

Wisdom in Words: Educational Metaphors in Chinese University Commencements

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Abstract

Commencement speeches at universities are the most important part of the educational activities, with the president's address carrying a rich array of educational metaphors. To better understand the educational values, concepts and developments of higher education institutions, this study examines 100 graduation speeches delivered by university presidents over the past decade as research material, taking Conceptual Metaphor Theory as the theoretical framework. Employing the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP), the analysis identifies 13 prominent source domains of educational metaphors across the speeches. The primary categories include PLANT, CONSTRUCTION, WAR, FAMILY, NATURE, JOURNEY, OBJECT, BODY, ECONOMY, LIGHT, CONTAINER, PLACE, and RELIGION. The quantitative data (tokens, types, resonances) shows that the PLANT metaphor is the most dominant (52.88% resonance), followed by CONSTRUCTION at 18.43% and the WAR at 13.43%. TE further qualitative data showed PLANT metaphor emphasizes the importance of patience, care, and a supportive educational environment, reflecting the deep-rooted agrarian culture and values in China. The CONSTRUCTION metaphor illustrates education as a process of systematically building knowledge, comparing with the goal-oriented and collaborative nature of Chinese educational policies. The WAR metaphor, though less frequently used, underscores the challenges and competitive aspects of education, advocating for resilience and strategic thinking among students. Additionally, the other metaphorical domains that also provide diverse perspectives on education, offering a broader understanding of the complexities within the Chinese educational systems. This study enriches perspectives on educational metaphors in Chinese commencement speeches by revealing how metaphorical language influences educational communication, drawing attention, ensuring effective information transmission and enhancing audience understanding of education elements.

Keywords: Educational Metaphor, Chinese Commencement Speeches, Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP).

Introduction

Commencement speeches are a distinctive representation of campus culture and an essential part of students' educational experience, serving as the "final lesson" they receive from their university. Through these speeches, university leaders express the institution's educational philosophy, using various metaphors to express their views and influence, or even change, the attitudes and behaviors of the audience. It has been established that metaphors refine the university leaders' communicative purpose in conveying perspectives on education's goals, mechanisms, and effects (Xu et al., 2020). Such metaphors are used as "tools of thought" as they reflect how school, teachers, graduates, and the wider institutions conceptualize the character of education and its "formative" purpose for persons and society at large.

Arguably, metaphors often refer to the transfer of knowledge across two or more domains so that the people can explain some experiences they encounter in their everyday lives or feelings they experience quickly. Referring to education by relating it with realities people encounter in their everyday lives or objects easily identified by the people- JOURNEY, BUILDING, or GARDEN, helps the audience relate to what is being said easily (Wei & YS, 2020). This connection not only makes the educational concepts more relatable but also enhances comprehension, allowing listeners to grasp the nuances of educational ideas more intuitively. Therefore, educational metaphors serve as powerful communicative tools that simplify complex ideas, making education more accessible and impactful for a broad audience.

This is especially important when the subject of the investigation is metaphors in the Chinese university commencement speeches. With its vast history and transitioning culture, China has tremendously valued education as a tool for growth and advancement in society and economically and competitively for the

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citizens (Chunga & Ngao, 2021). It is discernible that through the study of these conceptual metaphors in these commencement discourses, implied messages included in the rhetoric of the academic leaders and their attitudes and strengths can be revealed. From it, one can identify how Chinese universities conceive their mission of educating the students and molding their character to educate model citizens capable of contributing to society in the best way possible as good professionals (Wei & YS, 2020). This exploration provides a more theorized comprehension of China's educational beliefs and principles.

To investigate the prevalent educational metaphors in Chinese graduation speeches and understand their significance, this study addresses the following research questions:

What are the most common and primary metaphorical domains referring to education in those speeches?

To what extent do these educational metaphors represent the educational concepts, beliefs, principles, and values?

This research is significant in the sense that it indicates how presidents of a university in China employ educational metaphors as persuasive means to express their educational concepts, beliefs and make them easier to understand and more resonant with a wide audience. The study adopts the quantitative methods to determine the tokens, types and resonance of specific educational metaphors; the detailed and typical qualitative example of the educational metaphors are shown the contexts, meanings, and roles of such metaphors in Chinese education. This study provides a new vision of how university presidents use educational metaphors as influential tools for instilling educational values, hopes, and beliefs.

Literature Review

This research is guided by the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, propounded by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). CMT theory highlights the approach to the consideration of metaphors not simply as the figures of speech or the devices of decoration of the text, but as the meaningful patterns of thinking, comparing and reasoning by regarding the initially comprehensible and easily defined or abstract domain to the other one, which is often less well understood.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory's central tenet is the concept of conceptual mappings between source domains and target domains. Concept mapping is based on the deliberate transfer of relations, features, and logical connections from the source domain – a familiar items and context – to the target domain, which often concerns concepts that are abstract, complex, or even non-physical (Ren, 2023). These mappings help us make intellectual sense of various abstract concepts by relating them to something tangible we can feel, act upon, and interact with in the real world.

When examining education discourse, CMT is a sound theoretical framework for identifying the beliefs, values, and ideas of the educational philosophies embraced by academics (Lu, 2021). One can locate the epistemological frameworks and knowledge structures operating within the academic sphere and among educational professionals or institutions by identifying the educational metaphors used in commencement speeches, mission statements, curricula, and other educational communication.

For example, the metaphor 'EDUCATION IS A JOURNEY' conceptual constituents such as *travelers*, *routes*, *barriers*, and *goals* of the journey are transferred to the domain of education, which is seen as a *journey* of personal development, whereby the teacher acts as a *guide*, and the students as *travelers*, and there is a "cooperative effect" and "interactive effect" between teachers and students in teaching and learning activities (Leino & Drakenberg, 1993). The *destination* of the journey may not be necessarily the acquisition of knowledge but learning as a process of achieving certain milestones. However, the metaphor "EDUCATION IS A COMMODITY" describe how marketization and industrialization have affected education (Cheng, 2006). It could be interpreted as a mere *exchange* of expertise from *producer* school, to *consumer* student to receive a credential to secure a job and make more money. Choosing different perspectives referring to education are likely conscious because conceptual metaphors are part and parcel of the language and the thinking process. It is not just a question of the words being used but a matter of

how cognition is organized so that we categorize, picture, and think about the realities of the world in a certain way (Ren, 2023). In other words, the things the speaker choose to use, compare give a representation of one or the other in the education context, thus determining the way and how they reason, how to reveal the various perspective and hidden values and beliefs, ideological assumptions, and academic strategies inherent in the academic paradigms of the institutions and individuals involved (Zhang et al., 2020).

