

# Study on the Chinese Zodiac Xiehouyu from the Perspective of Conceptual Metaphor

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**Abstract:** *Xie houyu is a unique Chinese language form produced by the Chinese people in the practice of production and life. As a traditional Chinese culture, the Chinese zodiac is inextricably linked with the folk customs and livelihood of the Chinese people. In the long-term perception of the zodiac animals, people find that many characteristics of the zodiac animals are essentially similar to some living phenomena in human society, so they use some idioms about the zodiac animals to reflect real life and get some rational understanding. From the perspective of cognition, metaphor is not only the comparison between two things based on a similar relationship but "the tool and result of human cognitive activities". (Wang Yin, 2007) Through the cognitive classification and objective static description of this Chinese Zodiac xiehouyu. This study analyzes the metaphorical types of Chinese xiehouyu within Chinese zodiac animals, explains its metaphorical structure and semantic characteristics, and finally, elucidates the cultural connotation of Chinese Zodiac Animal Xiehouyu against the backdrop of Chinese national culture.*

**Keywords:** *Zodiac xiehouyu, Conceptual metaphor, Cognition*

## 1. Introduction

The traditional study of metaphor is limited to a common rhetorical device overall. The development of cognitive linguistics brings new perspectives and concepts to the linguistic community, gives linguists new research space, and has drawn more attention in the cognitive linguist field. The importance and great station of the Chinese Zodiac in Chinese traditional culture are out of the question. Chinese Zodiac xiehouyu refers to those containing animals of the Chinese zodiac. Each animal represents different meanings in different cultural backgrounds.

## 2. The Concept of Chinese Zodiac Xiehouyu and Metaphor

### 2.1. Chinese Zodiac Xiehouyu

Any text or figures outside the aforementioned margins will not be printed. Xiehouyu is interpreted as a special kind of idiom in Cihai (a large-scale Chinese dictionary and encyclopedia). It is prevalent and often used in Chinese people's lives with its humorous and vivid expressions. It is composed of two parts: the former part is often used as a description of a situation and the latter part as an interpretation or result of the former. When it comes to using, one can hide the last sentence in that in most cases the previous sentence can solely express the associating meaning due to its common use in daily life. For example, one can only say "Zhu Bajie (one of the three helpers of Xuanzang and a major character of the novel Journey to the West) looks its reflection in the mirror" to show that "there is no human-like being inside and outside"; The two parts can also be juxtaposed.

According to the way of semantic expression, xiehouyu can be divided into two categories: figurative xiehouyu and homophonic xiehouyu. The first part of the figurative xiehouyu describes a fact, the latter part explains and explains the fact in the context of Chinese culture. And the second part is the purpose of expressing the underlying meaning. For instance, "If you looking for a needle in the sea--it is impossible to find it". The first part of the homophonic xiehouyu puts forward a cause, and the latter part deliberately "talks about one thing but intends to mean the other" with the help of the relationship between the same sound or the near sound, which is a pun phenomenon of witticism. For example, "a tiger pulling a cart—

who can catch or who dare to catch (the Chinese pinyin of “谁敢” and “谁赶” is the same, so various interpretations can be drawn from this sentence.) ”.

Chinese Zodiac Xiehouyu is a combination of Chinese zodiac culture and xiehouyu. This category of xiehouyu reflects the living habits of Chinese zodiac animals, and projects the characteristics and habits of these animals into many aspects of human social life, resulting in an easier understanding of motto and humorous and vivid metaphor phenomena.

## ***2.2. The Definition of Conceptual Metaphor***

The word metaphor, derived from the Greek “metaphora”, has a special meaning in the rhetoric of “transferring one word to another”. A primary tenet of this theory is that metaphors are matter of thought and not merely of language: hence, the term conceptual metaphor. The metaphor may seem to consist of words or other linguistic expressions that come from the terminology of the more concrete conceptual domain, but conceptual metaphors underlie a system of related metaphorical expressions that appear on the linguistic surface.

