
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Analysis of Multimodal Metaphors in Ink and Wash Picture Books of Chinese Characters

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| ABSTRACT

The analysis of multimodal metaphors in Ink and Wash Picture Books of Chinese Characters centers the integration of Chinese characters and picture books. It explores how this innovative format preserves and reinterprets Chinese culture through the interplay of visual art and linguistic symbols. The paper employs multimodal analysis to reveal the metaphorical representations of Chinese characters within the picture books, which serve both as visual symbols and carriers of deep cultural and semantic information. The research indicates that the design of Chinese characters in these books not only highlights their aesthetic attributes but also creates a variety of visual metaphors through shape, color, and spatial layout, enhancing narrative content and jointly constructing meaning. Furthermore, the picture books facilitate the spread of traditional Chinese culture by using Chinese characters as a bridge and applying cross-cultural artistic techniques.

| KEYWORDS

Ink and Wash Picture Books of Chinese Characters; Multimodal Metaphor; Meaning Construction; Traditional Culture

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

The rapid pace of globalization has brought cross-cultural communication to the forefront as a critical global issue. As a significant bearer of Chinese culture, Chinese characters are playing an increasingly vital role in international exchanges. The *Ink and Wash Picture Books of Chinese Characters* (hereafter referred to as *the Picture Books*) serve as innovative artistic forms, ingeniously combining Chinese characters with picture books. Not only do they preserve Chinese culture by intertwining visual art with linguistic symbols, but they also breathe new life into Chinese characters through creative innovation. Our study delves into this distinctive artistic endeavor, seeking to examine the symbolic representations of Chinese characters in *the Picture Books* and their function in facilitating cross-cultural dialogue through a detailed multimodal analysis. This research aims to broaden the scope of Chinese character studies and contribute to the theoretical development of picture book art, cross-cultural communication, and cultural transmission.

In recent years, the study of multimodal metaphor has gained significant traction within academic circles, offering a theoretical framework through which the Chinese characters in picture books can be examined. Feng Dezheng and Zhao Xiufeng (2017) pointed out in their research that the combination of multimodal metonymy and visual grammar helps to reveal the process of meaning construction in image discourse. This theoretical perspective provides new cognitive evidence for our research, helping us understand how Chinese characters as visual symbols construct metaphorical meanings in *the Picture Books*.

The Chinese character design in *the Picture Books* is not only a visual aesthetic expression, but also constructs diverse visual metaphors through form, color, and spatial layout. These metaphors are intertwined with the content of the picture book story, jointly constructing a deeper meaning. The process of constructing this metaphor is influenced by various factors such as context,

subject, genre, and culture, as revealed by Ma Tinghui and Gao Yuan (2020) in analyzing multimodal metaphors in political comics. This requires us to conduct a comprehensive analysis from multiple perspectives to reveal the dynamic development of its metaphorical meaning.

At the same time, the study also explored the role of cross-cultural communication. As a bridge, Chinese characters, through the artistic expression techniques of picture books, not only promote the international dissemination of traditional Chinese culture, but also showcase the innovative application of Chinese characters in contemporary art on a global scale. This not only responds to the gap in research on visual grammar and metaphorical mechanisms (Wu Anping & Zhong Shouman, 2014), but also demonstrates the interactive significance of Chinese characters in multimodal discourse.

Therefore, the multimodal metaphorical analysis of *the Picture Books* is not only an artistic research but also has practical significance. Through the analysis of multimodal metaphors, we can explore their application in children's picture book teaching, as practiced by scholars at home and abroad. This helps to improve children's cognitive abilities, cultivate their imagination and creativity, and thus exert greater value in the field of education.

The purpose of this study is to enrich the research on Chinese character metaphors, provide a new multimodal analysis method, enhance the understanding of Chinese characters as visual elements and semantic carriers, and offer new thinking directions for cross-cultural communication, educational practice, and cultural inheritance theory. The results of this study not only enrich multimodal metaphor theory, but also inspire more research on the integration and innovation of art, language and culture.

