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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## **A Study on Chinese Culture in High School English Textbooks of BNUP from the Perspective of Conceptual Blending Theory for Multimodal Metaphors**

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**ABSTRACT**

At the end of the 20th century, scholars represented by Forceville dived into the construction and representation of metaphors using various modalities, leading the shift of metaphor studies towards multimodality, which consequently put the study of multimodal metaphors in the spotlight. English textbooks, as a combination of visual and linguistic modes of expression, contain a large number of metaphors. From the perspective of conceptual blending theory, the paper explores the construction and meaning of multimodal metaphors of Chinese culture in three compulsory high school English textbooks of Beijing Normal University Press. It is found that these three compulsory high school English textbooks of Beijing Normal University Press (BNUP) contain many multimodal metaphors of Chinese culture, and these multimodal metaphors can activate student's cultural background knowledge and convey the communicative intention of the pictures, thus arousing students' interest in Chinese culture and fostering cultural confidence.

**KEYWORDS**

Multimodal metaphor; conceptual blending; Chinese culture; the Senior High School English Textbooks of BNUP.

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**1. Introduction**

With China's increasing prominence on the global stage and growing international interactions, there is a heightened emphasis on cultural development within the country. Culture confidence, which refers to a national sentiment and belief in the strength, richness, and value of Chinese culture, is officially put forward at the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China and has been gaining much attention ever since. Later, in the 19th National Congress, Xi (2017) stated that the Chinese must strengthen cultural confidence and promote the prosperity of socialist culture. Overall, culture confidence plays a significant role in shaping China's national identity, soft power, and global engagement.

This shift towards cultural awareness is reflected in the educational sector, where there is a growing focus on enhancing students' key capacity for English. The concept of "English key capacity", in which "culture awareness" plays a part, was first proposed in *The National English Curriculum Standards for Senior High Schools (2017 Edition, 2020 Revision)* (hereinafter referred to as *The Standards*). This evolving educational approach underscores the significance of equipping students with not only linguistic skills but also a deep understanding and appreciation of cultural nuances.

The English textbook, as a kind of English teaching material, plays a crucial role in shaping students' understanding and appreciation of culture. Adamson (2004) points out that the knowledge carried and transmitted in foreign language teaching, especially foreign language teaching materials, can be divided into two levels. The first level is language knowledge itself, such as vocabulary, grammar, and phonetics; the second level is non-linguistic knowledge based on languages, such as the history and culture of foreign countries and their own country, humanities, social knowledge, and the ideology and moral values, which the

target language constructs and transmits. English textbooks contribute to raising awareness and appreciation of the diversity and richness of Chinese heritage. Students exposed to Chinese cultural content in textbooks are more likely to develop a curiosity and respect for Chinese traditions.

In 1980, Lakoff and Johnson published the revolutionary work "Metaphors We Live By", in which they introduced the concept of conceptual metaphor. They argued that metaphors exist not only at the linguistic level but also as a cognitive tool in people's thinking. They defined metaphor as "understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p.5). With the rise of visual media and digital technologies, the importance of visual communication has grown significantly. Visual metaphors, conveyed through images, videos, and graphic designs, play a crucial role in shaping meaning and conveying complex ideas. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, research on multimodal metaphors was conducted. Forceville (2009, p.19) pointed out that "metaphor should manifest itself not just in language but also via other modes of communication, such as pictures, music, sounds, and gestures." He and Mark Turner developed the conceptual blending theory together. In China, Zhao (2013) analyzed the shortcomings of the classification of mode, the dual-domain mapping model, and the definition of multimodal metaphor and proposed the conceptual integration model of multimodal metaphor. English textbooks, as a rich multimodal corpus, are not that much studied compared to political comics, advertisements, and films. Therefore, from the perspective of conceptual blending theory, the paper looks at the construction and meaning of multimodal metaphors of Chinese culture in three compulsory high school English textbooks of BNUP. By applying the conceptual blending theory to multimodal metaphor analysis, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how English textbooks serve as vehicles for exploring and interpreting Chinese culture, offering insights into the intricate interplay between language, culture, and cognition in the context of language learning and cultural exchange. This study tries to solve the question of how multimodal metaphors about Chinese culture construct meanings in three compulsory high school English textbooks of BNUP.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Conceptual Blending Theory**