## ***2.3. The Construction of Metaphor Semantic System***

Lakoff and other linguists systematically analyzed and explained the interactive relationship between the two conceptual categories covered by metaphor. They abandoned the terms “tenor” and “vehicle” that have been used in traditional rhetoric, but analyzed from the perspective of cognitive thinking and put forward the concept of “domain”, which deeply explores the scope and significance behind the meaning of the metaphor. On the basis of “domain”, they further put forward the concepts of “source domain” and “target domain”, and called the interaction process between the source domain and target domain “mapping”.

The understanding process of metaphor is the process of transferring the relevant characteristics of the source domain to the target domain and understanding the target domain. Metaphor is based on similarity. The similarity is indispensable in the construction of metaphor, and similarity is the essence of metaphor.

Generally speaking, metaphor has only one mapping process from the source domain to the target domain, but some metaphors have two or more such mapping processes. The final result of the mapping is the conceptual category represented by the metaphorical structure.

## **3. The Metaphor in the Chinese Zodiac Animals**

In the study of the Chinese zodiac animal metaphor, it is found that this mapping process is a mapping cognitive process from the zodiac as the “source domain” to the human “target domain”. It is repeatedly recognized and used in verbal communication, and finally gradually forms the semantic system of the Chinese Zodiac metaphor.

After screening the Chinese Zodiac xiehouyu, the “source domain” and “target domain” referring to unknown purposes such as “rats entering the bookcase— chewing sentence and biting words” and “beggars beating dogs— walking while beating” are eliminated. This chapter will analyze the metaphorical meaning of the selected Chinese Zodiac xiehouyu and the Chinese folk culture behind them.

Each animal in the Chinese zodiac (rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, chicken, dog, and pig) is well known to the Chinese people. In the long course of time, the application of each animal has increased. They are not only needed in material life but also remain more colorful in our spiritual world. Xiehouyu is one of the manifestations.

### ***3.1. Preference in Animal Metaphor of Chinese Zodiac***

The formation of conceptual metaphor does not transfer all the tenor’s features but transfer some significant and pronounced features. Therefore, as for which implications are selected for specific mapping, cognitive circles believe that in the long-term process of language communication, language users transfer some of the specific conceptual features of things in the source domain to the target domain due to the frequent use of fixed collaborations. Some specific concepts are gradually highlighted, and other implication meanings used less frequently in the source domain are weakened into background implications.

Professor Wang Wenbin of Beijing Foreign Studies University believes that in most cases, only part of the source domain is mapped to the target domain, and only part of the target domain participates in metaphorical mapping. This part of cross-domain mapping depends on Metaphorical prominence. To more accurately use the source domain to express the target domain, people will deliberately highlight one aspect of things. It can be seen from the xiehouyu that some characteristics of animals reflect some characteristics of human beings, which makes the cognitive understanding of human beings richer and more specific in line with the principle of metaphorical prominence. After projecting all the highlighted characteristics, a system network is formed, and the characteristics, relationships, behaviors, and actions of the source domain are mapped to the target domain. In the process of production and life, the Chinese people associate the similarities between animals and human beings through the observation of animals, so they use the concept of animals to map some human characteristics.

### **3.2. Similarities in Metaphor of the Chinese Zodiac Animals**

Lakoff refers to the vehicle as to the source domain and the tenor as the target domain. The interaction between the two domains is mapping. The cognitive model of metaphor is the mapping from the source domain to the target domain. The understanding process of metaphor is the process of transferring the relevant characteristics of the source domain to the target domain and understanding the target domain. Metaphor is based on similarity. The similarity is indispensable in the construction of metaphor, and similarity is the essence of metaphor. Without the similarity between the two domains, any metaphor is a tree without roots.

