

# A Comparative Study on Multimodal Metaphor in Chinese and American City Promotional Films

**Liu Yujun**

*Huaiyin Institute of Technology, Jiangsu, Huaian, 223001; China University of Mining and Technology, Xuzhou, Jiangsu, 221116, China*

**ABSTRACT.** *With the development of information technology, city promotional films are widely used to help publicize a city. Multimodal metaphors, which can integrate the visual image, verbal language and sound together to show the culture of a city, can effectively aids to build the image of the city. Cultures have great influence in the formation and understanding of multimodal metaphors. Based on the multimodal metaphorical theory, this paper takes the city promotional films of Beijing, Shanghai, New York and Washington as examples to illustrate how the multimodal metaphors help convey the cultures of a city and how cultures affect the multimodal metaphors by comparing the similarities and differences in Chinese and American city promotional films.*

**KEYWORDS:** *City promotional films, Multimodal metaphor, Comparative study*

## 1. Introduction

With the globalization of the world and the development of information technology, city promotional films are widely used to enhance the cities' prestige. In order to establish the city's good image and improve the city's popularity and reputation, the city promotional film is expected to display the city's as many aspects as it can such as history and culture, economic construction, natural environment and social fashion of urban development in several minutes. In a city promotional film, a large quantity of messages should be squeezed into a brief span of television or on-line advertising time. Thus, multimodal metaphors are widely used in the city promotional films to achieve the purpose of publicity of cities.

## 2. Multimodal Metaphor

### 2.1 Definition of Multimodal Metaphor

As a way of thinking and cognition, metaphor exists pervasively in our daily life.

The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one concept in terms of another. [1] Metaphor not only occurs in language alone but also in other modes such as in spoken language, static and moving images, music, etc. Multimodal metaphor refers to a kind of metaphor phenomenon which includes two modalities or more than two modalities to inflect source domain and target domain. "Its target domain and source domain are presented exclusively in different modes or its targets and/or source are cued in more than one mode at the same time." [2] In city promotional films, non-verbal sound, spoken language and lines contribute to the construal and interpretation of metaphors.

### ***2.2 Three Types of Multimodal Metaphor in City Promotional Films***

Three types of multimodal metaphor are commonly used in city promotional films, namely, visual metaphor (pictorial metaphor), verbal metaphor and Non-verbal Sound and music metaphor.

A visual metaphor is an image used in the place of or in conjunction with another to suggest an analogy between the images or make a statement with them. Visual information is decoded by perceptual module. Generally, in a visual metaphor, the image is perceived subconsciously and compared with the previously stored information on the visual attributes of the object. If the image is expected to convey other meanings other than simple perceptual recognition, processing moves one step beyond into a more conscious interpretation.

In city promotional films, commentaries and intertitles are usually used to help understand the screen image and aid the construal of non-verbal metaphors. The source domain and target domain of verbal language metaphor are entirely rendered in language. We refer to such a use of metaphor purely on the verbal level as verbal metaphoric expression. [2]

Non-verbal sound and music can also offer possibilities for constructing meaning in that it can help identify the metaphor's source domain and help identify features that can be mapped from source to target. [2] The sound in multimodal metaphors aids the identification of the source domain. Actually, the three types of metaphor are integrated and help manifest the metaphorical meaning.

### **3. Multimodal Metaphors in Chinese and American City Promotional Films**

In this part, four carefully-selected city promotional films of Shanghai, Beijing City, New York and Washington are taken as examples. The four cities are the most representative cities in China and the United States respectively. As the largest and most prosperous city in China, Shanghai is the commercial and financial center. It was the largest and most prosperous city in East Asia during the 1930s, and rapid re-development began in the 1990s. Beijing is the capital of China, the political, cultural, and educational center. New York is the economic center of the United States and also the economic center of the world. What's more, it has been ranked first among cities across the globe in attracting capital, business, and tourists.

Washington, D.C. is the capital of the United States of America, which is described as the political Capital of the World, owing to its status as the seat of the United States federal government and numerous international institutions.

The four city promotional films are not long, each lasting around 5 minutes. They try to present all about the cities to the viewers. In the short-limited time, many pictorial metaphors mainly water metaphors, architectural metaphors, transportation metaphors are employed with verbal language and background music to construct the metaphorical meanings of politics, economy, culture, transportation, development of their own city.