From 1994, Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner have integrated metaphor analysis with other linguistic and cognitive phenomena in a series of articles and works, including "The Principle of Conceptual Integration" (1998), "Networks of Conceptual Integration" (1998), and "Mappings in Thought and Language" (1997). Their theory is commonly referred to as "Conceptual Blending Theory" or "Conceptual Integration Theory". The Conceptual Blending Theory is a cognitive theory that explains how humans create new meanings by blending elements from different mental spaces. Unlike Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) conceptual metaphor theory, in which mapping takes place in only two domains and is directional, from the source domain to the target domain, the conceptual blending theory holds the view that there are at least 4 mental spaces when it comes to metaphor interpretation. Mental spaces are small conceptual packets constructed as we think and talk for local understanding and action (Fauconnier & Turner, 1998). The conceptual blending network comprises 2 input spaces: the input space I (the source mental space) and the input space II (the target mental space), a generic space, a blending space and an emergent structure. The 2 input spaces are partially mapped, matched and projected into the blending space. The generic space, which is the basis of cross-mapping between input I and input space II, reflects the abstract structures of the 2 input spaces, including framing structure, image schema structure, and character structure. In the process of blending, composition, completion, and elaboration take place in the blend space and the emergent structure that shares some structures of the existing and accessible structures and has its own unique structure, and new meaning comes into being. The Basic Diagram (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002, p.46) in Figure 2.1 illustrates the conceptual integration.

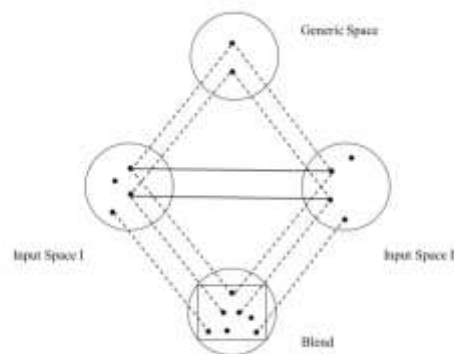


Figure 2.1 Conceptual Integrated Network Model

## 2.2 The Conceptual Integration Model of Multimodal Metaphor

The conceptual integration model of multimodal metaphor, as proposed by researcher Zhao in 2013, builds upon the foundational theories of Conceptual Blending, developed by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner (2002) and Brandt and Brandt's (2005) conceptual poetic and imagery integrated model. Zhao's model specifically addresses how metaphors are constructed and understood in multimodal contexts, where multiple forms of communication (such as text, images, sound, and gesture) interact. The conceptual integration model of multimodal metaphor is illustrated in Figure 2.2.