The similarity between the source domain and target domain is produced in the process of metaphor, which is not inevitable, preset, and deduced, but created by people's psychological cognition. People will subconsciously use the associative function of the human brain reaction psychological process to connect two similar different things or phenomena, and metaphor is the external expression of this associative ability (Wang Wenbin, 2007)

Shu Dingfang believes that similarity can be divided into physical similarity and psychological similarity (Shu Dingfang, 2002) Physical similarity can be a similarity in shape or appearance and function. Psychological similarity refers to people's belief that there are similarities in some aspects between certain things due to culture, legend, or other psychological factors. Two things originally belong to different conceptual networks. Due to the similarity of two things or phenomena, people will have psychological associations and match the two together to form a metaphor. People will move their perspective and understanding of a familiar thing to another unfamiliar complex thing, which is helpful to their understanding and understanding of complex things. People always connect animals with their characteristics, so as to understand people from a different perspective. To establish the relationship between the two domains of animal metaphor, we must be good at perceiving the similarities between the two domains.

## **4. Metaphorical Cognitive Analysis of Animals in the Chinese Zodiac**

### **4.1. Metaphorical Cognitive Analysis of "Mouse"**

"Mouse" is small, but it has the strong reproductive ability and good adaptability. In the eyes of the Chinese people, it is an annoying, harmful, and clever little animal. But when describing the mouse, it is not negative all the time. The mouse in literary and artistic works appeared as good and evil characters. For example, Bai Sheng, "the day mouse" in Water Margin, is the character of 108 generals. But mice usually leave people a negative impression. Through the following allegorical sayings about mice, we can have a clearer understanding.

(1) "Mice who are celebrating a wedding in the bridal chamber--make unsettled noise." (target domain: some people in our life make noise in public places, which makes person on-site impatient and annoyed.)

This sentence captures the biological characteristics of mice. When doing anything, it will make a constant noise, which makes people annoyed. The prominent meaning in metaphorical clues is noise.

(2) "Rats cross the street--which everyone shout and beat." (target domain: some people have done bad things and are so notorious that everyone else wants to beat him or her.)

The metaphorical clue is to grasp the social characteristics of rats. Everyone wants to get rid of rats who steal food at home. To Chinese people, the mouse is not a good image.

These two sentences are both negative comments on mice. From the perspective of metaphorical cognition, some characteristics of "mouse" as the source domain in the example sentence are mapped to the target domain. The similarity between mouse and human in appearance, action, and behavior is the condition for the formation of this substantive metaphor, that is, the similarity basis.

#### **4.2. Metaphorical Cognitive Analysis of "Ox"**

The zodiac animal "ox" is a very familiar animal partner of humans in agriculture. It looks simple and honest and has a strong physique. It helps people cultivate the land and work hard. It is a good helper for farmers. Therefore, the cow symbolizes tenacity, dedication, and endurance. Lu Xun expressed his ambition to serve the people diligently with "cattle". But cattle also have a stubborn and stubborn temper. Here are two xiehouyu selected.

(3) "The grass in the ox's mouth—it can't be pulled out" (target domain: it refers to something that can't be taken back when it was got by a stubborn person.)

The metaphorical clue is the natural habit of oxen. Oxen are herbivorous ruminants. When eating grass, they probably swallow it first, then ruminate it to the stomach, chew it carefully, and then swallow it. Therefore, the grass in the mouth of cattle cannot be pulled out.

(4) "An old ox plowed field—it is full of energy" (target domain: a person works hard without complaint.)

Metaphorical clues are not the natural characteristics of ox. Pulling a plow is gradually established by people who tamed cattle in the farming era and made use of their great strength. Over time, people formed inertial thinking that cattle's job is to pull a plow, so they work unambiguously and hard. This is also the reason for the formation of the concept that horses are usually used to pull cars.

#### **4.3. Metaphorical Cognitive Analysis of "Tiger"**

The metaphorical image of the Chinese Zodiac "tiger" in Chinese traditional culture is "brave, powerful, powerful and ferocious", which is usually used to describe people or things with momentum. The tiger has always been worshipped by the Han nationality and is a symbol of justice, bravery, and majesty. The Han people regard the tiger as the king of beasts. It is reflected in the allegorical sayings:

(5) "Plucking teeth out of a tiger's mouth is--bold." (target domain: a thing with high challenge difficulty or a person's behavior is very courageous.)

