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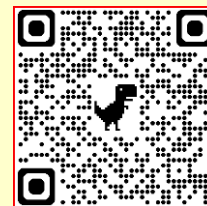
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Metaphor, Culture, and Chinese Zodiac Expressions: A Review of Research and Pedagogical Implications for Chinese Language Education

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ABSTRACT

This review examines Chinese zodiac metaphorical expressions as culturally embedded forms of figurative language in Chinese. It synthesizes research on conceptual metaphor, cultural cognition, animal metaphors, Chinese zodiac symbolism, idioms and fixed expressions, cross-linguistic transfer, and vocabulary pedagogy. The review argues that Chinese zodiac expressions are not merely idioms containing animal names, but linguistic forms shaped by cultural symbolism, metaphorical mapping, pragmatic convention, and learner interpretation. Existing research has contributed to the explanation of zodiac culture and animal-related idioms, yet it often remains focused on cultural description and semantic explanation. Less attention has been paid to how learners of Chinese interpret these expressions, how first-language transfer influences comprehension, and how such expressions can be taught systematically. The review proposes that teaching Chinese zodiac metaphorical expressions should move beyond translation and memorization toward an integrated approach that combines literal imagery, cultural explanation, metaphor awareness, pragmatic use, and cross-linguistic comparison. Future research should further examine learner cognition, classroom practice, corpus-based usage, and graded vocabulary design.

KEY WORDS: Chinese zodiac; metaphorical expressions; animal metaphors; cultural vocabulary; Chinese language education; cross-linguistic transfer.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Rationale

Metaphorical expressions constitute an important part of Chinese vocabulary and discourse. In everyday Chinese communication, many idioms, fixed expressions, proverbs, and colloquial phrases do not convey their meanings through the literal combination of individual characters alone. Rather, their interpretation often depends on shared cultural knowledge, conventionalized metaphorical associations, historical allusions, and pragmatic context. From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, metaphor is not merely a rhetorical ornament but a fundamental mechanism

through which people understand one domain of experience in terms of another (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). This view is particularly relevant to Chinese idiomatic and culturally embedded expressions, because many such expressions require learners to move beyond literal meaning and reconstruct the conceptual and cultural associations behind the expression.

Expressions such as “playing the lute to an ox” 对牛弹琴, “beating the grass and startling the snake” 打草惊蛇, “hoping one's son becomes a dragon” 望子成龙, and “green plums and a bamboo horse” 青梅竹马 are typical examples. Although the individual

characters in these expressions may appear familiar to intermediate or advanced learners of Chinese, the meanings of the expressions as a whole cannot always be inferred directly from their surface forms. This difficulty reflects a broader problem in second language learning: figurative expressions often involve conceptual mappings, cultural conventions, and pragmatic meanings that are not fully accessible through lexical knowledge alone (Littlemore & Low, 2006). For this reason, the learning of metaphorical expressions should be understood not simply as vocabulary memorization, but as part of learners' developing metaphorical and intercultural competence.

Among culturally loaded metaphorical expressions, those related to the Chinese zodiac are particularly significant. The twelve zodiac animals—rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig—are not merely animal names. They form part of a symbolic cultural system that has been widely integrated into Chinese folk beliefs, social imagination, moral evaluation, and linguistic expression. Zodiac-related expressions often use animal images to describe human personality, social behavior, moral judgment, interpersonal relations, danger, aspiration, or failure. However, such mappings are not universal in a simple sense; they are shaped by cultural models, historical experience, and conventional patterns of usage (Kövecses, 2005, 2010).

A focused review of Chinese zodiac metaphorical expressions is therefore necessary because these expressions occupy an intersection of metaphor, culture, vocabulary learning, and cross-cultural communication. They expose the limitations of dictionary-based vocabulary learning: a definition may tell learners what an expression means, but it does not necessarily explain why that meaning developed, when the expression is pragmatically appropriate, what evaluative tone it carries, or how it differs from apparently similar expressions in other languages. Research on figurative language has shown that idioms and metaphorical expressions often involve image-based motivation, but such motivation may be interpreted differently across languages and cultures (Boers & Demecheleer, 2001; Dobrovolskij & Piirainen, 2005). This makes Chinese zodiac expressions a productive site for reviewing the relationship between metaphor, culture, learner interpretation, and vocabulary pedagogy.