2. Cross-cultural research on Chinese characters and picture books

2.1 Historical and cultural connotation of Chinese characters

Chinese character, as one of the oldest characters in the world, is not only a language symbol, but also carries profound cultural connotation. From the hieroglyphic representation of oracle bone inscriptions, to the smooth lines of gold script, to the regularity and unity of small seal characters, and then to the evolution of official script and regular script, the morphological changes of Chinese characters reflect the evolution of Chinese history and cultural changes. Each stage of this evolution reflects a different period of social aesthetics, philosophical ideas, and craft technology, making Chinese characters a dynamic and historical visual art form.

In the historical context of Chinese characters, each character is a miniature visual story, and its structure contains profound symbolic significance. For example, the Chinese character “家” (family) is composed of “宀” (house) and “豕” (pig), symbolizing the peaceful life with houses and pigs, reflecting the core value of farming civilization. The character “和” (harmonious), composed of “禾” and “口”, reflects the concept of harmonious coexistence and embodies the philosophical thoughts of traditional Chinese culture. Every stroke and radical of Chinese characters is historical testimony and cultural accumulation, which makes Chinese characters not only serve as characters, but also become a metaphorical visual medium in *the Picture Books*, conveying information beyond the level of language.

The application of Chinese characters in picture books reflects its cross-cultural integration and dissemination. Through picture books, a globally shared art form, Chinese characters communicate with readers around the world in a new visual language, overcoming linguistic barriers. The beauty of the structure and the depth of the image of Chinese characters make it become a kind of expressive artistic symbol in cross-cultural communication. Both children and adults can feel the charm of Chinese characters in picture books and understand the traditional Chinese culture behind them.

Zhou Li (2014) mentioned in her research that the combination of picture, text and sound in picture books is crucial to understanding the meaning of picture books. Through this multimodal integration, they use the visual characteristics of Chinese characters to build a rich metaphorical meaning, so that readers can enjoy the art and feel the charm of Chinese culture. This kind of cross-cultural communication not only promotes traditional Chinese culture, but also broadens the application field of Chinese characters in contemporary art, and reflects the interactive significance of Chinese characters in multimodal metaphors. At the same time, the innovative application of Chinese characters in picture books also responds to Yu Yanming's (2013) research on the multimodal metaphorical representation of news comics to some extent, demonstrating a transformation from tradition to modernity and from single mode to multi-mode. The metaphorical expression of Chinese characters in *the Picture Books* is no longer limited to metonymy and metaphor at the text level, but constructs a more complex and three-dimensional meaning network through multimodal means such as form, color and spatial layout.

The historical and cultural connotation of Chinese characters plays a crucial role in the cross-cultural research of Chinese painting books. It is not only a carrier of words, but also a bridge of culture. Through the construction of multimodal metaphors, Chinese characters realize a dialogue with the world in *the Picture Books*, providing global readers with a unique way to understand and

appreciate Chinese culture. This innovative practice undoubtedly provides a new perspective for Chinese character research, picture book art and cultural inheritance.

2.2 Art forms and narrative strategies of picture books

The nature of metaphor is to understand abstract concepts through concrete experience. Metaphors are not just a language phenomenon; they are also cognitive phenomena, a way of thinking (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The form of Chinese characters in *the Picture Books* has undergone a transition from abstraction to concrete, from traditional strokes to modern art style. In *the Picture Books*, Chinese characters are no longer just words, but become a part of visual art through their integration with the art form of the picture book, and they play a crucial role in the narrative strategy of the picture book. Zhou Li (2014) emphasized in her research that the complementary relationship between picture, text and sound is the key to understanding the meaning of picture books, which is vividly reflected in *the Picture Books*. The graphic characteristics of Chinese characters are closely combined with the images, colors and compositions of picture books to build a rich multimodal discourse, allowing readers to deeply understand and feel the connotation of the story under the dual guidance of vision and text.

The art form of picture books, especially the use of color, has played a significant role in strengthening the construction of metaphorical meaning. In the research of Teng Da and Miao Xingwei (2018), they proposed that color has conceptual, interpersonal and textual functions in picture books, which can guide readers' reading path and understanding through careful selection and arrangement. In *the Picture Books*, the color of ink painting is light and, elegant and deep, which not only conforms to the aesthetic of traditional Chinese art, but also provides a rich visual background for the metaphorical meaning of Chinese characters through color contrast and suggestion. For example, the black ink symbolizes the deep history, while the white space represents the infinite imagination space. The metaphorical use of this color makes the interpretation of the story more diversified and profound.

