

# A Study of “Hand” Metaphors in English and Chinese—Cognitive and Cultural Perspective

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**How to cite this paper:** Fan, H. (2017). A Study of “Hand” Metaphors in English and Chinese—Cognitive and Cultural Perspective. *Advances in Literary Study*, 5, 84-93. <https://doi.org/10.4236/als.2017.54007>

**Received:** September 27, 2017

**Accepted:** October 20, 2017

**Published:** October 23, 2017

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## Abstract

Our ordinary conceptual system by means of which we live, think and act is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. Human body undoubtedly has been the most important cognitive status in human being's cognition. This paper studies the metaphor concerning hand as a source domain on the basis of linguistic evidence. It seeks to find out the differences and the similarities between English “hand” metaphors and Chinese “hand” metaphors, then to explore the causes of the universality and variations from cognitive and cultural perspectives. This paper will, to a certain degree, be helpful to the vocabulary and rhetoric teaching in English and Chinese.

## Keywords

Hand, Metaphor, Cognitive Perspective, Cultural Perspective, English, Chinese, Comparison

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## 1. Introduction

Metaphor has been an important topic of research and analysis from Aristotle to the present. For more than 2000 years, it was generally recognized as a fundamental figure of speech, especially in literature. In contemporary research, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) revolutionized the concepts of metonymy and metaphor. They found that metonymy and metaphor are not merely rhetoric devices that people have always believed them to be. Instead, they function also in people's conceptual system and play a significant role in shaping how people think and behave. Lakoff and Turner (1989) expanded its traditional territory from rhetoric and literary criticism to various fields that overlap, to different degrees, on the common ground of cognitive science, including linguistics, semiotics, philosophy, psychology, neurology and anthropology. What impresses us

most is that the cognitive tradition of metaphor studies has been revitalized, and with the strong claims that people think metaphorically, metaphor has exploded as a topic of interest in the humanities and social sciences over the past twenty-five years.

The human body is often regarded as the dimension to measure things surrounded, as said by the sage Protagoras, “Man is the measure of all things”. (cited from Wang, 2002: p. 88) We all have hands. Due to the great importance of hands, people tend to conceptualize the world in terms of them, which, in turn, gives rise to abundant metaphorical expressions in language. In previous papers, many studies have been done on the comparison between English and Chinese body metaphor. However, little work has been on “hand” metaphors. Inadequate attention has been paid to them in the realm of cognitive science. Our physical, social and cultural experience provides many possible bases for “hand” metaphors.

Confronted with the above-mentioned problems and challenges, the present study attempts to address some key issues concerning “hand” metaphor understanding. This paper is a case study of English and Chinese “hand” metaphors. It attempts to test the contemporary theory of metaphor from general cognitive and cultural perspectives relying primarily upon dictionary-based meanings of words related to “hand”. So the present work is to study the metaphor concerning “hand” as a source domain on the basis of linguistic evidence. It seeks to find out the differences and the similarities between English “hand” metaphors and Chinese “hand” metaphors, then to explore the causes of the universality and variations from cognitive and cultural perspectives.

## 2. A Comparison of Metaphors on “Hand” between English and Chinese

It goes without saying that hands are one of the most important external body parts with which we deal with the external world. And the main functions of our hands are their uses. Thus, “hand” expressions are important and abundant use among all the cultures of the world. Theoretically, the synchronic corpora of “hand” might be similar between different languages from the perspective of the functional semantic categories on the hypothesis of the same functional use of “hand”. Therefore, the paper tries its best to collect various forms of the linguistic data so as to present a reasonable classification. The Chinese corpora the paper used are mainly from Modern Chinese Dictionary (sixth edition) (to hereafter to as: Lv & Ding, 2012). And the English corpora in this paper on “hand” metaphors are from Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary (Sixth edition) (to hereafter to as: Hornby, 2010) and Collins Cobuild Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary (8<sup>th</sup> edition) (to hereafter to as: Harper Collins Publishers Ltd., 2017). According to Hornby (2010), the original periphrasis on “hand” is “the part of the body at the end of the arm, including the fingers and thumb”, which can be translated as “手” in Chinese.

## 2.1. Similarities of Semantic Category of “Hand”

### 2.1.1. “Hand” → “Ones Who Performs a Particular Job”

A hired hand on the farm

A ranch hand

All hands on deck!