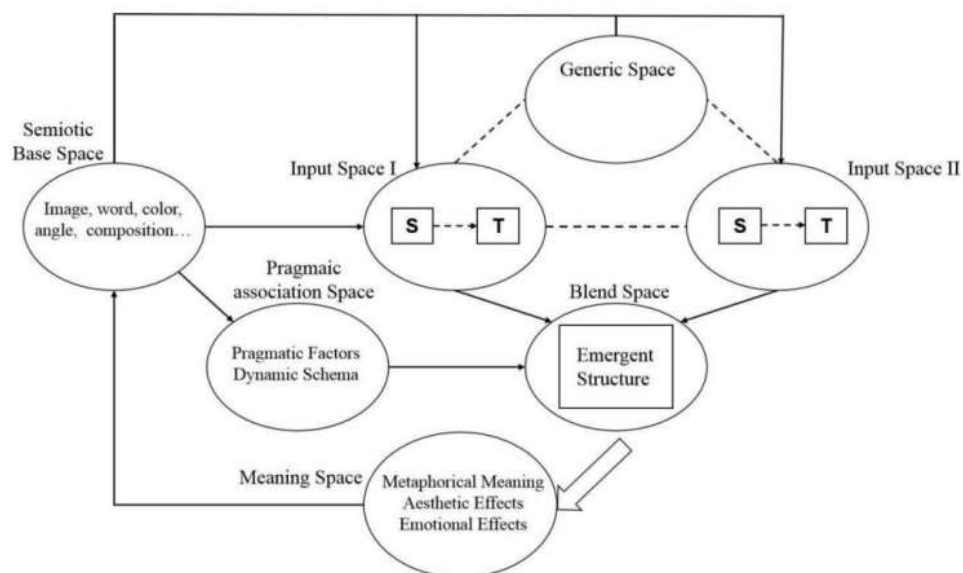


Figure 2.2 The conceptual integration model of multimodal metaphor

Different from the conceptual poetic and imagery integrated model that targets linguistic discourses and does not concern the interaction between metonymy and conceptual metaphor, the conceptual integration model of multimodal metaphor highlights metonymy, the activated conceptual metaphor domains based on image schema and idealized cognitive models. In the interpretation of multimodal discourse, the multimodal symbols, including shapes, colors, lines, composition, angles, and relationships between events, exist in the semiotic base space. The 2 input spaces initially have to be mapped by metonymy and conceptual metaphor to the target domains that can be available in the system. And then, the selective mapping between the two domains arises. After the previous mappings, dominated by the generic space, the components in input I and input II enter the blending space so as to produce emergent structure and new meanings.

Then, in order to convey the complete cognitive, emotional, or aesthetic effect generated by the multimodal discourse, the relevant space has to be introduced. Zhao (2013) defines the space as a dynamic relevance space that contains various pragmatic factors directly related to the construction of a multimodal metaphor, including communicative subject, carrier, social cognition, cultural value, genre schema, and aesthetic trends. The conceptual meaning and emotional aesthetic effects are blended into the meaning space when the dynamic schema in the relevance space is mapped into the blend space. The meaning space, in return, puts restrictions on the selection and creation of producers' multimodal symbols, forming a complete model depending on meaning production and interpretation thereafter.

## 3. Data and Methodology

### 3.1 Data Collection

There are 266 pictures in total in these three compulsory books. And 100 pictures are related to Chinese culture, including 41 "man and self", 44 "man and society", and 15 "man and nature". Among these 100 pictures, there are 57 multimodal metaphorical pictures of Chinese culture, including 29 "man and self", 16 "man and society", and 12 "man and nature", as seen in Figure 3.1.

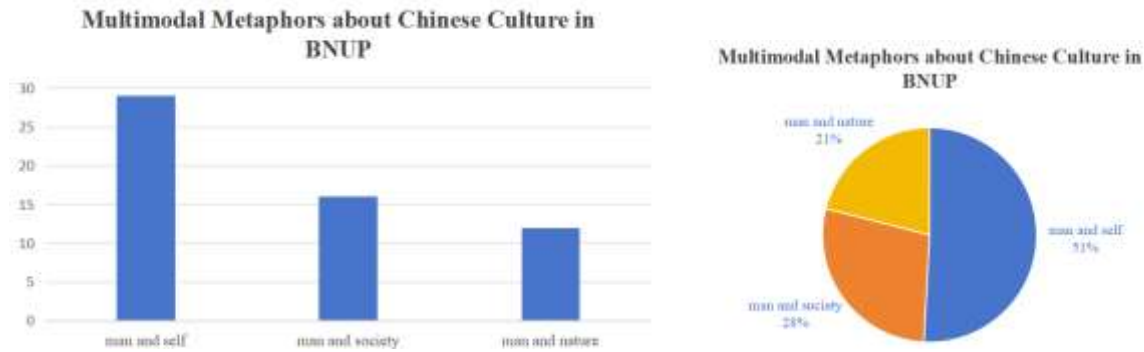


Figure 3.1 Multimodal Metaphors about Chinese Culture in BNUP

The 3 multimodal discourses analyzed as examples in the paper are selected from three compulsory high school English textbooks of BNUP. The first picture belongs to the theme of humans and self, the second is human and society, and the last is human and nature. Each picture is taken from each book separately. The first picture is from compulsory book 1, unit 1, Life Choices, on page 5. The second picture is chosen from compulsory book 2 unit 6, The Admirable, on page 49. The third picture is from compulsory book 3, unit 8, Green Living, on page 29, as seen in Table 3.1.

Theme	Source	Name	Content
Human and Self	Compulsory book 1; unit 1; page 5	Life Choices	Choose your own path and live your own life.
Human and Society	Compulsory book 2; unit 6; page 49	The Admirable	The Chinese scientist Yuan Longping
Human and Nature	Compulsory book 3; unit 8; page 29	Green Living	Protecting our earth.