1.2 Scope of the Review

This review focuses on Chinese zodiac metaphorical expressions, referring to idioms, fixed expressions, proverbs, sayings, and colloquial phrases that contain one or more of the twelve zodiac animals and whose meanings go beyond literal reference to animals. The focus is therefore not on zodiac culture as folklore in general, but on how zodiac animal images are transformed into metaphorical meanings in Chinese vocabulary and discourse.

The review is situated at the intersection of metaphor theory, animal metaphor studies, cultural vocabulary, and Chinese language education. It includes studies relevant to conceptual metaphor, animal metaphors, cultural variation, Chinese idioms, zodiac symbolism, figurative language learning, and vocabulary pedagogy. It does not attempt to provide a full historical account of the Chinese zodiac, nor does it discuss zodiac beliefs, fortune-telling, or customs in detail, except where they are directly relevant to metaphorical meaning and language learning.

This scope also makes it possible to distinguish different kinds of zodiac expressions. Some expressions are based on relatively concrete animal behavior, some depend on culturally valued symbols, and others derive from allusions or long-established

idiomatic convention. Treating all of them simply as animal idioms would obscure these differences. The review therefore considers not only what the expressions mean, but also how their meanings are motivated, conventionalized, interpreted, and taught.

1.3 Review Questions

This review addresses four questions. First, how have previous studies conceptualized Chinese zodiac metaphorical expressions? Second, what cultural and cognitive mechanisms underlie these expressions? Third, what difficulties may learners of Chinese encounter when interpreting them? Fourth, what pedagogical implications can be drawn for Chinese language education? Together, these questions provide the analytical basis for examining Chinese zodiac metaphorical expressions as linguistic forms, cultural signs, cognitive mappings, and pedagogical resources.

2. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

2.1 Conceptual Metaphor, Cultural Cognition, and Animal Metaphors

The study of metaphor has moved from a primarily rhetorical understanding to a cognitive and cultural understanding. In classical rhetoric, metaphor was often treated as a figure of speech associated with eloquence, poetic vividness, and stylistic ornamentation (Aristotle, trans. 1996). Later interaction theories emphasized that metaphor involves the interaction between different thoughts or domains rather than simple word substitution (Richards, 1936; Black, 1962). A more decisive shift occurred with cognitive metaphor theory, which argues that metaphor is not only a linguistic device but also a basic structure of thought. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), people understand abstract or less familiar experiences through more concrete and familiar domains. This approach provides a useful basis for analyzing expressions in which animal imagery is used to structure human experience.

Animal metaphors are especially relevant to this review because animals often function as source domains for conceptualizing human traits, actions, emotions, and social relations. Human characteristics may be understood through perceived animal features such as strength, speed, danger, loyalty, greed, foolishness, or elegance. In Chinese, “devouring like wolves and tigers” 狼吞虎咽 maps the imagined eating behavior of wild animals onto a human action, while “a tiger’s back and a bear’s waist” 虎背熊腰 maps animal strength onto the human body. These expressions illustrate how animal imagery can become a cognitive resource for describing human conduct.

At the same time, animal metaphors are not based only on objective animal characteristics. They are shaped by cultural interpretation and conventional usage. Kövecses (2005) argues that metaphor shows both universality and cultural variation: some metaphors may arise from shared bodily or perceptual experience, but their linguistic realization and cultural implications differ across communities. This point is crucial for Chinese zodiac expressions, because the twelve zodiac animals are not merely biological creatures. They are also cultural symbols embedded in folk belief, literary memory, social evaluation, and everyday discourse. The dragon provides a clear example. In Chinese, dragon-related expressions often carry positive meanings associated with excellence, aspiration, vitality, and prestige, while in some Western traditions dragons are more commonly associated with danger or monsters. Thus, “hoping one’s son becomes a dragon” 望子成龙 cannot be fully explained by animal imagery alone; it depends on a culturally specific model of

the dragon.

Cultural cognition further explains why learners may encounter difficulty even when they know the literal meanings of individual words. Sharifian (2011) defines cultural cognition as cognition distributed across members of a cultural group and reflected in language and communication. From this perspective, culturally loaded expressions are linguistic traces of shared cultural schemas and values. Understanding “playing the lute to an ox” 对牛弹琴 requires more than knowing “ox” and “lute”; the learner must recognize the communicative judgment encoded by the metaphor. Similarly, “green plums and a bamboo horse” 青梅竹马 requires knowledge of literary association and conventional cultural memory rather than direct animal-based mapping. Conceptual metaphor theory therefore needs to be combined with cultural cognition to explain how Chinese zodiac expressions work.