Spatial layout is also an important part of the narrative strategies of picture books. The arrangement of Chinese characters in picture books not only follows the traditional rules of writing Chinese characters, but also visually echoes with image elements to build the context of the story. Through the size, position and arrangement of Chinese characters, readers can intuitively feel the emotional changes and plot progression of the story, which not only strengthens the visual effect, but also deepens the readers' understanding of the story. Its multimodal interaction with images and colors together constitutes a dynamic narrative process, enabling readers to experience the perfect integration of Chinese characters and picture book art forms in reading.

The narrative strategy of picture books is also reflected in the interaction between Chinese characters and images, which is not only reflected in the description of images by words, but also in the metaphorical meaning jointly constructed by the two. Chinese characters complement images to create a deeper meaning beyond the description of words. Through this cross-modal narrative, the story and information in *the Picture Books* can be conveyed more richly, and Chinese characters play a key role in guiding, explaining and deepening understanding.

The art form and narrative strategy of *the Picture Books* innovatively construct metaphorical meaning through organic integration of Chinese characters and multimodal elements of picture book. Chinese characters are no longer just carriers of written information but a part of visual art, working together with color, composition and spatial layout to provide readers with a new way to understand and perceive traditional Chinese culture. This integration and innovation not only enriches the field of Chinese character research, but also injects new vitality into picture book art and cross-cultural communication theory.

3. Multimodal analysis of *the Picture Books*

3.1 Visual metaphor: the expression in ink painting of Chinese characters

Based on the three metafunctions of systemic functional linguistics, Kress & van Leeuwen (1996) constructed a theoretical framework for the study of visual communication, namely representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning. In *the Picture Books*, the visual metaphor of Chinese characters can be vividly displayed through the expression of ink painting art. The form, color and spatial layout of Chinese characters, under the ink brush strokes, is no longer just the static presentation of the text, but a vivid visual metaphor. They are interwoven with the story content of *the Picture Books*, jointly building a deep meaning. As Zhao Xiufeng and Li Xiaowei (2016) pointed out that color picture books convey characters' emotions through multimodal symbols, and use visual stimulation and mirror neurons to create empathic effect and cognitive poetics impact. In *the Picture Books*, this visual impact also exists, which is only realized through the gray scale change and blank space of ink painting, so that readers can experience deeper emotional resonance in the integration of words and paintings.

Under the rendering of ink painting, the form of Chinese characters not only retains the traditional stroke structure, but also gives a new visual tension. For example, the word "anger" is a metaphor for the intensity of emotions through the thick weight of the strokes and the shade of the ink, while the blank space indicates the depression or outbreak of emotions. This morphological

metaphor, combined with the background of the story, enables readers to intuitively feel the emotional state of the characters in the story, so as to deepen their understanding of the story.

The metaphorical use of color in *the Picture Books* is also worth exploring. Feng Dezhong and Zhao Xiufeng (2017) proposed that the reproduction meaning, interpersonal meaning and composition meaning of visual images are constructed from metonymy mapping in human cognitive models. The color of the ink painting, such as the depth of ink, is not only in line with the aesthetic appreciation of traditional Chinese art, but also further enriches the metaphorical connotation of Chinese characters through the contrast of colors, such as black and white, dark and bright, implying the light and shadow, good and evil and contradiction.

The spatial layout also embodies the visual metaphor of Chinese characters in *the Picture Books*, which complement the story content and build meaning together. The arrangement of Chinese characters not only follows the layout rules of traditional calligraphy, but also visually echoes with the image elements, forming a dynamic spatial metaphor, such as the size and position of Chinese characters, which can guide the readers' line of sight and imply the rhythm and emotional ups and downs of the story. The metaphor in the layout makes Chinese characters not only carry language information in picture books, but also provide readers with a richer reading experience through visual language. We can understand that metaphor representations often use completely different conceptual domains to map themes, such as fire, monsters, etc., to create novel visual effects. In *the Picture Books*, the cross-modal interaction between Chinese characters and images also uses this metaphor strategy to construct the deep meaning of Chinese characters and images beyond the text description so that the information of the story can be conveyed more fully.