### 3.1 Water Metaphors

Both Chinese and American city promotional films use the image of water with verbal language or background music to construct the metaphorical meanings of the culture of their own city. Water is one of the most familiar objects to human beings. “Most cities have been built along water, and the residents live on water and carry out a lot of activities on it, which enables us to acquire adequate knowledge of water and accumulate various experience of it.” [3] Therefore, people's experiences on water have served as the basis for the attributes in the source domain to be mapped onto various target domains.

Water in Chinese city promotional films basically have the metaphorical meanings of great virtue, while in American city promotional films basically maps the meaning of relaxation and freedom onto the target domain. For example, water in *Beijing City Promotional Film*, with the text of “因水而兴” “Prosperity the water delivers”, constructing the conceptual metaphors “CULTURE IS WATER” “ENERGY IS WATER”(as in Figure 1). Water bred Beijing city and made it prosperous. The source domain “WATER” is one of the most important images in Chinese traditional culture. The thought of “water” in the Taoism contains the unity of truth, goodness and beauty at the same time. Laozi, the founder of Taoism, thought the top class of virtue is like water, expressed in “上善若水” which moisturize all things without competing for fame and fortune. Then water was given the metaphorical meanings with great virtue and broad mind, generous, tolerant and helpful which are great virtue of Chinese culture.



Fig.1



Fig.2

In figure2, we can see a cargo is sailing on the sea (water) in *Shanghai, The City of Innovation*. From the visual image, we construct “COMMUNICATION IS WATER”. The source domain “WATER” carries a ship, which implies Shanghai trading with outside. The good characteristics of water, such as inclusiveness, openness and diversity are mapped to the ways of communication.

In the New York and Washington city promotional films, the image of water appears in the introduction of Central Park and Korean War Veterans Memorial respectively.

In *New York City Vacation Travel Guide*, as in Figure 4, we can see people come to the lake in central park, a beautiful place with water, trees and flowers, with the verbal language and caption saying “There is no greater chill out space in the Big Apple(New York) than Central Park a beautiful 850 acres networking meadows and lakes. This is the place for New Yorkers under wraps romance express themselves”. Americans love nature. The calmness of lakes in Central Park will help them relax and enjoy themselves after busy work. Thus metaphor “WORK PLACE IS A CONTAINER” is constructed and meanwhile, the metaphor of “FREEDOM IS WATER” is constructed as well. The calmness of water in lakes maps onto the free of life after busy work.



Fig.3



Fig.4

From Figure 4, we can see the Korean War Veterans Memorial is surrounded by water, and water here is flowing in *Washington, D.C. City Video Guide*. In the metaphor of “PEACE IS WATER”, the source domain “WATER” here means freedom, however we can also see the words in figure 5 “Freedom Is Not Free” is engraved into one wall at the Korean War Veterans Memorial. In the promotional films they want to justify the Korean War by conveying the meaning that the United States of America is a country which fighting for freedom.

### 3.2 Architecture Metaphors

Both Chinese and American city promotional films use architecture with verbal language or background music to metaphorize the politics, economy and history of their country. “Architectures and statues have witnessed the historical, economic and cultural development of a country.”[4] Architecture can highlight national cultural characteristics. The country is not built in a short time and in today's cultural

diversity, many architectural designers pay great attention to metaphorical meaning in architectural design. They express some cultural metaphors through architectural design.

In Chinese city promotional films, ancient buildings are usually used to imply Chinese long history. For example, we find in the Beijing city promotional films(as in Figure 5), the Great Wall, with a long and slow rhythm of background music is presented to construct the conceptual metaphor of “HISTORY IS THE GREAT WALL”.



Fig.5

The Source Domain “the Great Wall” is a Symbol of China, Which Stretches for Thousands of Miles and Has a History of More Than Two Thousand Years. It is Also One of the Embodiment of Productivity and Creativity of the Chinese Nation. the Great Wall is China’s Precious Cultural Heritage and a Gene of Civilization. the Source Domain “the Great Wall” is Given the Metaphorical Meaning That China is a Country with a Long History and Full of Creation.