Table 3.1 Data Collection

**3.2 Methodology**

There are 3 reasons for choosing the 3 compulsory books of BNUP as discourses for analyzing the multimodal metaphor of Chinese culture in high school English textbooks. First, Beijing Normal University Press is affiliated with Beijing Normal University, one of China's most prestigious universities, known for its strong emphasis on educational sciences. The press was established to publish educational and academic materials, contributing to educational development and innovation. BNUP's English textbooks are designed in line with China's national educational standards and curricula. They typically focus on enhancing students' English language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing, alongside cultural awareness and critical thinking skills. And every student is asked to learn the compulsory books. Second, the high school English book of BNUP is used in many Chinese regions, such as Beijing, Tianjin, Hebei province, Shanxi province, Liaoning province, Jilin province, Heilongjiang province and so on. Lastly, the topics in these 3 books are rich, giving a vivid and charming account of Chinese culture, including art, technology, nature disaster, sports, etc.

All these pictures are selected based on the concept of culture, Chinese culture and multimodal metaphors. *English Curriculum Standard for Senior High Schools* (2017) defines culture from 2 aspects: the material and spiritual aspects. Material mainly refers to clothing, food, transportation, architecture, and other things related to inventions and creations. Spiritual aspects mainly include science, philosophy, education, literature, history, art, aesthetics, values, social conventions, sentiments, and customs. Chinese culture includes traditional Chinese culture and modern Chinese culture. Traditional Chinese culture is jointly created by all ethnic groups in China and is accumulated by long-term historical development. Modern Chinese culture is developed from traditional Chinese culture and formed under the influence of various historical periods and Chinese social status in different times (Zhang & Fang, 1994). Forceville (2008) proposes three conditions for understanding multimodal metaphors: 1) Given the context in which they occur, the two phenomena belong to different categories. 2) The two phenomena can be slotted as target and source, respectively, and captured in an A IS B format that forces or invites an addressee to map one or more features, connotations, or affordances from source to target. 3) The two phenomena are cued in more than one sign system, sensory mode, or both (Forceville, 2008, p. 469).