2.2 Cultural Vocabulary in Chinese Language Education

Cultural vocabulary plays an important role in Chinese language education because language learning involves more than the acquisition of grammar and lexical meaning. Many words and expressions carry cultural assumptions, social values, historical memory, and pragmatic conventions. For learners of Chinese, understanding such expressions requires not only linguistic competence but also the ability to interpret culturally embedded meanings in context. This is closely related to intercultural communicative competence, which emphasizes that learners need to understand how meanings are shaped by cultural perspectives, social practices, and communicative norms (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1993).

Chinese zodiac metaphorical expressions are typical examples of cultural vocabulary. They are difficult not only because they are idiomatic, but because their meanings often depend on cultural models that are not explicit. A translation can provide a rough equivalent, but it may fail to explain metaphorical motivation, cultural background, pragmatic restrictions, or evaluative tone. Nation (2001) argues that word knowledge includes not only form and meaning but also use, collocation, register, association, and contextual appropriateness. This broader view is highly relevant to zodiac expressions, whose meanings are shaped by both linguistic form and cultural convention.

Metaphor awareness can support the teaching of cultural vocabulary. Boers (2000) argues that drawing learners’ attention to metaphorical motivation can improve vocabulary retention and comprehension. In the case of zodiac expressions, learners may benefit from being guided to notice how animal images are mapped onto human traits, actions, or social situations. For relatively transparent expressions, such as “devouring like wolves and tigers” 狼吞虎咽, visual imagery and contextual examples may help learners infer meaning. For more opaque expressions, such as “green plums and a bamboo horse” 青梅竹马, explicit explanation of literary allusion and conventional usage is necessary. This distinction suggests that teaching methods should be adjusted according to the transparency and cultural density of each expression.

2.3 Review Approach and Analytical Framework

This article adopts a narrative review and critical synthesis approach. Rather than conducting a systematic review of all studies related to Chinese zodiac culture, it synthesizes key theoretical and pedagogical discussions relevant to Chinese zodiac metaphorical expressions. A narrative review is suitable for topics that cut across several fields and require conceptual integration rather than

quantitative aggregation of findings (Green, Johnson, & Adams, 2006). The literature considered in this review includes works on metaphor theory, animal metaphors, Chinese idioms and fixed expressions, zodiac symbolism, cross-linguistic comparison, figurative language learning, and Chinese vocabulary pedagogy.

The review gives priority to studies that help explain how zodiac animal images are transformed into metaphorical meanings, how such meanings become culturally conventionalized, and how learners of Chinese may interpret or learn these expressions. Works that focus only on zodiac fortune-telling, calendar systems, or folk customs are not treated as central sources unless they directly illuminate metaphorical meaning or language teaching. Studies on animal expressions outside the twelve zodiac system are considered only when they help clarify broader issues of animal metaphor, cultural symbolism, cross-linguistic comparison, or teaching methodology.

The analytical framework used in this review connects literal imagery, cultural meaning, learner interpretation, and pedagogical application. It assumes that zodiac expressions are not merely lexical forms or isolated idioms. Their meanings are produced through the interaction of literal animal image, cultural symbolism, metaphorical meaning, pragmatic usage, learner interpretation, and pedagogical application. Figure 1 presents this framework.

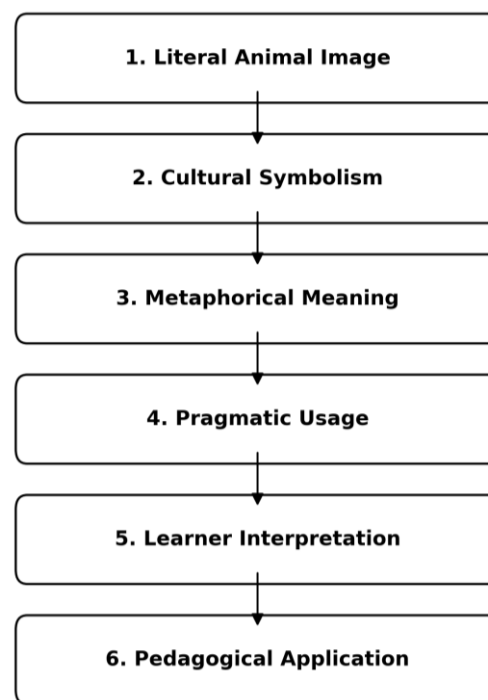


Figure 1. Analytical framework for reviewing Chinese zodiac metaphorical expressions. Source: Author’s synthesis.