Two portraits are painted by the same hand.

All hands to the pumps!

选手(player), 能手(dab hand), 拖拉机手(tractor driver), 助手(assistant), 扒手(pickpocket), 旗手(flagman), 副手(assistant), 打手(gorillas), 帮手(helper), 一把手(boss).

### 2.1.2. “Hand” → “The Motion of Hand”

Hey you! Get your hands off.

Those two can't keep their hands off each other—they never stop kissing and cuddling.

I'll kill him if I ever get my hands on him.

I saw Pat and Chris walking hand in hand through town the other day.

He handed his basket to Scraps and said: “Keep that, until I get out of prison.”

“Hands up!” she said calmly, holding the revolver to his head.

Rosie, remember you should always hold my hand when we cross the road.

They weren't kissing or anything—they were just holding hands.

I wish you'd try and look smart instead of just standing there with your hands in your pockets!

他赶紧跑来搭手。(translation: He hurries to help me.)

这封信从一个人转手到另一个人直到每个人都看过。(translation: The letter passed from one to another until everyone had read it.)

人够多了,您就不用插手了。(translation: You don't have to join in. There are more than enough people on the job already.)

她打了我,所以我还手打她。(translation: She hit me, so I struck her back.)

这项工作我刚接手。(translation: I've just taken over the job.)

得知这个消息,他高兴得手舞足蹈。(translation: He jumped for joy on being told the news.)

一些粗暴的人对自己的儿子大打出手,直到他们有了还手之力才肯罢休。(translation: Some violent men beat up their sons, until the boys are strong enough to hit back.)

他常常明知我手忙脚乱,还要调皮捣蛋。(translation: He often plays up when he knows I'm in hurry.)

### 2.1.3. “Hand” → “Handwriting”

His hand was illegible.

Most of his letters were typed, but we've found a few personal ones written in his own hand.

I've never seen such an untidy hand! Your writing is barely legible.

He writes a good hand.

这样，国家可以把全国最优秀的丹青妙手汇聚起来。(translation: The academies gathered the most excellent painters in the country.)

这是孙中山先生写于 1897 年的自传手迹。(translation: This is Dr. Sun's original handwriting in 1897-manuscript of his autobiography.)

#### 2.1.4. "Hand" → "Skill, Ability"

An old/numb/poor/bad hand

The comedienne tries her hand at singing and dancing for the first time.

He has a light hand with pastry, i.e. makes it well.

Guy's made a marvelous bookcase—I had no idea he was so good with his hands.

He wants to try his hand at singing.

他真有两手。(translation: He really knows his stuff.)

他虽然很缺乏经验，但在拳击比赛中仍大显身手。(translation: Although much less experienced, he gave a good account of himself in the boxing match.)

我的继母得心应手地料理着一切。(translation: My stepmother was in her element, organizing everything.)

这世上怎么会有这么心灵手巧的人呢？(translation: It's a wonder that the world has such skilled craftsmen.)

就功能而言，双方的演示程序可以说是棋逢敌手。(translation: Both presentation apps are almost equal in terms of functionality.)

#### 2.1.5. "Hand" → "Control, Possession"

What he concerns is not to let the property get out of his hands.

The reception was already in the hands of the florists and caterers.

He wants to keep the management of the firm in his own hands.

Welsh has suffered badly at the hands of the dominant English language.

How many people have died at the hands of terrorist organizations since the violence began?

The school allowed the teacher a free hand in her treatment of the children.

The football fans have got completely out of hand.

I bet he had a hand in it.

鹿死谁手尚难逆料。(translation: It's still hard to tell who will emerge victorious.)

已无还手之力的政府军面对他们几乎是束手就擒。(translation: They met little resistance from outgunned government troops.)

由于政府动辄干预银行，金融服务业一直束手缚脚。(translation: Financial services remain hamstrung, thanks to the government's penchant for interfering with banks)

对于你这样的电脑专家，这还不是手到擒来。(translation: For a computer wizard like you, it would be like off a log.)

#### 2.1.6. "Hand" → "Sides, Aspects"

On the one hand I'd like the job which pays more, but on the other hand I enjoy the work I'm doing at the moment.

She's caught in a dispute between the city council on the one hand and the

education department on the other.