Therefore, this paper highlights how metaphors used in Chinese graduation speeches by university presidents construct particular views and concepts regarding education, the educational process, and the roles of teachers and learners. Specifically, it examines how these metaphors reflect and communicate the educational philosophies and values of Chinese universities. By understanding these metaphorical expressions, we can gain deeper insights into the underlying educational messages and aspirations conveyed in these speeches.

Methodology

The corpus analyzed in this study come from 100 commencement speeches of presidents of the top 10 higher education institutions according to the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) in 2023. These were Peking University, Tsinghua University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Fudan University, University of Science & Technology, Zhejiang University, Tongji University, Wuhan University, Nanjing University, and Harbin Institute of Technology. So, to have as vast and diverse a study corpus as possible, the researchers gathered as many as one hundred commencement speeches given in the years ranging from 2013 through 2023. These ten years were selected to include the most recent discussions and developments in Chinese higher education since it is the most recent decade and, at the same time, ensure that the data collected is comprehensive enough to identify trends (Wang et al., 2020). These speeches were also regarded as primary sources of data collection because they contained reliable and complete information that was not biased, as they were obtained from the official university source of information.

or the first step, the researcher scrutinized each word of the texts one by one manually and marked those metaphorical terms, such as “*cultivating*” and “*minds*” in “*cultivating young minds*”. This meticulous approach allowed the researchers to compile a list of metaphorical expressions used by the speakers for further analysis and comparison.

After reviewing the candidate metaphorical expressions, then the comparison with the literal meaning and contextual meaning is followed. The literal definition is the linguistic originally meaning. By contrast, contextual meaning is the use and interpretation of the linguistic unit in the ongoing discourse context. They established whether the linguistic unit is used metaphorically, considering that the contextual meaning of the lexical unit differs from the primary meaning or whether this contrast is possible through cross-domain mapping. Cross-domain mapping is a conceptual process through which a context, object, attribute, or relationship in one semantic domain (source domain) is anchored to another (target domain) to make understanding other abstract or complex concepts more accessible.

For example, in the phrase “*the journey of study*” the reference of the linguistic unit “*journey*” is the apparent physical movement or passage from one location to another. However, in an educational context, “*journey*” has been used in a more symbolic sense to refer to a learning and development process that incorporates challenges, achievements, and change. As in the previous cases, the contextual meaning of the word “*journey*” differs from its primary meaning, and this contrast can be elaborated cross-domain from the source domain of “traveling” to the target domain of “education”. Therefore, The MIP was applied to each lexical unit in the speeches accompanying the commencement, considering the context of the word and its possible metaphoric meaning. The researchers reviewed the speeches several times while paying attention to one lexical unit at a time; whether a specific speech fragment could be considered a metaphor was discussed until the researchers made a joint decision. Identifying metaphors is a fundamental step in this study, which involves extracting, classifying, and calculating potential metaphorical terms. To enhance the objectivity and persuasiveness of the data, this

study adopts the metaphor identification procedures (MIP) proposed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007), specifically:

Contextual Reading

Read the entire speech to establish general understanding

Identify the lexical units within the text.

Note potential metaphorical expressions

Lexical Unit Analysis

Break down text into lexical units

Determine basic meaning of each unit using authoritative Chinese dictionaries

Compare basic meaning with contextual usage

Metaphor Identification

Mark units where contextual meaning contrasts with basic meaning

Verify if meaning contrast can be understood via cross-domain mapping

Document identified metaphorical expressions

Classification and Verification

Group identified metaphors by source domain

Cross-check classifications between researchers

Resolve disagreements through discussion

In the actual analysis, the commencement speech texts were read section by section to grasp the overall context, and sentences were divided into individual lexical units. For example, in the sentence “*Of all the fruits of your youth that you have harvested during your four years in college, the most precious is the ideas you have gradually formed,*” the words “harvest” and “fruits” were identified as potential metaphorical keywords. In context, the literal meaning of “harvest” as “gathering crops” was metaphorically mapped to “gaining results,” and “fruits” as “parts of a plant” referred metaphorically to “achievements and progress.” These words were thus marked as metaphorical expressions.

Based on the metaphors identified in Step 1, the identified educational metaphors were further grouped into semantic domains such as journey, WAR, and garden. For instance, the words “harvest” and “fruits,” along with expressions like “seeds” and “growth,” belong to the plant domain, emphasizing the cultivation and nurturing aspects of education. Cross-domain mapping structures were drawn to analyze the relationships between source and target domains. For instance, the common metaphor “teachers are gardeners” links “gardener” (source domain) with “teacher” (target domain), where the gardener’s role of nurturing plants is mapped onto the teacher’s role of cultivating students.

When Applying CMT to educational discourse, it involves three key aspects:

The first is the System Mapping. CMT identifies correspondences between source domains (e.g., factory, building) and the target domain (education). For example: Factory metaphor: seed → student/knowledge,

grow → learn/develop, gardener → teacher/educator. Building metaphor: foundation → basic knowledge, blueprint → curriculum design, construction → learning journey.

The second one is Cognitive Functions. These mappings reflect cognitive structures, shaping how education is understood. For instance, the architecture metaphor views education as systematic construction, linking processes like foundation to basic knowledge and finished structure to educational achievements.

The last aspect includes the Cultural Embedding; Metaphors like plants resonate in Chinese educational discourse due to cultural traditions, reflecting broader values.

To ensure data reliability, this study introduces “researcher triangulation” (Masson et al., 2018), whereby two external researchers were invited to independently review the Chinese corpus and verify the accuracy of the annotations.

The study focuses on commencement speeches delivered between 2013 and 2023, selected for several reasons: this timeframe captures recent developments in Chinese higher education policy, reflects contemporary educational philosophy and values (Guruleva, 2020), allows for the examination of consistent trends over a decade, and reflected the significant educational reforms in China (e.g., Ministry of Education Report, 2013-2023). The selection of 100 speeches (10 per institution across 10 major universities) ensures a balanced representation of diverse institutional perspectives (Creswell, 2014).