(6) "Tiger enters the cave--looking ahead and ignoring the back" (target domain: a person is as fierce as a tiger, and no one dares to approach.)

In the Han culture, due to the ferocity of the tiger and the fact that it often causes casualties to people and animals, "ferocity" has almost become synonymous with the tiger at the same time. Therefore, people hold a respectful attitude towards the tiger. The similarity is the difficulty of things and the position that cannot be provoked.

(7) "A tiger hit by a hemp stalk--felt neither painful nor itchy." (target domain: in real life, it is of little effect to attack a person with strong spirit with words, or it can be compared with the situation that a person with plenty of energy run ten laps on the playground, which will not bring him a great burden.)

The metaphorical clue is the tiger's aggressiveness. Attacking the tiger with hemp stalk can't cause it any harm. The similarity between the two is that they both have excellent ability in one aspect, so if the attack on it is very slight, it won't get any substantial hurt.

#### **4.4. Metaphorical Cognitive Analysis of "Hare"**

The animal "hare" has been loved by the Chinese people since ancient times and is regarded as an auspicious object. Rabbits have many characteristics. They are fast, jump up and down, and are very active. The Chinese characters derived from the word "hare" have their own characteristics. For example, "逸" is a knowing word. In Shuowen Jiezi, it is believed that the word means that the hare is "good at running", so there are many words with this meaning, such as "奔逸 (running away)" and "逃逸 (running away)". (He Xingliang, 1999) Through the analysis of allegorical sayings, we can see the Chinese people's cognition of hares:

(8) "It seems that you have hare's legs--so you run fast." (target domain: a person's running speed is very fast.)

(9) "It seems that you have hare's ears--so you can hear a distant voice clearly." (target domain: it usually means a person's hearing is very good.)

Both sentences reflect the characteristics of hare body parts. The similarity between the two is fast speed and good hearing.

(10) "It's like you carry a rabbit--the whole way is uneasy." (target domain: a metaphor for a person who is overactive and difficult to control.)

The metaphorical clue is the hares' restless and active biological characteristic, which is similar to those who are energetic and like to move their bodies in life. There is also "quiet as a virgin, moving like a rabbit." which describes a person as active as a rabbit.

#### **4.5. Metaphorical Cognitive Analysis of "Long"**

"Long" is different from the western dragon which is evil and monster. The Chinese Zodiac "dragon" is the symbol of the Chinese nation. People's metaphorical impression of the "dragon" is often "dignity, extraordinary spirit, auspiciousness, wealth and power". The Dragon first appeared in myths and legends. It is a creature derived from reality and divorced from reality. It is said that it is a magical and unique creature combined with the characteristics of nine animals. It can go from heaven to earth and call wind and rain. In feudal society, it symbolizes men and imperial power. The emperor is called the real dragon, the son of heaven and the proud son of heaven, which is the will of heaven. It shows people's totem worship and good wishes, hoping that the dragon can protect itself and eager to have the super ability of the dragon.

"Dragon King farts--which is divine air." (target domain: emperors, noble people with virtue can be called dragons. Zhu Geliang in the Romance of the Three Kingdoms had outstanding wisdom and was called "卧龙(the dragon hiding in waters)" when he retired to the mountains and forests.)

Metaphorical clues are the auspicious and noble characteristics of dragons. Even farts have divinity. The latter refers to the group of people who are outstanding among human beings. The similarity is that everyone admires them.

"Dragon King goes to sea--with shrimp soldiers and crabs following behind." (target domain: some influential man with high status and many people will accompany.)

The similarity between the two is high status and many followers.

"Dragon King is happy--bringing tsunami."; "Dragon King sneezes--bringing drizzling." (target domain: powerful people can do things at will.)

It is said that dragons can make clouds and rain. In the year of drought, dragons and Dragons play in the water, which is expected by the people. The metaphorical clue comes from the legend that dragon rain is a casual and easy thing to do.

