these abstract concepts.

Example 4:

着力提升发展质量效益，保持经济持续健康发展。(2021)

“Jian Kang” is originally a term used to describe human physiological or psychological states, referring to the normal functioning of the body and the absence of disease. However, in this sentence, the “economic development” is endowed with the human characteristic of health, likening the sound operation of the economic system to the healthy state of the human body, which belongs to a classic example of human metaphor. In this way, the general public can swiftly grasp the connotations that economic development necessitates a balance of stability, coordination, and sustainability, lowering the barrier to understanding complex economic concepts. This sentence demonstrates the function of metaphor in simplifying intricate political concepts.

5.2.5 Machine Metaphor

The machine metaphor involves mapping concepts onto the functioning of mechanical systems. In this metaphor, elements such as mechanical components and operational modes are utilized to construct an understanding of abstract concepts.

Example 5:

以改革创新为根本动力。(2021)

“Dong Li” refers to the driving force required for the operation of machinery and equipment, emphasizing that mechanical systems rely on power to sustain their operation and achieve their function. By employing the mechanical concept of “Dong Li”, it is highlighted that reform and innovation, akin to the power source of a machine, serve as the core driving force for promoting high-quality economic and social development. They can provide sustained energy to the development system, ensuring that the economy and society operate steadily in accordance with set goals. This sentence underscores the fundamental supporting and propelling role of reform and innovation in development, which aids public comprehension.

6 Conclusion

Through an analysis of conceptual metaphors in Chinese Government Work Reports from 2021 to 2025, this study draws the following conclusions. Firstly, there is a diverse and widespread use of metaphor types. The reports extensively employ conceptual metaphors, predominantly journey, building and war metaphor, which map abstract political concepts onto specific domains of everyday life experiences. Secondly, the functions of metaphors are notable. Metaphors simplify complex political content, establish national image and evoke emotional resonance among the public, thereby enhancing the persuasiveness of the discourse. Finally, this study provides new empirical evidence for research on metaphors in political discourse, offers a linguistic perspective for interpreting government work reports, and contributes to improving the effectiveness of policy communication.

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