Then the researchers analyzed the metaphors used in the speeches and divided them into different source domains according to their corresponding mappings. According to Kong et al., (2023), “token” refers to a specific instance of a word or phrase that appears in a text. Each occurrence of a metaphor, such as “*cultivating the young minds*” and “*sowing seeds of knowledge*”, can be regarded as 2 tokens (*cultivate* and *sow seeds*) in PLANT domain. Conversely, “type” refers to a specific metaphor concept, which is realized in the text through multiple different expressions (tokens). For example, the metaphor concept “TIME IS MONEY” is a type, while specific expressions like “*wasting time is wasting money*” or “*saving time is like saving money*” are tokens of this concept.

To collect quantitative data, the researchers first counted the tokens of education metaphors and then, classified the types of metaphor by their source domains. tokens are individual instances of expressions and each occurrence of a metaphor can be regarded as one token (Richards and Schmidt, 2011). For example, in FAMILY Domain as table shown, “父母、父亲与母亲 (Parents, Father and Mother)” appears 147 times in the corpus, which means the token is 147. Conversely, “type” refers to a specific metaphor concept, which is realized in the text through multiple different expressions (tokens). In this example, there are four distinct types:

“父母、父亲与母亲” (Parents, Father and Mother), “家，家园” (Family; home), “孩子，孩子们” (Child; Children), and “故乡，故里” (Hometown).

Based on the token and type, it counted the resonance of the educational metaphors. The resonance value of the source domain indicates the coverage rate for a certain type of metaphor in a certain corpus (Lai, 2020), showing the impact and spread of metaphor use in the educational context. To calculate the resonance or R-value, the researchers counted the product of the total words and the number of different metaphors. The resonance value of the PLANT metaphor in previous example is 2 (types of keywords) * 2 (tokens) = 4.

The qualitative analysis involved the consideration of the actual meanings and assess the contextual significance and influence of these metaphors in conveying educational philosophies and values. The researcher also looked at how culture, history, and institutions shape the choice and meaning of educational metaphors in a Chinese university setting that would enhance the interpretivism of findings.

By integrating the quantitative and qualitative data analyses, the research focused on offering a contextual and complex view of educational metaphors in Chinese university commencement speeches regarding their frequency, use, and roles. Therefore, by identifying the investigated metaphorical expressions according to MIP, the subsequent type, the token, and the frequency of the noted educational metaphors, to reveal the particular classification, distribution, and mapping structure of the conceptual source, which were employed by the Chinese presidents, when expressing their beliefs, norms, values and attitudes concerning the education.

Results and Discussion

Identification of Educational Metaphors

By following and applying the MIP systematically, the current research identified 1,271 metaphorical expressions and 104 types of conceptual metaphors associated with education in the Chinese commencement speech corpus. The identified metaphorical expressions span 13 domains related to education: PLANT, CONSTRUCTION, WAR, FAMILY, NATURE, JOURNEY, OBJECT, BODY, ECONOMY, LIGHT, CONTAINER, PLACE, and RELIGION. This section focuses mainly on the PLANT, CONSTRUCTION, and WAR metaphors, as these were the most frequently occurring and varied.

Table 1

Source Domain	Type Total	% of Total Type	Total Token	% of Total Token	Resonance	% of Total Resonance
PLANT	21	20.19%	408	32.1%	8568	52.88%
CONSTRUCTION	15	14.42%	199	15.66%	2985	18.43%
WAR	15	14.42%	145	11.41%	2175	13.43%

Expression Type	Translation	Token
(1) 父母、父亲与母亲；	Parents, Father and Mother;	147
(2) 家，家园	Family; home	109
(3) 孩子，孩子们	child; Children	11
(4) 故乡，故里	hometown	4
Total		271

FAMILY	4	3.85%	271	21.32%	1084	6.69%
NATURE	8	7.69%	50	3.93%	400	2.47%
JOURNEY	4	3.85%	82	6.45%	328	2.02%
OBJECT	12	11.54%	16	1.26%	192	1.18%
BODY	6	5.77%	28	2.2%	168	1.04%
ECONOMY	5	4.81%	23	1.81%	115	0.71%
LIGHT	4	3.85%	17	1.34%	68	0.42%
CONTAINER	4	3.85%	15	1.18%	60	0.37%
PLACE	4	3.85%	12	0.94%	48	0.3%
RELIGION	2	1.92%	5	0.39%	10	0.06%
Total	104	100%	1271	100%	16201	100%