The first level, literal animal image, refers to visible or imaginable animal features such as strength, speed, danger, or eating behavior. The second level, cultural symbolism, concerns culturally specific values attached to zodiac animals, such as the positive status of the dragon in Chinese culture. The third level, metaphorical meaning, explains how animal images are mapped onto human traits, actions, social relations, or moral evaluations. The fourth level, pragmatic usage, considers context, tone, register, and evaluative force. The fifth level, learner interpretation, focuses on how learners understand, infer, or misunderstand these expressions through literal reading, contextual clues, or first-language transfer. The final level, pedagogical application, addresses how these insights can inform teaching culturally embedded vocabulary in Chinese language

education.

The framework is not intended to suggest a rigid sequence that every learner follows. Rather, it offers a set of analytical dimensions for reviewing previous research and for identifying gaps. Some expressions may be strongly motivated at the level of literal image, while others may require cultural or historical explanation before their metaphorical meaning becomes visible. Likewise, some teaching problems may arise from semantic opacity, while others may arise from pragmatic inappropriateness or negative transfer from the learner's first language.

3. Major Research Themes

3.1 Chinese Zodiac Culture and Symbolism

Research on Chinese zodiac culture usually begins from the recognition that the twelve zodiac animals are not merely chronological signs, but culturally meaningful symbols. In Chinese-speaking societies, the zodiac system connects animals with time, personality, family expectation, folk belief, social imagination, and symbolic interpretation. Studies of Chinese symbols have shown that animals, plants, objects, colors, and numbers often acquire culturally conventional meanings through repeated use in literature, art, custom, and everyday life. Eberhard's dictionary of Chinese symbols, for example, illustrates how symbolic meanings are connected with social attitudes, customs, and traditional ways of interpreting life (Eberhard, 1986).

Within this symbolic system, zodiac animals function as culturally familiar images through which people classify, evaluate, and imagine human experience. The rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig are not understood only as biological animals. They are associated with culturally shaped ideas of intelligence, diligence, danger, gentleness, power, cunning, speed, docility, cleverness, vigilance, loyalty, or vulgarity. Yet these associations are not always fixed. The same animal may carry different meanings in different expressions. The tiger may suggest strength in "a tiger's back and a bear's waist" 虎背熊腰, danger in "a sheep entering a tiger's mouth" 羊入虎口, and structural inconsistency in "a tiger's head but a snake's tail" 虎头蛇尾. This complexity shows that zodiac symbolism cannot be reduced to a simple list of animal meanings.

Studies of Chinese visual and symbolic culture also show that animal imagery often operates as part of a broader semiotic system. Welch (2008), for instance, examines recurring motifs and visual images in Chinese art and material culture, which helps explain why animal images may carry layered cultural meanings rather than purely literal reference. Such studies are useful for understanding zodiac metaphors because many idioms rely on culturally accumulated image systems. "Hoping one's son becomes a dragon" 望子成龙 depends not on direct observation of an animal, but on the dragon's culturally elevated status as a symbol of excellence, nobility, power, and aspiration.

At the same time, zodiac symbolism should not be treated as closed or homogeneous. A zodiac animal may have one meaning in folk belief, another in idiomatic expression, and another in contemporary colloquial use. The dog may be associated with loyalty in some contexts, but "dog legs" 狗腿 carries a strongly negative social evaluation. Similarly, the pig may be associated with wealth or abundance in some symbolic contexts, but in colloquial evaluation it may suggest laziness, stupidity, or vulgarity. This instability matters for language education because learners cannot reliably infer the meaning of a zodiac expression by memorizing a single symbolic

value for each animal.

This point also suggests that zodiac symbolism should be reviewed as a dynamic resource rather than a fixed cultural code. Traditional symbolic associations may continue to influence idiomatic meaning, but actual language use depends on genre, period, speaker intention, and discourse setting. Some expressions preserve older cultural values, while others are reinterpreted in contemporary media and everyday conversation. A review of zodiac metaphorical expressions should therefore pay attention to both inherited symbolic meanings and changing patterns of usage, especially when the goal is to inform language teaching rather than only describe cultural history.

3.2 Chinese Zodiac Idioms and Fixed Expressions

Research on Chinese zodiac idioms and fixed expressions is closely related to broader studies of idiomaticity and formulaic language. Idioms and fixed expressions are generally characterized by relative structural stability, conventionalized meaning, and varying degrees of semantic opacity. In many cases, the meaning of the whole expression cannot be fully predicted from the meanings of its individual components (Fernando, 1996; Moon, 1998). This is particularly relevant to Chinese zodiac expressions, since many of them contain familiar animal words but convey meanings that extend far beyond literal animal reference. Expressions such as "playing the lute to an ox" 对牛弹琴, "beating the grass and startling the snake" 打草惊蛇, and "a tiger's head but a snake's tail" 虎头蛇尾 are not simply descriptions of animals or actions. They are conventionalized idiomatic forms that encode social judgment, communicative evaluation, or assessment of human behavior.