The visual metaphor expression of Chinese characters in *the Picture Books* is to closely combine the form, color and spatial layout of Chinese characters with the story content through the unique medium of ink art, and jointly construct a dynamic and multi-level metaphorical context. This innovative visual metaphor not only enriches the research perspective of Chinese characters, but also provides a new thinking direction for the theoretical discussion of the art of picture books, cross-cultural communication and cultural inheritance.

3.2 Interactive narrative between text and images

In *the Picture Books*, the interactive narrative between text and image is a key element in constructing a multimodal metaphor. This kind of interactive narrative is not only the description of images, but also a deep and multi-level communication. Through the interaction between the form, the color and the spatial layout of Chinese characters, it jointly weaves a rich and profound metaphorical story. Zhou Li (2014) pointed out in her research that the contrast between pictures and text is crucial in picture books. By providing cross information, such as ironic contrast and predictive contrast, readers' interpretation and participation can be enhanced. In *the Picture Books*, this contrast relationship is skillfully used. Chinese characters and images create a dynamic metaphorical tension in the contrast, allowing readers to constantly construct the meaning in the process of reading.

Color plays an important role in the interactive narrative between words and images. For example, the collaboration between images and text in picture books can create novel visual effects. In *the Picture Books*, the use of color also conveys deep metaphorical information, such as dark ink symbolizing the outbreak of anger, while the white space indicates the dissipation of emotions. The contrast and hint of colors not only enrich the metaphorical connotation of Chinese characters, but also enhance the emotional resonance of readers.

Spatial layout is also crucial in interactive narrative. It constructs a visual dynamic narrative through the arrangement and combination of Chinese characters and images. As Wu Anping and Zhong Shouman (2014) explained that, the reproduction function of images includes movements, events and spatial expression, while the interactive function reflects the interaction between participants. In *the Picture Books*, the size, location, and layout of Chinese characters and their relationship with the image are carefully designed, which together create a spatial metaphor that allows the reader to visually follow the rhythm of the story and the fluctuations of the emotion, thus deeply understanding the theme and emotion of the story.

This interactive narrative of text and image, through the multi-modal metaphor construction, not only enriches the artistic performance of Chinese characters in picture books, but also improves the reading experience of readers. It breaks the limitations of traditional text narrative, so that readers can not only appreciate the aesthetics of Chinese characters in the process of reading, but also deeply understand the deep meaning behind them. This innovative narrative method provides a new perspective for the study of Chinese characters, the art of picture books and the theoretical discussion of cultural inheritance, and also provides valuable practical cases for the future study of multimodal metaphors.

3.3 The role of multimodal metaphors in meaning construction

Multimodal metaphors are metaphors whose target and source are each represented exclusively or predominantly in different modes (Forceville & Urios-Aparisi, 2009). In *the Picture Books*, multimodal metaphor plays a core role in meaning construction. It

creates emotional resonance and cognitive depth beyond the text itself by integrating the visual symbols of Chinese characters with the narrative strategy of the picture book. As proposed by Teng Da and Miao Xingwei (2018), the three functional theories of visual grammar are crucial in the construction of multimodal metaphors. They dynamically construct and convey the meaning of picture book discourse through the functions of representation, interaction, and composition. *The Picture Books* are carefully designed visual grammar that interweaves Chinese characters with images, colors, and spatial layout in the picture book discourse, weaving together a network of visual and semantic interweaving, allowing readers to experience the fusion of multiple meanings during the reading process.

The form of Chinese characters is endowed with metaphorical visual expression in *the Picture Books*, which is influenced by language, culture, vision, and context, forming a dynamic metaphorical construction process. For example, a page depicting the Chinese character “雷”(thunder), is metaphorically represented by heavy ink color and strokes, while the surrounding images may be raindrops, symbolizing thunderstorm. This combination of text and images, through the visual grammar reproduction function, allows readers to intuitively feel the depth of “thunder”. At the same time, through the interactive function, it further expands the semantic meaning of “thunder” to a broader cognitive field through the representational function.

Color, as a powerful tool for multimodal metaphor, plays a conceptual, interpersonal, and discourse role in *the Picture Books*. It not only echoes the form of Chinese characters, enhancing the visual impact of metaphors, but also creates richer emotional layers through comparison and suggestion. Teng Da and Miao Xingwei’s (2018) research emphasizes the metaphorical nature of color, which can guide readers’ emotional reactions and enhance the narrative effect of picture books.