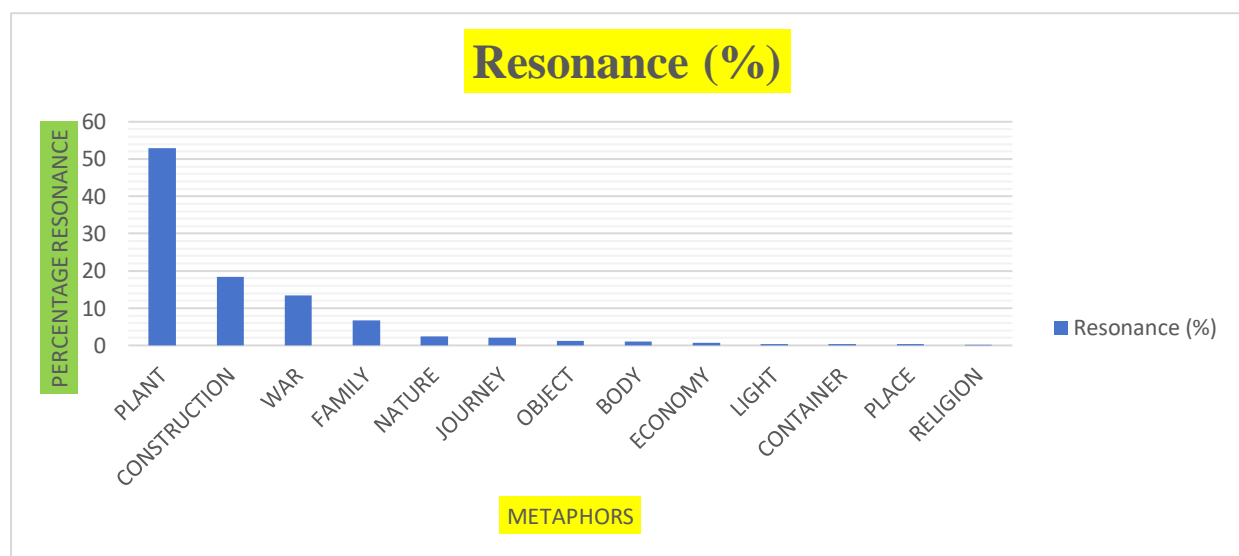


Figure 1. Shows the Percentage Resonance of the Chines Metaphors

Figure 1 provides the probability density of various metaphors employed in Chinese commencement speeches. This is followed by the PLANT metaphor with a score of 52.88% further proving that it has greatly impacted education as a field of study. Two more themes are CONSTRUCTION and WAR metaphors that are used in the texts under analysis at the rates of 18.43% and 13.43% correspondingly emphasizing the construction of education and the presence of WAR attitudes towards it. Other six metaphors comprise 6.224%, of which NATURE has 1.247% which is the next to the least used metaphor in the speeches followed by 0.737% for RELIGION metaphors and 0.065% for PLACE metaphors which are the least of the metaphors. This chart enhances nature-based metaphorical viewpoint's dominance on the reader's behalf.

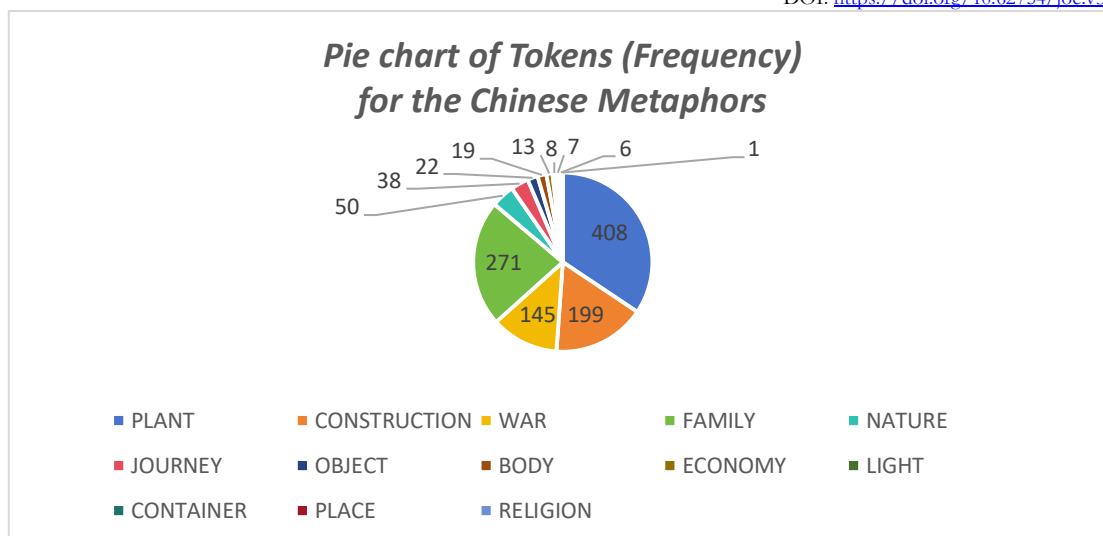


Figure 2. Shows the Pie Chart for the Tokens (Frequency) of the Chines Metaphors

The given pie chart in figure 2 illustrates the frequency of tokens of metaphor domains present in Chinese commencement speeches. Out of all the identified metaphors PLANT was the most frequent with 408 tokens acknowledging the significant role of this metaphor in education. FAMILY (271 tokens), CONSTRUCTION (199 tokens) and WAR (145 tokens) are two, three and four while indicating their importance. Other source domains not influencing the texts' metaphorical representations include the NATURE with 50 tokens and JOURNEY with 38 tokens, while RELIGION and PLACE sourced metaphors appear little in the texts and below ten tokens. By means of this chart, it is possible to stress the imbalance and variability of particular metaphors in the corpus.

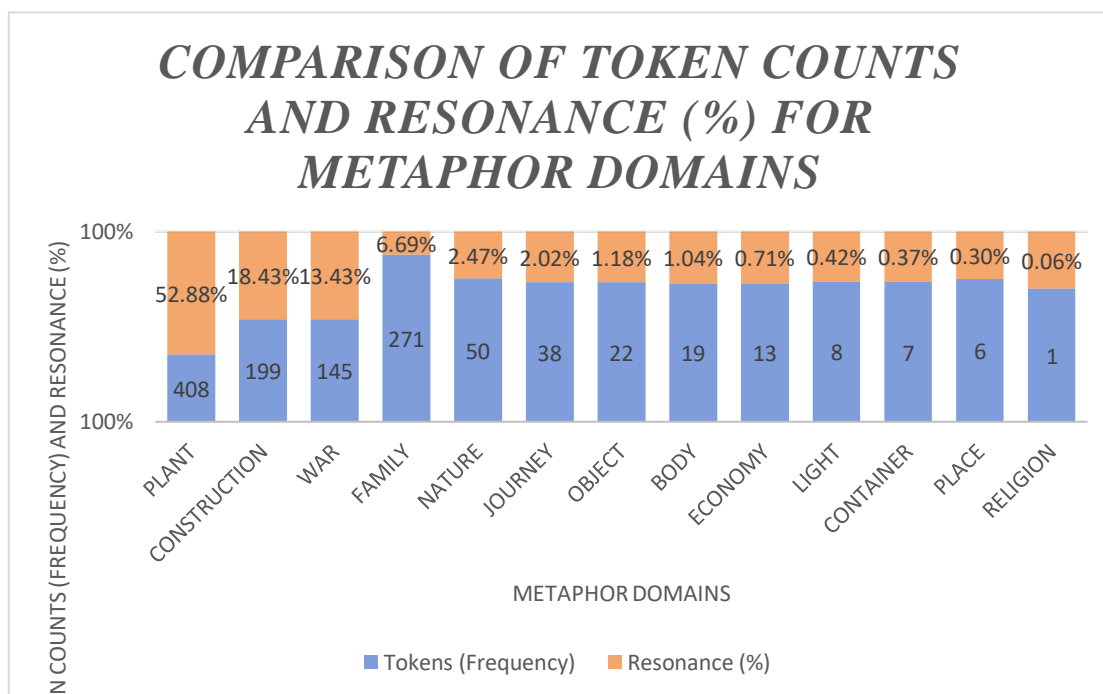


Figure 3. shows the Comparison of Token Counts and Resonance (%) for Metaphor Domains

The stacked column chart 3 above compares usage frequency as tokens and relative importance as resonance percent for different metaphor domains in Chinese commencement speeches. The blue bars show the token frequency or the number of metaphor domains identified. In terms of the token frequency,

the overall leader of the study is recognized as a ‘plant’ with a score of 408 tokens, proving that it occupies a central position in the use of rationalistic educational metaphors. This is followed by the FAMILY domain, which has a total token count of 271; this remains significant in shaping relations about the academic discourse.