Studies of idioms have shown that idiomatic meaning exists on a continuum from relatively transparent to highly opaque. Some idioms are motivated by clear imagery, while others require knowledge of cultural convention, historical background, or textual allusion (Cacciari & Tabossi, 1993; Gibbs, 1994). Chinese zodiac idioms display the same continuum. "Devouring like wolves and tigers" 狼吞虎咽 is relatively transparent because the animal image supports the figurative meaning of eating hurriedly or greedily. "A sheep entering a tiger's mouth" 羊入虎口 is also imageable because the relationship between sheep and tiger evokes danger and helplessness. By contrast, "green plums and a bamboo horse" 青梅竹马 is much less transparent; its meaning depends on literary association and conventionalized cultural memory. This distinction between transparent and opaque expressions is important for both idiom analysis and Chinese language education.

Chinese zodiac idioms also show that fixed expressions cannot be explained only by assigning a single symbolic meaning to each animal. The same animal may participate in different metaphorical structures and carry different evaluative meanings. The horse, for example, may be associated with speed, carelessness, childhood play, or flattery depending on the expression. This confirms a major point in phraseological studies: idiomatic meaning is produced by the whole expression, not by the isolated meaning of one component word (Moon, 1998; Wray, 2002).

For learners of Chinese, zodiac idioms and fixed expressions present a particular challenge because their surface forms may appear simple while their meanings are culturally dense. Learners may recognize the characters for "ox," "tiger," "snake," or "dragon," but recognition does not guarantee understanding of idiomatic meaning. Research on formulaic language suggests that idioms are processed and learned differently from freely generated language because they are stored, retrieved, and used as conventionalized units (Wray,

2002). In Chinese language education, zodiac idioms therefore need to be presented as meaningful formulaic units with attention to imagery, cultural motivation, usage context, and pragmatic force.

This also suggests that frequency and usefulness should be considered in selecting zodiac idioms for instruction. Some expressions are common in everyday communication or media discourse, while others are literary, historical, or relatively rare. A pedagogically oriented review therefore needs to consider not only cultural richness, but also communicative relevance. Expressions that learners are likely to encounter in reading, conversation, online media, or classroom texts should receive greater attention than obscure idioms whose main value is historical or ornamental.

3.3 Animal Metaphors, Conceptual Mapping, and Cross-Linguistic Transfer

Studies on animal metaphors provide an important theoretical basis for understanding Chinese zodiac metaphorical expressions. In conceptual metaphor theory, animals often function as source domains through which human traits, actions, emotions, and social relations are conceptualized. This process involves mapping selected features of animals onto human experience. Lakoff and Turner (1989) relate this tendency to a broader metaphorical system in which human beings understand themselves and other entities through hierarchical relations among humans, animals, plants, objects, and natural forces. From this perspective, animal metaphors are not random figures of speech; they reflect structured ways of interpreting human life through non-human imagery.

In Chinese, animal metaphors frequently map perceived animal qualities onto human conduct and social evaluation. “Devouring like wolves and tigers” 狼吞虎咽 represents eating behavior, “a tiger’s back and a bear’s waist” 虎背熊腰 represents physical strength, and “a sheep entering a tiger’s mouth” 羊入虎口 represents danger and vulnerability. However, the mapping from animal to human is selective rather than comprehensive. An expression does not transfer all features of an animal to a human target; instead, it selects culturally salient features and suppresses others. This selectivity is central to metaphorical mapping, because metaphor highlights some aspects of the source domain while backgrounding others (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

The study of conceptual mapping also helps distinguish between image-based metaphors and convention-based or allusion-based expressions. Some zodiac expressions are motivated by animal behavior and are therefore relatively transparent. Others are less directly motivated by the animal itself. “Green plums and a bamboo horse” 青梅竹马 contains the word “horse,” but its meaning is not produced by mapping the qualities of a horse onto a human target. Instead, the expression depends on literary memory, childhood imagery, and conventionalized usage. Not all zodiac expressions can therefore be analyzed through animal-to-human mapping alone; some require attention to intertextuality, allusion, and phraseological convention.