While in American city promotional films statue metaphors are used to convey the city’s history and Culture value such as Abraham Lincoln Statue, Albert Einstein Statue and the Statue of Liberty. The statue of liberty is the most typical and famous statues in America. The Statue of Liberty appeared three times in *New York City Vacation Travel Guide*, which is also the most frequent statue appeared in American city promotional films. As we can see in Figure 6, the Statue of Liberty upholds a 12-meter-high torch of freedom in her right hand, holding the “Declaration of Independence” in her left hand, with the verbal language and caption saying “New York is continuously shaped by the waves immigrants drawn here but promise uphold and liberty every newcomer arrive to the cultural suitcase that contributed to this sounds tastes and textures and New York but is their dreams which built the city a CD like no other”.



*Fig.6*

The Statue of Liberty is a Symbol of the United States of America. the Torch in Her Right Hand is Light Which Can Enlighten the World, and the Declaration of Independence in Her Left Hand Shows the Independence of America. “Different Groups of People, Especially Countries Like the United States, Which Are Made Up of Immigrants from Different Geographical, Ethnic and Cultural Backgrounds, the Common Psychological Expectation is Freedom.”[5] the Source Domain “the Statue of Liberty” is Given the Metaphorical Meaning That the United States of America is a Country Advocating Freedom and the Freedom Can Also Enlighten the World by Using the Torch of Freedom in the Statue of Liberty.

### ***3.3 Differences and Similarities***

From the comparative analysis above, we can see that there are some similarities and differences in the American and Chinese city promotional films.

The multimodal metaphors in city promotional films of the two countries have the same source domain but different target domains. For example, in water metaphors, they have the same source domain “WATER”, but the target domains are different. The different experiences of water in different cultures embody different meanings in water. Such as in China water is given the metaphorical meanings of great virtue and broad mind, while in the United States water is given the metaphorical meanings of relaxation and freedom.

The multimodal metaphors in city promotional films of the two countries have same target domain, but the source domains are different. Take Architecture metaphors as examples. The target domain is “CULTURE”, but the source domains vary. In Chinese city promotional films, “THE GREAT WALL” is used as the source domain to tell the viewers what Chinese culture is like. While in American city promotional films, “THE STATUE OF LIBERTY” is used as the source domain to tell the viewers the characteristics of American culture.

What’s more, in city promotional films of both countries, the multimodal metaphors are used to make the characteristics of the city more outstanding and attractive, and serve the theme of the promotional films.

According to Zoltan Kovecses, “Metaphor is based on the human body and brain

function, and human beings are alike at the level of this functioning, then most of the metaphors people use are fairly similar.” [6] Although Chinese people and American people live in different countries, speaking different languages, they live in the same planet, the brain functions, physical functions and perception organs are the same. There are some universal experiences in the cognitive system. The commonality of thinking and the similarity of the cognitive system provide the precondition for people to understand the multimodal metaphors, which are the reasons for the existence of the similarities of multimodal metaphors in Chinese and American city promotional films.

Meanwhile, as Zoltan Kovecses pointed out “The different experiences and cognitive preferences and styles of people in different cultures are the causes of variation in metaphor.”[6] Chinese and Americans have different experiences which result from two peoples’ different interaction with the surrounding culture and the material world, forming different value systems, different cultures and cognitive preferences and styles, which are the reasons for the differences of multimodal metaphors in Chinese and American city promotional films.

#### **4. Summary**

From the comparative study above, we can conclude that in Chinese and American city promotional films, water and architecture metaphors are widely used in the two countries’ city promotional films. Multimodal metaphors in city promotional films effectively help viewers build the image of the city in a very short time because multimodal metaphors can make the profound cultural heritage and unique characteristics more salient with the pictures, verbal metaphoric expression and music functioning together. Metaphors in pictures, sounds, verbal languages or captions echoes each other and help the viewers understand the metaphorical meanings embodied in multimodal metaphors and get a much better understanding the cultures and value of the city. The culture differences have great influence on the choice of source domain and target domain in multimodal metaphors, which results in the differences in the multimodal metaphors in two nations’ city promotional films.

This study can verify the scope of application of multimodal metaphors and help people better understand the city culture contained in different city promotional films. On the one hand, and it can provide some cultural insight for the designers of the city promotional films, so as to effectively build the international image of Chinese city.

#### **Acknowledgments**

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