The orange bars show the relative percentage of the resonance of each used metaphor, meaning its contribution percentage to the total of the used metaphors. In addition, at the same level of importance, 52.88%, the PLANT verb also demonstrates the maximum reach. Second, there is the word CONSTRUCTION (199 tokens) with a resonance of 18.43%, and the word WAR takes third place with an amount of 145 tokens and a resonance of 13.43%. This distribution shows that some metaphors are used significantly more often and are perceived in the context of these speeches in the educational field than others, like PLANT, CONSTRUCTION, and WAR.

PLANT Metaphor

The PLANT metaphor was found to be the most dominant source domain with its 21 different types (20.19%) and 408 tokens (32.1%), giving it a total resonance of (19 %) of the total resonance. Below, the PLANT domain of the specific metaphorical expressions identified in this study is found.

Metaphorical expressions in PLANT domain

cultivate/grow up; growth/take root/harvest
 /fruit/ripe/trees, saplings/ plant/land, fertile soil
 /Green and unripe/plough and weed/ seed/flower/ ecology/nutrients/ sow /bud/blossom,
 bloom/ grass/branches and leaves/ nursery garden

Table 2. Breakdown of Metaphorical Expressions in the PLANT Domain

Metaphorical Expression	Meaning/Interpretation in Education
Cultivate	Refers to nurturing students' growth
Sowing seeds	Introducing knowledge to students
Growth	The gradual development of students
Harvest	Achieving educational outcomes
Roots	The foundational values of education
Bloom/Blossom	Success or achievements of students

This metaphor effectively painted the planting elements of nurturing onto education: the cultivators compare to instructors, the nurturing practices refer to the academic handle and teaching methods, gardens to the instructive teaching environment- school, students as the tender plants or young trees, and knowledge and skills as the expected fruits or produce. This mapping focuses on the sustaining components and elements of the teaching or learning process, where educators (nursery workers) transmit knowledge (fertilizer/nutrition) to learners (seeds/saplings/trees). The school (garden) provides a favorable environment and resources for learning (soil and land), looking forWARD to learning outcomes (fruit/flowers) and sound, viable skills as the teaching results and effects of educational activities (branches and twigs). Such connection reveals that education is long and ongoing, requiring patience, care, and continuous effort for growth. Just as each seed has its unique rhythm of growth and way of flowering, this metaphor also emphasizes individual differences in the development of students. Each student has their learning style and speed, and education should respect and accommodate these differences.

This comparison also highlights education's process-oriented and developmental aspects, emphasizing its reliance on the teaching and learning environment. It underscores the significance of a supportive and adaptable setting, which is crucial in agriculture and education. Moreover, the plant's roots are the basis for its growth, making the socialist direction of running schools deeply rooted in Chinese education. This reflects the primary status of socialist education with Chinese characteristics and the stability of the development of Chinese education.

Example: Teaching is Sowing

*Professor Zhong Yang, who has been teaching for over 30 years, has continuously **sown** the country's and humanity's future.*

Typically, this metaphor of "sow" refers to the act of dispersing seeds on the ground. In the context of education, "sowing" refers to the teacher's responsibility to instill value in the students' hearts in addition to imparting information, much like seeds do when they take root, sprout in soil, and eventually yield fruit. This phrase highlights how Professor Zhong develops and nourishes his pupils, teaching them values, concepts, and information that will help them grow and contribute to society. For this reason, it highlights the professionalism of educators: their unwavering dedication to their work, their ability to change people's lives, and the importance of appreciating education. Teachers like Professor Zhong are not just providing the students with information but also sowing seeds for the future, a noble profession that demands a lot of commitment and a sense of purpose.

Example: Student is Seed and Tree

*Like a **seed**, I hope you will always **take root** in the land and bring benefits to the people.*

*Wu University students are **trees**, carrying the spirit of Wu University and growing in all directions.*

These metaphors describe the students as seeds or trees. In the first example, the seed represents the beginning of life, the symbol of potential, and the source of growth. Students come to the University as raw talents, like seeds, that must be nurtured and taken root. Comparing them to "a seed" means they have unlimited possibilities and room for development and can thrive if adequately nourished and cared for.

When they mature, they become trees, which means that they become people who represent the University's ideals and spirit, dispersing these traits and skills as they mature and advance in life. This phrase suggests that they are demanding, active, and ever-changing. Since trees are anchored in the earth and endure wind and rain, they represent the spirit, culture, and traditions of Wuhan University as well as the educational experience of its students. Students leave school and enter society with this spirit. Wherever they go, they maintain Wuhan University's identity and distinctive features. A tree standing in all directions indicates that the students receive an all-around education that will allow them to grow and add more branches in other areas.

CONSTRUCTION Metaphor

The CONSTRUCTION metaphor domain was the second most prominent, accounting for 17.11% of the total resonance. The following table displays this domain's metaphorical expressions and tokens.

Metaphorical expressions

build; construct/foundation, base/support beam/structure/support, pillar/platform/front door/bridge/tower building/stage/builder/inner space/stairs/pavilion /blueprint

These metaphorical expressions compare the path and development of education to building construction. Students are the builders of their learning and information kingdoms. As designers meticulously prepare and gradually create a building blueprint, educators design the teaching goals, curriculum design and educational resources, guiding educational implementation and development and erecting a firm and stable information structure and foundation for students, stone by stone. Furthermore, expressions such as "the situation and tasks are clear, and the construction blueprint has been drawn" directly compare each step of educational development planning to an architectural blueprint, emphasizing the clarity of actions and the predictability of the future.