Cross-linguistic transfer further complicates the interpretation of Chinese zodiac metaphors. Learners often interpret figurative language through the conceptual and cultural resources of their first language. Positive transfer may occur when a learner’s first language contains an expression similar to the Chinese one. For example, expressions comparable to “playing the lute to an ox” 对牛弹琴 exist in some East Asian languages, making it easier for learners from those backgrounds to understand the Chinese expression. However, cross-linguistic similarity may also produce

negative transfer. Similar-looking expressions may differ in semantic range, cultural value, usage context, or evaluative tone. An expression involving childhood companions in one language may not carry the same literary, gendered, or romantic associations as “green plums and a bamboo horse” 青梅竹马 in Chinese.

The dragon is a particularly clear example of cross-cultural variation. In Chinese, dragon-related expressions often carry positive meanings associated with excellence, vitality, nobility, or aspiration. In many Western cultural traditions, however, dragons are more often associated with danger, evil, or monsters to be defeated. This contrast shows why literal translation alone is insufficient. A learner who interprets “hoping one’s son becomes a dragon” 望子成龙 through a non-Chinese cultural model of the dragon may fail to understand its positive evaluative meaning. Cross-linguistic research on figurative language has shown that culturally different images can affect learners’ comprehension of idiomatic expressions (Boers & Demecheleer, 2001; Dobrovolskij & Piirainen, 2005).

Transfer should therefore be understood as both a cognitive strategy and a pedagogical issue. Learners naturally compare unfamiliar expressions with familiar ones, but teachers need to help them evaluate whether the comparison is reliable. A useful classroom practice is to ask learners to identify a possible equivalent in their first language, then compare literal image, figurative meaning, emotional tone, and usage context. Such comparison can reveal partial overlap and prevent learners from assuming that similar images always carry the same communicative value.

3.4 Teaching Chinese Cultural Vocabulary

Studies on teaching Chinese cultural vocabulary emphasize that vocabulary learning involves more than memorizing lexical meanings. Words, idioms, and fixed expressions often encode cultural values, historical memory, social evaluation, and pragmatic conventions. Chinese zodiac metaphorical expressions are especially relevant because they combine lexical form, animal imagery, cultural symbolism, and idiomatic usage. A learner may know the literal meanings of “ox,” “dragon,” or “horse,” but this does not guarantee understanding of the whole expression. What must be taught is not only translation, but also metaphorical motivation, cultural background, evaluative force, and appropriate context of use.

One major approach in teaching cultural vocabulary is contextualized instruction. Rather than presenting idioms as isolated items, teachers can introduce them through short dialogues, narratives, authentic texts, classroom scenarios, or communicative tasks. Context helps learners understand who uses an expression, in what situation, and with what attitude. For example, “dog legs” 狗腿 carries a derogatory meaning and should not be taught merely as “a person who flatters others.” Learners need to understand its negative tone and the social relationship implied by its use. Similarly, “blowing the ox” 吹牛 may be humorous or critical depending on context.

Another useful approach is cross-cultural comparison. Learners often interpret new expressions through the conceptual resources of their first language, so comparison can help them identify both similarities and differences between Chinese expressions and expressions in their own languages. However, contrastive teaching should not assume direct equivalence. A similar expression may differ in emotional tone, pragmatic range, cultural association, or social acceptability. Teachers should guide learners to ask not only whether their language has a similar expression, but also whether it

means the same thing, carries the same tone, and applies to the same situation.

Pedagogical sequencing can also be improved by classifying zodiac expressions according to transparency and cultural density. Image-based expressions, such as “devouring like wolves and tigers” 狼吞虎咽, may be introduced through pictures and contexts. Cultural-symbolic expressions, such as “hoping one’s son becomes a dragon” 望子成龙, require explanation of symbolic values. Allusion-based expressions, such as “green plums and a bamboo horse” 青梅竹马, need story-based or text-based teaching. Pragmatically sensitive expressions, such as “dog legs” 狗腿, require attention to tone, register, and social appropriateness. Such classification can help teachers move beyond random idiom instruction and develop a more systematic approach to teaching culturally embedded metaphorical vocabulary.

This pedagogical perspective also has implications for materials design. Textbooks and supplementary resources should not simply list idioms with translations. They should provide short contexts, contrastive notes, common collocations, typical speaker attitudes, and warnings about inappropriate use when necessary. For advanced learners, authentic examples from news, fiction, social media, or spoken interaction can help show how zodiac expressions function in contemporary discourse rather than only in dictionary entries.