## 4. Case Analysis

### 4.1 Life Choices

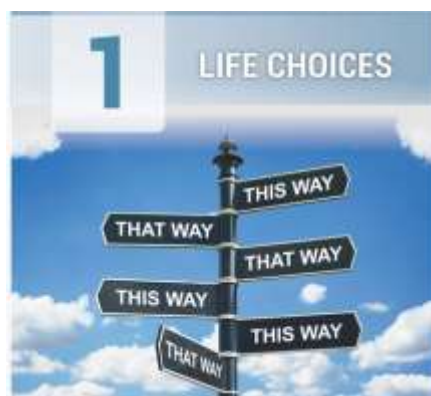


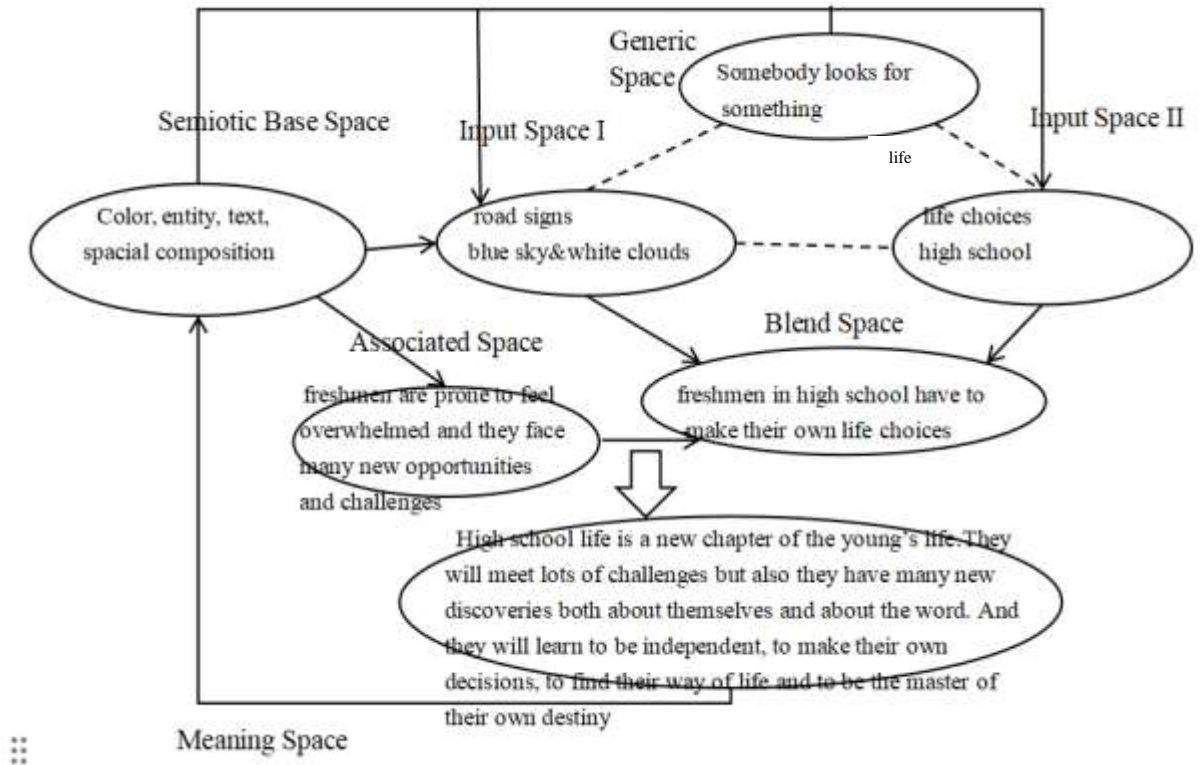
Figure 4.1 Life Choices

This picture is the central edge composition. In the central is a road sign pointing to different directions. And on those signs, it says "this way" and "that way". In the back of the road sign is the light blue sky and some drifting clouds. The visual image activates input space I, that is, a man walking on the road and looking up at the road signs to find his own way. When he looks at the road signs, he will also see the light blue sky and drifting white clouds. The texts "this way" "that way" show different ways he can take. The agent is the walking man. The environment is the blue sky and white clouds, the actions are making choices and finding a way. According to our encyclopedic knowledge, the visual image and text together activate input space II. After graduating from junior high school, the young people are entering their new chapter of life, the senior high school life. They will have a lot of opportunities to explore themselves and to gain new experiences. During this period, they can bump into many obstacles and challenges. They will make many different life choices and gradually figure out what kind of life they want to have and what kind of man they want to be. Therefore, The walking man is freshman in junior high. The blue sky and white clouds are the junior high school life. The road signs and text are the life choice those freshmen have to make. The metaphor and metonymy mapping in input spaces are shown in Table 4.1.

Mode	Mapping				Mapping		
	Semiotic representations		-----> Target domain		-----> Target domain		
Visual image	color	White	metaphor	Youth; innocence; purity	metonymy	The Chinese youth	In the Growing up of Chinese young people, they face many life choices and challenges.
		Blue	metaphor	Self-exploration; self-expression			
	entity	sky	metonymy	Broad			
		cloud	metaphor	Obstacles; challenges			
		Road sign	metaphor	Life choice			
Text	This way; That way		metaphor	Life roads			The Chinese youth have to learn live their own life.

Table 4.1 Analysis of "Life Choices"

The semiotic base space includes "color", "entity", "spacial composition", and "text". The generic space contains "somebody looks for something", which dominates the matching and cross-space mapping between input space I and input space II. After the selective mapping, the components in input I and input II enter the blending space so as to produce emergent structure and new meanings through composition, completion and elaboration. The background knowledge, that is freshmen are prone to feel overwhelmed and they face many new opportunities and challenges, is activated in the pragmatic relevant space. The conceptual meaning and emotional aesthetic effects are integrated into the meaning space when the dynamic schema in the relevance space is mapped into the blending space. Through the analysis of multimodal metaphor, it can be said that high school life is a new chapter of the young's life. They will meet lots of challenges, but they will also make many new discoveries both about themselves and about the world. They will learn to be independent, to make their own decisions, to find their way of life and to be the master of their own destiny. Figure 4.2 shows how the multimodal metaphor is constructed.