In order to guarantee the stability of the educational framework, support beams and pillars are compared to the crucial educational support systems during this process. In particular, the completion of the "Four beams and eight pillars" of the new educational system marks the beginning of a bright future by indicating that the educational structure has moved into the stage of full-scale building and careful ornamentation. The transition into the structure phase guarantees methodical and orderly advancement throughout the educational journey as the academic framework is progressively constructed. Different educational stages, such as first-year and second-year, are like the various floors and stairs of the building and symbolize the gradual academic advancement, progressively enhancing students' knowledge and abilities. Each stage of education also requires straightforWARD entry and transition points. The front door symbolizes the entry phase of education, while the bridge represents the transition between different learning stages.

Platforms within this educational facility offer areas for development and displaying, while the interior space symbolizes the classroom setting and school culture, impacting students' learning results and experiences. The pavilion represents educational rest and reflection times, giving pupils a chance to stop, consider, and adapt. Peak educational accomplishments, like academic research findings or innovations, are ultimately like architectural towers, signifying the pinnacle of knowledge that students or institutions have attained via their endeavors. Through these interconnected metaphors, we can gain a more comprehensive and profound understanding of various aspects of education and how to effectively construct and enhance the educational system.

Example: Teacher is the Builder

*When Mr. CAI Yuan Pei came to Peking University as president, he put forWARD the idea of "freedom of thought, inclusiveness, and inclusiveness," which broke the stale atmosphere of Peking University at that time and laid the ideological **foundation** of modern Chinese universities.*

In construction, establishing a base or foundation is the first stage in putting up structures and buildings, as it serves as the base on which the complete structure will stand. The term is typically associated with stability, solidity, and support when applied to the educational sphere. "Ideological foundation" is a metaphor to highlight Cai Yuan Pei's profound impact on the development of modern Chinese universities.

This notion of stability underscores the enduring influence and irreplaceability of Cai Yuan Pei's ideas. He first stressed that "moral education is the first" and that School is a foundation to cultivate personality: only after cultivating a rugged, independent, moral and comprehensive personality can students better cope with various societal challenges. At Peking University, he further actively advocated nationwide education reform, such as the course selection system and the faculty management reform, which enhanced the flexibility and autonomy of education and formed an excellent academic atmosphere and teaching environment. It has influenced the development direction of China's modern higher education and laid the foundation of the contemporary university system. CAI's ideas provided ideological guidance for establishing a modern university system, laid the essential spirit and values that universities should possess, and enabled modern universities to develop healthily based on academic freedom and pluralistic tolerance.

Example: School is the Bridge

*Universities are an essential **bridge** to promote human civilization and cultural exchanges*

In the metaphor "School is Bridge," often used in commencement speeches, universities are depicted as necessary structures that must be in place for the advancement of civilization and cultural diplomacy. This metaphor emphasizes the function of educational institutions as the bridge between students and a vast world of learning, chances, and multiculturalism. Being bridges, schools help students to move from one society to another, from one learning context to another, from one work environment to another, and this way, gain aWAREness and respect for diversity in the world. This metaphor creates an image of energy and change in the education process. It is the same as a bridge that offers a way over barriers and unites divided territories; schools provide students with the tools, knowledge, and experience to cope with personal and professional difficulties. Hence, education assists students in coming up with rightful and unique life decisions without the help of other individuals. Therefore, they foster the advancement of humanity and cultural development. School as a Bridge is where educational facilities are viewed as tools for bringing change and growth. Schools may not be just centers where information gets passed from teachers to students but where everything from ideas to innovations and evaluations happens.

WAR Metaphor

The third most used source domain was the WAR metaphor domain, contributing to 9.78% of the total resonance. As with the CONSTRUCTION domain, possessing eight types, the WAR metaphor generated fewer, albeit slightly above, 36 tokens overall. In this metaphor, education is a WARfare/ WAR ground where students and teachers fight ignorance and difficulties. These expressions portrayed education as a military-type activity, WARfare, or campaign associated with struggles, battling, competing or coming up with ways to overcome. When applied to the context of education, the WAR metaphor highlights the competition and combativeness of education as a system. It focused on the necessity to stay on-task and face the challenges, competitions and struggles tactically during the educational process, as the WAR encompassed problem-solving and organizing resources to triumph, making it easier for people to understand and feel the urgency and importance of education.

Metaphorical expressions

fight/reform/strategy/backup	shield/soldier/sacrifice/victory/front	line/weapons/armed
forces/coat armor/bullets/battlefield/military order/assault		

The most relevant elements of the WAR metaphor domain that can be used in learning relate to different aspects of the learning process. Words such as “fight” and “assault” are connected with the conflict and competition in education to a battle, with all learning and teaching efforts taking place on the battlefield and the front line(schools). To achieve educational goals, the necessary reforms and strategies (the academic plans and action, adjustments and improvements) are significant, sometimes even requiring the issuance of strict directives and explicit requirements related to educational reform similar to military orders.

In this educational battle, students are like soldiers supported by backup shields and armed forces (the teachers and schools). They wear coat amour, carry weapons, and face bullets and challenges in the education process. Ultimately, testing outcomes and academic achievement may lead to victory, or they may lose or require sacrifice. Such a symbolic framework provides an intriguing perspective on the challenges and difficulties in students' educational experiences and development for schools, likening it to a combative spirit in the study and strategic endeavor for running a great university.

Example: Knowledge is Weapon

*With knowledge, you will have a sharp **weapon** to resolve all kinds of complex contradictions.*

The WAR metaphor is central in education as it vividly illustrates the learning process, supporting the contention that learning is akin to a battle. When knowledge is depicted as a sharp weapon, it can create a sense of power and responsibility among students, making them feel powerful and confident. Knowledge

is precisely such an invisible weapon, providing methods and strategies to solve problems while also stimulating innovative thinking, enabling us to explore new paths and possibilities.

Having a wider variety of weapons means you can adapt your tactics and strategies flexibly according to changes in the battlefield, thereby achieving better results. Different types of knowledge are like different weapons, each with its own characteristics and uses. Students need to see themselves as WARriors armed with formidable and varied weapons. When facing specific problems, they need to choose the most suitable knowledge as a “weapon” based on the nature and characteristics of the problem to solve it more effectively.