4. Critical Discussion and Pedagogical Implications

4.1 From Cultural Explanation to Learner Interpretation

Existing research has made an important contribution by explaining the cultural meanings of zodiac animals and the symbolic background of related idioms. Such work helps show that expressions such as “hoping one’s son becomes a dragon” 望子成龙, “a sheep entering a tiger’s mouth” 羊入虎口, and “playing the lute to an ox” 对牛弹琴 are not literal descriptions of animals, but culturally conventionalized forms of figurative meaning. However, a common limitation of this research tradition is its tendency to explain what an expression means without sufficiently examining how that meaning is understood, learned, or used.

In many cases, studies focus on the symbolic value of individual animals or provide semantic explanations of idioms, but pay less attention to the interpretive process through which learners move from literal animal imagery to metaphorical meaning. This creates a gap between cultural explanation and language learning. Knowing that the dragon is a positive cultural symbol helps explain “hoping one’s son becomes a dragon” 望子成龙, but it does not fully explain how learners notice, infer, misunderstand, remember, or appropriately use the expression in communication.

Learner cognition should therefore become a more central concern. Learners may first notice the literal animal image, then connect it with context, and finally search for a figurative meaning. For transparent expressions such as “devouring like wolves and tigers” 狼吞虎咽, this process may be successful because the animal image provides a clear clue. For expressions such as “green plums and a bamboo horse” 青梅竹马, literal analysis is unlikely to help because the meaning depends on cultural memory and literary convention. Research on idiom comprehension shows that transparency, familiarity, imageability, and contextual support influence how idioms are understood (Cacciari & Tabossi, 1993; Gibbs, 1994). These insights should be more fully integrated into studies of Chinese zodiac expressions.

A learner-centered approach would ask how learners interpret an expression, what kinds of errors they make, how first-language knowledge shapes their interpretation, and what kinds of teaching support help them understand more effectively. Methods such as think-aloud protocols, interviews, classroom observation, learner diaries, and error analysis could reveal how learners process zodiac metaphorical expressions. This shift would move research from cultural description toward learning process analysis.

4.2 From Semantic Meaning to Pragmatic Use

Another limitation of existing research is the limited integration of pragmatics. Many studies focus on lexical meaning, cultural symbolism, or idiomatic interpretation, but pay less attention to how expressions are used in communicative contexts. Figurative expressions are not only semantic units; they also carry pragmatic force. Their meanings depend on who uses them, to whom they are addressed, in what situation they occur, and what evaluative attitude they convey. This is important because learners may understand the general meaning of an expression but still use it in an inappropriate tone, register, or social context.

Chinese zodiac metaphorical expressions often carry strong evaluative meanings. Some expressions are relatively neutral or descriptive, such as “devouring like wolves and tigers” 狼吞虎咽. Others carry negative judgment, such as “dog legs” 狗腿, which criticizes someone as servile or sycophantic. Some expressions may be humorous in informal speech, such as “blowing the ox” 吹牛, while others may sound literary or contextually restricted. These differences cannot be fully captured by dictionary definitions alone. From a pragmatic perspective, learners need to know not only what an expression means, but also what it does in interaction.

This issue is closely related to communicative competence. Hymes (1972) argues that knowing a language involves knowing how to use it appropriately in social contexts. Later models of communicative competence also emphasize sociolinguistic and pragmatic knowledge as essential components of language ability (Canale & Swain, 1980; Bachman, 1990). Applied to Chinese zodiac metaphorical expressions, this means that learners need to understand whether an expression is formal or informal, complimentary or derogatory, playful or serious, and whether it is suitable for describing oneself, others, elders, classmates, colleagues, or public figures.

A more pragmatic approach would present zodiac expressions in dialogues, narratives, media examples, or social scenarios. Learners should be guided to notice speaker intention, emotional tone, relationship between interlocutors, and contextual constraints. This aligns with the broader view that language teaching should integrate linguistic form, cultural meaning, and communicative use rather than treating them as separate domains (Kramsch, 1993; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

Pragmatic instruction is especially important because some zodiac expressions can sound playful in one context but offensive in another. A teacher may explain the semantic meaning of an expression accurately, yet learners may still use it with the wrong interlocutor or in an inappropriate register. For instance, expressions with negative animal imagery should be taught with caution, including information about whether they can be used jokingly among close friends, whether they sound insulting, and whether they are suitable in written or formal contexts. This kind of guidance helps learners avoid treating all idiomatic expressions as interchangeable decorative language.