MMCIM: conceptual integration model of multi metaphor

Figure 4.2 MMCIM of the picture "life choices"

Chinese culture has a rich tapestry of beliefs and values that relate to the concepts of independence and mastering one's own destiny. Confucianism, perhaps the most influential philosophical tradition in Chinese culture, emphasizes the importance of personal development, ethical conduct, and social harmony. Confucian ideals promote the concept of self-cultivation and continuous learning as a way to master one's destiny. By improving oneself intellectually and morally, an individual is seen as better equipped to influence their fate and contribute positively to society. In contemporary China, the rapid social and economic changes have also shaped perceptions of independence and control over one's destiny. The increasing emphasis on individualism in urban areas contrasts with more traditional communal values, reflecting a shift towards personal independence and self-determination. The modern Chinese economy encourages entrepreneurship, innovation, and self-reliance, as seen in the rise of tech giants and startups. This shift underscores a modern interpretation of mastering one's destiny through business success and innovation.

From the analysis above, it can be seen that the English textbook of BNUP exposes students to the Chinese culture, which states that one should be independent, make his own life choices, and master his own fate.

**4.2 The Admirable**



Figure 4.3 The Admirable

The picture belongs to the center edge composition. The central part is a renowned Chinese scientist, Yuan Longping. He bends his back, his hands touching the rice and his face smiling. The periphery is a tract of green, flourished paddy fields and trees. The visual image activates input space I. That is, Yuan is working in the paddy field attentively and the rice is heart-satisfying. The agent is Yuan Longping, the scientist. The action is working in the field wholeheartedly. The result is flourishing rices. The intention is to help put food on the table. According to our cultural background knowledge, the image activates input space II. In order to fuel the development of China in all respects, admirable people from different walks of life in China are working with all their hearts. And they have gained a lot and have made contributions to the country. Therefore, the corresponding agents are admirable people from different walks of life in China, the action working in their own domain; the result has gained a lot and have made their own contributions, the intention of contributing to China’s development in all respects and the result the fast development of China. The metaphor and metonymy mapping in input spaces are shown in Table 4.2.

Mode	Mapping		Mapping			
	Semiotic representations	----->	Target domain	----->	Target domain	
Visual image	Color	green	metaphor	Growth; hope		
		white	metaphor	Spirituality; purity		
		black	metaphor	Authority; sophistication		
	Entity	Yuan Longping	metonymy	Chinese scientists	metonymy	The admirable people in China
		Growing paddy	metonymy	Yuan’s harvest	metonymy	The harvest of the Chinese people

Table 4.2 Analysis of “The Admirable”

“Color”, “entities”, and “spacial composition” are contained in the semiotic base space. Under the dominance of the generic structure, that is, “someone works for something”, the selective matching and cross-space mapping between 2 input spaces emerge. After matching and mapping, the components in input I and input II are integrated into the blending space. The emergent structure arises and new meanings, that is, the admirable people in China are making their commitment to the development of China. In the pragmatic associated space, the information is activated that Yuan Longping, often referred to as the “Father of Hybrid Rice,” was a renowned Chinese agronomist and scientist known for his groundbreaking work in agriculture and Yuan Longping’s hybrid rice varieties have helped to address food shortages and improve agricultural productivity in China and other countries facing similar challenges and China is on its way to realize the Chinese dream. The dynamic schema in the pragmatic relevant space will be mapped into the blend space. The conceptual meaning and emotional aesthetic effects blended into meaning space put restrictions on the selection and creation of multimodal symbols. Figure 4.4 shows how the multimodal metaphor is constructed.