Their education as a necessary process of arming themselves, maintaining a clear mind and unwavering conviction with the best skills in an environment where information is widely available and constantly changing. This ability equips them with greater composure and confidence in the face of challenges and difficulties, empowering them to overcome any obstacle with ease. education is not a passive process that one goes through and gets a certificate at the end of the process but a skill that one applies as a weapon to fight for a noble cause. Such framing can help raise the perceived status of education, making the students' progress toWARD their class preparation with passion and vigor.

Example: School is a Strategist

*The school strive to cultivate more **strategic** scientific and technological talents for China's modernization. The college's comprehensive reform and overall development aim to create national **strategic** teaching.*

In military terms, “strategy” involves planning and directing large-scale WARfare operations to achieve significant, long-term goals. In a metaphoric sense, “strategic” in the educational context means the coordinated and systemized changes implemented by the school to enhance learners’ competencies. This clear comparison of educational difficulties to WAR actions emphasizes the necessity of planning, coordination, and action. By understanding education as WARfare, the metaphor highlights the importance of strategy and WARfare, implying the need to accurately define goals and implement work to consolidate reform outcomes, much like military operations. This metaphor encourages educational leaders to make comparisons, thereby more effectively formulating strategic plans and recording long-term goals and improvements.

The metaphor describes the struggle to reform the education system as a WAR, thus necessitating hard work. It helps people understand that to achieve meaningful change, challenges and endurance must be faced. The term "strategy" captures the systematic nature of the educational reform process, requiring targeted and consistent effort. This approach acknowledges that, to bring about meaningful change in a society, dedicated effort toWARD stated goals is essential, rather than relying on temporary solutions.

Table 3. Detailed Breakdown of Metaphorical Expressions by Domain

Source Domain	Metaphorical Expression	Meaning/Interpretation in Education
PLANT	Cultivate	Nurturing and developing students
	Sowing seeds	Introducing knowledge or values
	Growth	Gradual improvement and progress of students
	Harvest	Achieving educational outcomes or success
CONSTRUCTION	Roots	Foundational principles of education
	Foundation	The core values and structure of educational systems
	Blueprint	The educational plan or curriculum

	Building blocks	Fundamental knowledge and skills students need
	Pillars	Key educational values or support structures
WAR	Strategy	Educational planning and policies
	Battle	Overcoming challenges in learning and education
	Weapons	Knowledge as a tool to face difficulties
	Victory	Achieving educational success

Discussion

Historically, China's agrarian society has deeply influenced its cultural expressions, including the prevalent use of PLANT metaphors in commencement speeches. Education is viewed as an ongoing process of growth and cultivation, echoing Dewey's educational philosophy of “Education is growth which is one of constant reorganization, continuous transformation, and ongoing adaptation” (1990, p. 45). This is perhaps due to the recurrent cultural focus on the development of the patient, and care nurturing of the individual, a process of “becoming” and the significance of fostering an appropriate and proper educational climate (Stitzlein, 2017; Farooq Zai et al., 2023). This framework highlights that patience, care, and persistence are crucial in the learning and teaching process, like planting a seed that needs proper sunlight, water or nutrition to blossom, which advocating for the natural growth of students rather than just imparting knowledge (Gao, 2015). Such emphasis likely stems from the influence of Chinese Confucian philosophy, which promotes the nurturing of students' virtues and the development of a “gentle” culture through education, with the goal of shaping them into valuable contributors to society (Zhuge, 2019). Furthermore, the metaphor further suggests the individuals' differences, similar to comparing students to plants that grow differently even under the same cultivating conditions ((Wang et al., 2022). The quality of growth results from various natural and external factors working harmoniously, not isolated elements.

Source domain	Focusing Aspects	Educational Implications
PLANT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PLANT: Organic growth process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Balances natural development with environmental factors (e.g., policies, resources, and societal needs)) Encourages gradual, sustainable growth in students and institutions Emphasizes the importance of nurturing individual potential while corresponded with institutional goals
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PLANT: Nurturing approach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrates growth through patience, care, and structured interventions Supports a holistic learning environment that fosters creativity and independent thinking Encourages educators to balance personalized guidance with curriculum demands
	PLANT: Evolving process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promotes adaptability and resilience in changing educational landscapes Builds foundations for long-term success in education

The metaphorical domain of PLANT symbolizes organic growth, nurturing, and the gradual evolution of the education system in China. The first implication is that it shows the rapid and health development of higher Education between 2013 to 2023. The expansion during these periods of the gross enrollment ratio

and the cultivation of world-class universities mirror the nurturing and growth process represented by the Plant metaphor. Policies such as the Double First-Class initiative emphasize "cultivating talent" and "growing capacity", similar to fostering a well-rooted tree that can flourish in competitive global environments (Guruleva, 2020). The gradual increase in higher education access also reflects the nurturing of individuals to meet societal demands, resonating with the concept of patient cultivation and organic evolution (Li, 2013). Furthermore, the public discussions regarding educational equity, innovative education, and internationalization have become increasingly prominent during this time frame. In particular, social expectations for Chinese higher education have shifted in recent years, with a growing emphasis on the quality of education and the cultivation of students' abilities, reflecting public concern for "planting" educational quality and recognition of future talent needs.

The second predominant metaphorical domain is the CONSTRUCTION metaphor, with a rating of 18.43. The education system can be viewed as a grand building, with its overall structure and planning serving as the foundation for its stability and sustainability. Just as architectural construction requires meticulous blueprint planning, consideration of structural stability, and functional layout, the education system also needs clear development goals, reasonable curriculum design, and resource allocation to ensure orderly operation and continuous development. Meanwhile, the students' basic knowledge, the teachers' professional competence, planning in educational resources, and the support from educational policies constitute the "supporting structure and foundation" of education (Lin, 2016). For Chinese higher education, undergraduate education not only lays a robust foundation toward a career or further academic pursuits for students (constructing the same *buildings*), but also highlights the goal-oriented nature of the educational process and the indispensable continuity and cooperation (*collective planning and building* of the educational community of Strong School Initiative for China in 2020) between its stages and platforms (build with *bricks by bricks*). By constructing an ideal educational building, it motivates people to work towards common goals. This metaphor successfully integrates every student, teacher, and staff member into the grand construction team of education, collectively contributing to the dream of making China a strong educational nation.