#### **4.6. Metaphorical Cognitive Analysis of "Snake"**

The metaphorical image of the Zodiac "snake" in Chinese culture is "cold, vicious, sinister and cunning". The snake's body surface is covered with scales, and its shape is creepy. At the same time, some snakes are highly poisonous, which makes people dare not approach, leaving people an image of fear. Xiehouyu reflects a wide range of people's life, and the image of snake also has specific cognition:

(14) "Paint a snake and add feet--which is superfluous." (target domain: to do superfluous things, but make mistakes.)

The metaphorical clue is "adding feet", the snake is a footless reptile, adding feet is the wrong way, which means a fact that adding more is sometimes useless.

(15) "A snake wants to swallow an elephant-- it is too greedy." (target domain: a man is too greedy to consider his own situation and try to get something he can't bear.)

The metaphorical clue is that the snake swallows the elephant. When swallowing food, the snake bites the head of its prey into its mouth. However, because the elephant's head is too big, the snake can't swallow it. The similarity between the two is their greed.

#### 4.7. *Metaphorical Cognitive Analysis of "Horse"*

The animal "horse" metaphorically forms the image of "smart, capable and galloping". In ancient times, "千里马 (a pure horse that can keep a long-distance ride)" was often used to praise talents, especially talented young talents. China's horse culture has a long history. The emperors' love, riding, and good horse and the "horse policy" implemented by each dynasty have played a positive role in guiding and promoting. The following allegorical sayings reflect people's understanding of horses:

(16) "Horse is neighing--because it is looking for its group." (target domain: people know each other through the process of conversation.)

The metaphorical clue is that the horse finds its partner through the behavioral process of neighing, which is gradually familiar with and has similarities with people through continuous communication in society.

(17) "Horses run to the battlefield--whereas donkeys turn to the hillside." (target domain: people with ability can do great things, while those without ability can only do small things.)

Horses played an important role in the ancient battlefield, while donkeys mainly worked in the mountains or Plains.

(18) "The old horse hisses at the wind--but the ambition does not retreat" (target domain: Although people are old, they still have lofty aspirations)

Based on the theory of metaphorical cognition, some features of "horse" as the source domain in the example sentence are mapped to "human" domain, in which the similarity between horse and human in appearance, action, and behavior is the condition for the formation of metaphor, that is, the similarity basis.

#### 4.8. *Metaphorical Cognitive Analysis of "Goat"*

Goats are animals domesticated by human beings long ago. They are plump and have dense body hair. They are also timid and gentle animals both food and feeding are full of their shadow, which is also regarded as a symbol of wealth by nomads. Through the analysis of xiehouyu, we can see the Chinese people's cognition of sheep:

(18) "When goats see the tiger's skin--they are afraid." (target domain: timid people are afraid of small things)

Although sheep are gentle animals, some people think it is their weakness. Taking this as a metaphorical clue, this characteristic of sheep is similar to the timid people in real life.

(19) "Sheep's cashmere--can't be cut once." (target domain: in Uighur xiehouyu, it corresponds to the boundless fantasy of smokers.)

sheep's fluff flourishes and grows quickly even after cutting. However, people who smoke hemp smoke get out of control once they become addicted. This irreducible nature is the metaphorical basis of the two.

#### 4.9. *Metaphorical Cognitive Analysis of "Monkey"*

Monkeys have developed brains and flexible limbs. In Chinese culture, people with "intelligence, agility, humor, and wit" are metaphorical. Monkeys also enrich our spiritual world. The monkey king in Journey to the West is deeply loved and worshiped by people. People's impression of monkeys is also mostly naughty, intelligent, and spiritual. The following allegorical sayings can be seen:

(20) "Monkey's climbing a tree--is a good play." (target domain: a person does what he is good at.)

Climbing trees is a natural skill of monkeys, similar to what people do skillfully.

(21) "When a monkey reading--it is faking it." (target domain: a person who likes outdoor activities and can't sit still is learning by pretending to do something and sitting at his desk.)

Monkeys are often naughty and can't be quiet. There are also such people in life. The similarity is that they like sports rather than quiet reading.