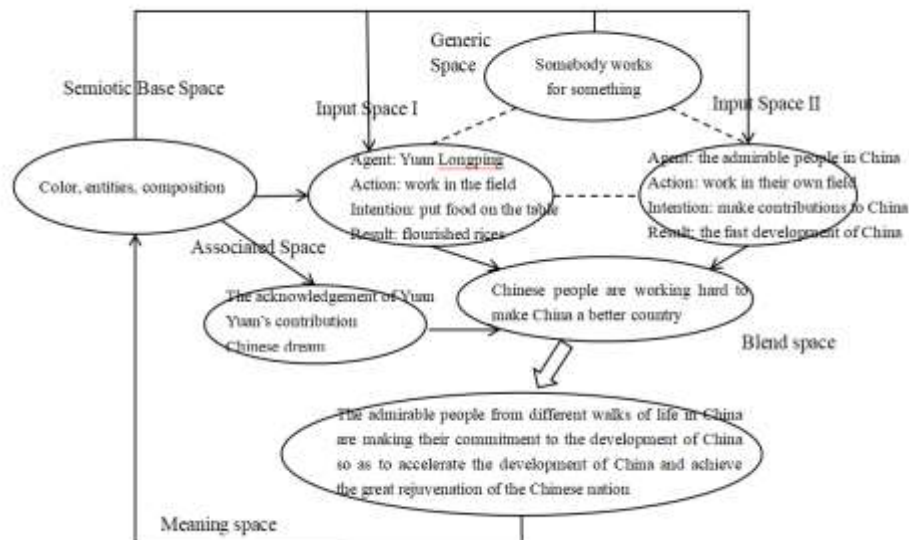


Figure 4.4 MMCIM of the picture “The Admirable”

Chinese culture, both traditional and modern, places a strong emphasis on devotion to the country, love for the nation, and the realization of social values. These principles are deeply rooted in historical, philosophical, and social contexts and continue to influence contemporary Chinese society. Traditional Chinese society values the collective over the individual. This collectivist approach fosters a strong sense of community and national identity, where personal interests are often secondary to the interests of the group or the nation. Confucian philosophy, which has profoundly influenced Chinese culture, emphasizes the importance of loyalty and duty to one's family and, by extension, to the country. The concept of "忠" (zhōng), meaning loyalty, is central in Confucian teachings and is often extended to mean loyalty to the state and its leaders, which includes making devotion to your country. Modern Chinese culture continues to promote patriotism. China actively promotes Confucianism as a moral guideline that aligns with modern socialist values, reinforcing a sense of continuity and identity that is uniquely Chinese.

Through the above analysis, it shows that BNUP tries to guide students to love their own country and make a contribution to it. It stresses the importance of the realization of individual social value.

**4.3 Green Living**



Figure 4.5 Green Living

In this picture, three people with white T-shirts stand in a triangle. Each of them is holding some earth, in which there is a green tender shoot, in cupped hands. They stretched out their hands and put the three tender shoots together to form a triangle. And the bright sunshine falls down on their hands and the tender shoot. Such visual image activates the input space I, that is, three people holding the earth and the sprout in cupped hands. The agent is the hands of 3 people, the action holding something in cupped hands, the object the earth and tender shoots. Based on our background knowledge, input II is activated. People are taking some actions to protect nature and our environment. Therefore, the hands of those 3 people stand for all human beings. Holding something in cupped hands refers to actions taken by people so as to protect something. The earth and tender shoots are our nature and living environment. The metaphor and metonymy mapping in 2 input spaces are shown in Table 4.3.

Mode	Mapping			Mapping		
	Semiotic representations	----->	Target domain	----->	Target domain	
Visual image	color	white	metaphor	Purity; safety; protection		
		Green	metaphor	Hope; growth; nature		
	entity	Cupped hands	metonymy	Human beings	metonymy	Human activities
		Earth and sprouts	metonymy	Nature		
		sunshine	metaphor	Warmth; life; vitality		
composition	triangle	metonymy	Stability			

Table 4.3 Analysis of "Green Living"

The semiotic base space contains "color", "entity", and "spacial composition". The generic space for this picture is "somebody protects something". Under such generic space, the partial mapping of counterparts between input space I and input space II emerges. After mapping, the components in the two spaces and some structures in the generic space are partially projected into the blending space. In the blending space, through composition, completion, and elaboration, the emergent structure, that is, human beings taking action and working together to protect the environment, is generated, and new meanings arise. In the pragmatic relevant space, the knowledge that nature is damaged and environmental protection is imminent is activated and integrated into the blend space. The conceptual meaning and emotional aesthetic effects are blended into the meaning space



when the dynamic schema in the relevance space is mapped into the blend space. Figure 4.6 shows how the multimodal metaphor is constructed.