4.3 Pedagogical Implications

The teaching of Chinese zodiac metaphorical expressions should move beyond translation and memorization. A useful instructional chain is: literal image, cultural source, metaphorical meaning, and pragmatic use. The literal image helps learners notice the concrete form of the expression; the cultural source explains why the image has meaning in Chinese; the metaphorical meaning clarifies the intended interpretation; and pragmatic use shows when and how the expression can be used appropriately.

This chain can be adjusted according to expression type. Image-based expressions can be taught through pictures, gestures, and situational examples. Cultural-symbolic expressions require explanation of cultural values, such as the positive status of the dragon in Chinese. Allusion-based expressions require story-based teaching and examples of conventional usage. Pragmatically sensitive expressions require attention to tone, register, and social appropriateness. In all cases, teachers should avoid presenting zodiac expressions as isolated idioms detached from discourse.

Cross-linguistic comparison can also be valuable, but it must be carefully designed. Learners should be encouraged to compare Chinese expressions with similar expressions in their first languages, while also noticing differences in semantic scope, emotional force, cultural background, and usage restrictions. This approach can transform transfer from a source of error into a resource for learning. It also helps learners develop metaphorical awareness and intercultural sensitivity, both of which are essential for understanding culturally embedded figurative language (Littlemore & Low, 2006).

A possible teaching cycle can begin with a concrete image or short scenario, followed by guided questions about the literal scene. The teacher can then introduce the figurative meaning, explain the cultural or historical source if necessary, and provide several contextualized examples. Learners can compare the expression with possible first-language equivalents, identify differences in tone and use, and finally produce short dialogues or sentences. Such a cycle encourages learners to connect form, image, culture, meaning, and use rather than treating the expression as an isolated item to memorize.

4.4 Future Directions

Future research should develop in at least three directions. First, more studies should examine learner cognition. Rather than asking only what an expression means, researchers should investigate how learners interpret, infer, misunderstand, and remember zodiac metaphorical expressions. Second, more corpus-based and classroom-based research is needed. Corpus studies can show how zodiac expressions occur in contemporary discourse, while classroom studies can examine how different teaching methods affect learner comprehension and use. Third, researchers should develop a graded teaching syllabus for zodiac metaphorical expressions, moving from frequent and transparent expressions to culturally dense and pragmatically sensitive expressions.

Such research would connect metaphor theory, cultural cognition, and Chinese language pedagogy more effectively. It would also help teachers make principled decisions about which expressions to teach, how to sequence them, and how to assess learners' understanding. Ultimately, the goal is not simply to help learners memorize idioms, but to help them develop the ability to interpret figurative meaning in culturally and pragmatically appropriate ways.

Assessment is another area that deserves attention. If instruction aims to develop metaphorical and pragmatic competence,

assessment should not be limited to matching idioms with translations. Learners may be asked to explain the literal image, choose an appropriate context, identify tone, compare expressions across languages, or revise an inappropriate use. These tasks would provide a more accurate picture of whether learners can understand and use zodiac metaphorical expressions as part of communicative competence.

5. Conclusion

Chinese zodiac metaphorical expressions occupy an important position at the intersection of metaphor, culture, vocabulary, and Chinese language education. They are not merely idiomatic expressions containing animal names, nor are they simple reflections of zodiac folklore. Rather, they are culturally embedded forms of figurative meaning through which animal images are used to conceptualize human traits, social behavior, moral judgment, interpersonal relations, danger, aspiration, and cultural values.

This review has shown that existing research has contributed significantly to the understanding of Chinese zodiac expressions. Studies of zodiac culture and symbolism have explained the cultural background of the twelve animals. Research on idioms and fixed expressions has shown how animal-related expressions become conventionalized in Chinese. Studies of animal metaphors and conceptual mapping have clarified how animal images are mapped onto human experience. Cross-linguistic research has further demonstrated that learners' interpretation of metaphorical expressions is shaped by similarities and differences between Chinese and their first languages.

At the same time, the review identifies several limitations. Existing research often remains focused on cultural explanation and semantic description, while paying less attention to learner interpretation, pragmatic use, classroom implementation, and graded teaching design. For Chinese language education, zodiac metaphorical expressions should therefore be taught through an integrated approach that connects literal animal image, cultural symbolism, metaphorical meaning, pragmatic usage, learner interpretation, and pedagogical application.

Future research should pay closer attention to learner cognition, classroom practice, corpus-based usage, cross-linguistic comparison, and the development of graded teaching materials. Such work would not only deepen the study of Chinese metaphorical expressions, but also contribute to a more systematic approach to teaching cultural vocabulary in Chinese language education.

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