The spatial layout also plays an important role in metaphorical construction in *the Picture Books*. The arrangement and position of Chinese characters are not only based on the aesthetics of traditional calligraphy, but also visually correspond with image elements, forming spatial metaphors. The metaphorical layout of this space strengthens the visual guidance role of Chinese characters in picture book discourse, allowing readers to follow the layout of Chinese characters and experience the emotional rhythm of the story.

Through interaction with images, colors, and spatial layout, Chinese characters have achieved dynamic construction of multimodal metaphors in *the Picture Books*, which not only enriches the aesthetic expression of Chinese characters, but also deepens readers’ understanding of the content of the picture book. The use of multimodal metaphors not only broadens the perspective of Chinese character research, but also provides new thinking directions for picture book art, cross-cultural communication, and cultural inheritance theory. Ma Tinghui and Gao Yuan’s (2020) research shows that the complexity of constructing multimodal metaphors allows readers to understand information more deeply in cross-cultural contexts, and *the Picture Books* are vivid examples of this cross-cultural metaphorical communication.

The application of multimodal metaphors in *the Picture Books* constructs a deep meaning construction system through the interaction between visual elements and Chinese characters. It transcends the boundaries of language, giving Chinese characters new vitality in picture book art and enriching our understanding of metaphorical strategies in cross-cultural communication. This innovative practice not only contributes to the study of Chinese characters, but also injects new vitality into the theoretical exploration of picture book art, providing valuable experience for future multimodal metaphor research.

4. Conclusion

The Picture Books, with their unique multimodal metaphorical strategy, not only open up new horizons for Chinese character research, but also inject new vitality into picture book art and cross-cultural communication. Through in-depth analysis of the visual metaphors of Chinese characters, the interactive narrative between text and images, and the role of multimodal metaphors in meaning construction, we reveal the innovative expression of Chinese characters as visual symbols in *the Picture Books*. It not only inherits traditional Chinese culture, but also achieves innovative development in modern contexts.

The ink-wash expression of Chinese characters, combined with its profound traditional cultural core and innovative modern art forms, provides readers with a profound visual metaphorical experience. The careful design of form, color, and spatial layout makes Chinese characters no longer just words in picture books, but closely intertwined with the story content, jointly constructing multi-level meanings. This visual metaphor not only enhances the aesthetic characteristics of Chinese characters, but also promotes the international dissemination of traditional Chinese culture through cross-cultural artistic expression.

The interactive narrative between text and images also plays a key role in *the Picture Books*, breaking the boundaries of textual narrative and constructing deeper meanings beyond textual description through dynamic communication between Chinese characters and images. This interactive narrative strengthens the metaphorical nature of Chinese characters, allowing readers to more intuitively feel the emotions of the story during the reading process, while also enhancing the richness and depth of the reading experience.

Multimodal metaphor plays a central role in the construction of meaning in *the Picture Books*. It achieves dynamic construction and communication of meaning through the close integration of Chinese characters with other elements of *the Picture Books*. The multiple metafunctions of color, spatial layout, and visual grammar together construct a complex metaphorical network, making Chinese characters a dual guide for both visual and semantic aspects in picture book discourse. *The Picture Books* use multimodal metaphor as a bridge to achieve the perfect integration of Chinese characters in visual arts and language symbols. They not only provide innovative practical cases for children's picture book teaching, but also have a profound impact on the future development of Chinese character research, picture book art, and cross-cultural communication theory. This innovative practice enriches our understanding of Chinese characters, showcases the infinite possibilities of Chinese characters in contemporary society and art, and also provides a unique way for readers to understand and appreciate traditional Chinese culture. Therefore, the study of multimodal metaphors in *the Picture Books* is not only an academic contribution, but also a practical exploration of cultural inheritance and innovation, which is of great significance for promoting research and development in related fields.

The analysis of multimodal metaphors in *the Picture Books* has limitations. The research method needs improvement. For example, more diverse data collection methods could be employed. Also, a more systematic analysis framework could enhance the validity of the findings.

For future research on the analysis of multimodal metaphors in *the Picture Books*, more extensive data collection is needed. Incorporating different age groups' perspectives and exploring cross-cultural comparisons could enrich the understanding. Additionally, developing more refined analytical tools and theories would enhance the depth of research.

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