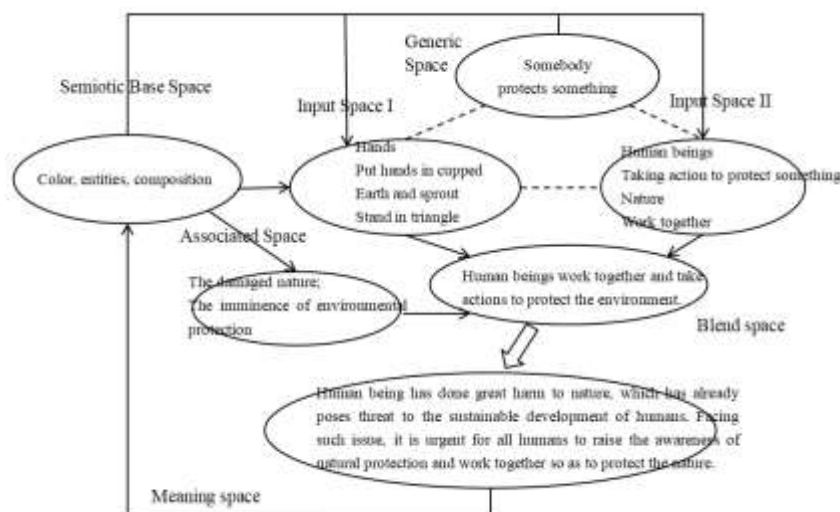


Figure 4.6 MMCIM of the picture “Green Living”

Chinese culture, with its deep roots extending back thousands of years, has always maintained a profound and philosophical connection between humans and nature. One of the core beliefs of Taoism is the principle of living in harmony with the Tao, which is often understood as the fundamental, natural order of the universe. Taoists believe in following the natural flow of life (Wu Wei) and emphasize the importance of humans living in harmony with the rhythm of nature. Confucianism, while often focused on human-centered ethics, also promotes the idea of harmony between heaven (nature), earth, and humanity. Respect for nature is seen as an extension of respect for one’s ancestors and society. The natural world is considered a reflection of moral order, and thus, maintaining its integrity is crucial. Traditional Chinese landscape painting and poetry vividly reflect the deep connection between humans and nature. Mountains, rivers, trees, and clouds are not just common motifs but are symbols of spiritual aspiration and inner feelings. Poets and artists often used natural scenery to express philosophical ideas and personal emotions, viewing nature as a mirror to human life. In recent decades, as the consequences of rapid industrialization have become apparent, there has been a growing emphasis on environmental issues in China. The government and various organizations are increasingly involved in promoting sustainable practices, reflecting a modern re-engagement with the traditional respect for nature. This includes major initiatives like reforestation projects and investments in renewable energy. Modern urban development in China often incorporates large parks and green spaces, reflecting the traditional Chinese value of integrating nature into daily life. Modern Chinese culture continues to celebrate traditional festivals that have strong connections to nature, such as the Qingming Festival (Tomb Sweeping Day), where people go outdoors to honor their ancestors, and the Mid-Autumn Festival, which celebrates the harvest and the beauty of the moon. These festivals help reinforce the cultural importance of nature and its cycles.

From the analysis above, it can be seen that BNUP expose students to the Chinese culture of respecting and living in harmony with nature. Students are guided to raise awareness of environmental protection and to take action to protect our living environment.

## 5. Conclusion

From the perspective of the conceptual blending theory, the multimodal metaphors of Chinese culture in the three compulsory books of BNUP are studied. 3 pictures with different themes are analyzed in detail to show how the multimodal metaphors are constructed in the textbooks and how it is related to Chinese culture. The paper suggests that there are many multimodal metaphors of Chinese culture in these three books studied, and these multimodal metaphors convey the communicative intention of the pictures and serve as a bridge to deeper cultural insights, offering students a glimpse into traditional and modern Chinese values, beliefs, and practices. However, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations that suggest directions for future research. First, the study was restricted to the three compulsory textbooks and did not include the four optional compulsory books and the three optional books available in the BNUP series. This limitation narrows the breadth of the analysis and may not fully represent the range of content available to students regarding Chinese culture. Second, the decision to analyze only the compulsory textbooks might introduce a selection bias, focusing on what is deemed essential by the curriculum developers and missing out on what is considered supplementary yet potentially impactful in conveying Chinese cultural elements. Therefore, future studies should consider including all categories of textbooks (compulsory, optional compulsory, and optional) in the analysis. This would

provide a more comprehensive overview of multimodal metaphor construction regarding Chinese culture in high school English textbooks of BNUP.

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