#### 4.10. *Metaphorical Cognitive Analysis of “Cock”*

China is the first country to domesticate chickens in the world. It has a history of at least 4000 years, and the significance of chicken is rich. The Chinese Zodiac "chicken" has auspicious meanings in Chinese culture, such as "Golden Rooster heralds the dawn", "you chicken has auspicious" and so on. But in many allegorical sayings, the image of chicken has a negative color, highlighting the shallowness and insignificance of chicken. For example:

(22) “The ability of the beautiful rooster--what it got is a few times scream.” (target domain: a person's bluff has no real ability.)

"Source domain" takes the appearance characteristics of the beautiful rooster. Its feathers are bright and beautiful. It looks better than ordinary roosters, but it can just show off and has no practical use. It has a metaphorical basis, that is, similarity, with people who only make superficial look intimidating in real life.

(23) “Iron Rooster--never gives a penny.” (target domain: he is extremely stingy and unwilling to pay a penny.)

The Iron Rooster is a rooster made of iron. Its feathers and body are one, and it is impossible to pull them out. This is also the characteristic of an extremely stingy person. Money is his life.

#### 4.11. *Metaphorical Cognitive Analysis of “Dog”*

From the primitive period, people could not live without dogs. They hunted for food and drove away wild animals. In the era of prosperous animal husbandry, shepherds took care of the herds for their owners. In the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, people thought dogs were beautiful things. Even the book of songs wrote poems praising dogs. In the spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States period, "dog" began to have a derogatory meaning. There is a paragraph in Yan Zi's envoy to the Chu that Yan Zi was asked to drill a dog hole when he was an envoy to the Chu, which shows that "dog" had the meaning of humiliation and contempt at that time. In the late Northern and Southern Dynasties, idioms and allusions containing "dog" began to contain derogatory meaning, which was almost derogatory in Tang, song, yuan, Ming, Qing, and later. There are many allegorical sayings with these derogatory features:

(24): “A dog catches a mouse--put its ginger into cat’s pie.” (target domain: a person is an interfering busybody.)

(25): “If one beat dogs with meat buns--there is nothing return.” (target domain: there is no reciprocity when someone gives the other one help or a person doesn't know how to be grateful.)

The three sentences all highlight the derogatory metaphorical meaning of dog and find the corresponding things in the target domain respectively.

#### 4.12. *Metaphorical Cognitive Analysis of “Pig”*

The Chinese Zodiac "pig" has the meaning of wealth and happiness in the eyes of the Chinese people, but more negative metaphors are well known. The common allegorical sayings describing the negative characteristics of pigs in life are as follows:

(26) “The tail of an old sow is--muddy.” (target domain: people who don't pay attention to hygiene and have a dirty living environment.)

"Source domain" highlights that pigs are dirty and unsanitary. Domesticated "pigs" are kept in captivity in an inch of land and wrapped in mud. Mapping this characteristic to humans, sloppy, and not paying attention to personal cleanliness is the corresponding characteristic.

(27) “Zhu Bajie looks in the mirror--nothing is human inside and out”; “Zhu Bajie dreams of marrying a girl--but it is just a dream”; “Zhu Bajie's mouth--all it can do is to eat and drink” (target domain: a person is as ugly, lazy and enterprising as Zhu Bajie.)

Journey to the West, one of China's four famous works, vividly depicts the image of a lazy, lecherous and greedy "pig eight precepts" through comparison. The book collects the bad characteristics of pigs in a relatively ironic tone.

## 5. Conclusions

Xiehouyu of the Chinese zodiac animal is not only a linguistic phenomenon but also a metaphorical phenomenon, which carries a nation's cognitive understanding and folk culture. This paper uses the principle of metaphor to analyze and describe the "source domain" and "destination domain" of Chinese Zodiac allegorical sayings. It is found that people have extracted many features from animals to compare people or things in real life. From this, we can find that the animal metaphor reflects the thinking mode, outlook on life, and values of a country and nation's traditional culture to a certain extent. Therefore, this is also an important reason for this topic. We hope to make the zodiac culture spread more widely with the help of metaphors.

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