Source domain	Focusing Aspects	Educational Implications
Construction	foundational design and systematic planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlights the importance of creating a solid institutional and policy foundation to support long-term educational goals. • Promotes systematic planning and structured educational reforms. • Supports the development of comprehensive policies for curriculum and infrastructure.
	Integration of resources and collaboration approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitates the effective use of cross-disciplinary strategies and resources to create innovative solutions in education. • Encourages partnerships without compromising unique institutional identities. • Encourages collaboration between academia, industry, and society.

CONSTRUCTION metaphorical frames represents the building, structure, planning, and the deliberate design of educational systems and institutions, which closely related to the development of Chinese higher education. The Implementation of the Double First-Class Initiative reflects the meticulous planning and systematic approach central to the CONSTRUCTION metaphor. By "building world-class universities and disciplines," this policy focuses on creating a solid infrastructure for global competitiveness (Guruleva, 2020).

Another educational policies like the establishment of New Engineering programs and industry-education integration further represented the CONSTRUCTION metaphor by emphasizing the design of innovative frameworks for aligning education with economic needs. These initiatives construct pathways for skill

development and economic integration, reinforcing systematic approaches to institutional progress. Globalization and The Belt and Road Initiative also reflects CONSTRUCTION through its focus on building international networks and collaboration with academia, industry, and society socially and internationally. Chinese universities are portrayed these as "pillars" in a global educational landscape, symbolizing structural integrity and global outreach (Berlie, 2019).

Still, the WAR metaphor now takes up 13.43% of the total resonance, ranking the third place. This metaphor portrays education as a fighting or WARfare, within which schools are seen as an "armed force" filled with "army exercises" conducted "in unison" and "soldiers" who demonstrate "absolute obedience". Such WAR metaphor evokes associations with WAR and generates a sense of urgency, making people aWARE that the consequences of failure in education are as severe as those in WAR. This, in turn, inspires the audience to be determined and fighting spirit in advancing education. This urgency inspires determination and a proactive approach to advancing education. By invoking the imagery of WAR, the metaphor motivates students, educators, and policymakers to work tirelessly towards educational excellence.

Source domain	Focusing Aspects	Educational Implications
WAR	Competitive Advantage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlights the need for Chinese higher education to excel and excellence in global rankings, research, and innovation. • Encourages fostering a competitive mindset and maintaining individual competitiveness in students to prepare them for global challenges.
	Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotes deliberate, long-term planning to achieve institutional goals and maintain a competitive edge • Makes quick, decisive actions to seize opportunities or address challenges in education systems. • Encourages the adoption of adaptive strategies to respond to changing educational demands and global trends.
	Determination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • highlight the importance of perseverance and determination in achieving excellence, even in the face of challenges for students, schools • Cultivates a resilient culture within institutions and students, fostering leadership, problem-solving and critical skills.

The WAR metaphor reinforces competitiveness, strategic efforts, and the determination to achieve dominance and victory in global education. With the rapidly fierce competition in global university rankings and the request for international recognition of Chinese education, WAR metaphor first positions Chinese universities as key players in the "battle" for global influence and academic excellence. The Belt and Road Initiative of education employs strategic educational alliances to enhance China's soft power, embodying a "warrior's" approach to gaining global prominence (Berlie, 2019). For example, they attract international students, collaborate with foreign universities, establish overseas branches, and actively participate in international rankings and global higher education networks. Furthermore, for implementation of the Double First-Class Initiative in 2016, it aims to build world-class universities and disciplines, which strengthened the international competitiveness of Chinese universities (Guruleva, 2020). Chinese universities act as "diplomatic tools" in education, further consolidating China's global soft power. These educational developments not only secures a higher position for Chinese universities within the global education system but also showcases China's strategic ambition and execution capabilities in the field of education through proactive internationalization efforts, which reflect the competitiveness, strategic nature, and determination inherent in the WAR metaphor.

The metaphors of PLANT, CONSTRUCTION, and WAR suggested the essence of Chinese higher education's recent evolution. The PLANT metaphor highlights organic, gradual growth, while the CONSTRUCTION metaphor ensures systematic planning and structure. The WAR metaphor injects

urgency, competitiveness, and strategic focus. Together, they provide a comprehensive narrative of how Chinese higher education has evolved to balance nurturing talent, building institutions, and competing globally.

However, it needs to mention that overemphasis of the WAR metaphor in education may ignore individual differences among students, making it difficult to tailor teaching to each student's needs, and can stifle their creativity and personal development, and also increase students' psychological pressure, leading to student anxiety and aversion to learning (Song, 2003).

The other metaphorical domains further offer diverse and unique perspectives on education, each adding unique insights to the understanding of China's educational processes. The JOURNEY metaphor reflects education as a continuous and challenging process, aligning with the Chinese cultural emphasis on lifelong learning. NATURAL metaphors highlight the changeable and adaptive nature of education, while the OBJECT emphasize practical outcomes and the BODY highlights the interconnection of educational elements. The ECONOMY metaphor views education as an investment, but risks of commodity in the quality of education. LIGHT metaphors inspire creativity and the desire for knowledge. Less frequent metaphors like CONTAINER and RELIGION provide traditional and sacred views of education but may face limitations in a diverse cultural context.

Conclusion

As a reflection of educational activities, these special speeches delivered by Chinese university presidents during annual graduation ceremonies offer a glimpse into how they use educational metaphors to convey educational values and concepts, ensure effective information transmission, and achieve impactful educational understanding and communication. According to the data from this study, a total of metaphorical keywords was used in the speeches, categorized into 13 types. Among them, the metaphors of PLANT, CONSTRUCTION, and WAR were the most frequent. The PLANT metaphor, coinciding with the need for constant irrigation, sits perfectly within the Chinese cultural context as education is commonly seen as a long process of cultivation, which takes time and effort and relies upon specific individual treatment. The second is CONSTRUCTION, which stresses rigidity and sequential organization and building of education, similar to constructing a stable house with pillars and bricks. The WAR is slightly less frequent but also still describes the difficulties of education, where learning is depicted as a fight full of hardship and victory. These primary metaphors and other domains, such as FAMILY, JOURNEY, OBJECT, BODY, ECONOMY, LIGHT, and RELIGION, give a complete picture of education beyond the traditional view that mainly focuses on different educational elements. They include self-fulfillment, moral transformation, integration of practice and theory and spiritual opens. These educational perspectives are congruent with a comprehensive philosophy of education that Chinese culture embraces, the perspective of learning as a process throughout one's life, affecting all domains of life and society.

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