The country is dominated by a power struggle between the communists on the one hand and the nationalists on the other.

On the one hand I should like to give the child a great deal of freedom but on the other hand I don't want him totally out of my control.

It brought out his better side.

Buckets of water passed from hand to hand to put the fire out.

简直不可思议，我一进去她就开始对我上下其手。(translation: It was unbelievable! I walked in there and she was all over me.)

他左右手都能写字。(translation: He could write either hand.)

契约成立，从现在起你便是我的左右手。(translation: Contract is established, from now on you is my right-hand man.)

我是新任的经理，你们将在我手下工作。(translation: I am the new manager and you will be working under me.)

我觉得我手面已很阔绰，而且这样做无损于我的贫困。(translation: I found that I had been a rich man without any damage to my poverty.)

秘书速办了手头事情。(translation: The secretary dispatched the matter at hand.)

#### 2.1.7. "Hand" → "Unit of Length"

The horse stood 20 hands.

一手掌大(as big as a hand).

#### 2.1.8. "Hand" → "The Feeling"

The warm, dry, luxurious hand of silk.

这块料子手感柔和。(translation: This fabric feels soft.)

#### 2.1.9. "Hand" → "Assistance, Concern, Approval"

He gave the old man a hand with his heavy bundles.

We have been working hand in glove with our European partners to beat our American competitors.

Give me a hand with the chores.

He has found to be hand in glove with the enemy.

War and suffering go hand in hand.

We have the situation well in hand.

The affair is no longer in my hands.

I've left the department in Bill's very efficient hands.

过道里放满了自行车，碍手碍脚的。(translation: The corridor is crowded with bikes which get in everybody's way.)

这次的司法介入，坚决而有力的打击，都令广大球迷额手称庆。(translation: The judicial intervention, determined and powerful blow have made the majority of fans clapping and cheering.)

甘地当即垮倒在地，同时还按印度教的方式，以手加额，表示宽恕凶手。(translation: Gandhi crumpled instantly, putting his hand to his forehead in the Hindu gesture of forgiveness to his assassin.)

他们经常争吵，但过后总是握手言欢。(translation: They argue a lot, but they always kiss and make up.)

### 2.1.10. “Hand” → “Order, Sequence”

An account that was as unreliable as most information got at third hand.

A bauble of little worth that went from hand to hand.

He got all the information at second hand rather than from original sources.

I only heard the news at second hand.

The report of the attack came at second hand.

All children are expected to have had hands-on manager and like to know exactly what everyone is doing.

He was the Prime Minister’s hand-picked choice to lead the investigation into police corruption.

我们提供商品的一手信息，吊牌信息，水洗标信息，让您详细的了解真正的尾单如有补货会及时更新商品信息。(translation: We provide commodity information firsthand, tags information and care label information, make you a detailed understanding of real tail list.)

你买了辆新自行车还是买了二手货？(translation: Did you buy your bike new or second-hand?)

## 2.2. Varieties of Semantic Category of “Hand”

Besides all the similarities, of course, there are also some diversities of the word “hand” in both Chinese and in English. That’s mostly due to the different cultural background and the different living styles.

Only exist in Chinese:

### 2.2.1. “Hand” → “Handcuffs, Fetters or Chains”

不手(free from fetters and handcuffs)

### 2.2.2. “Hand” → instead of “head”

陈知其罪，授手于我。(translation: Chen knows his sin and gives his head.)

### 2.2.3. “Hand” → “寸口”(A Person’s Pulse on the Wrist) in Traditional Chinese Medicine

三阴在手(three yins at a person’s pulse on the wrist)

Only exist in English:

### 2.2.4. “Hand” → “Pointer on a Clock, Dial, etc.”

The hour/ minute/ second hand of a watch

### 2.2.5. “Hand” → “(Dated) Promise to Marry”

He asked for her hand.

## 2.3. Summary

On the basis of the above evidence taken from the Chinese lexicon and the English lexicon, we may conclude that our bodily experience plays a prominent role

in the emergence of linguistic meaning. The word “hand” and its phrase demonstrate that much of functional meaning originates from bodily experience and that the body and its behavior in environment are bearers of meaning.

There are more similarities in the semantic meanings than the varieties in Chinese and English. From the comparisons above, we have got the following similar usages:

- 1) “hand” to refer to end part of the human arm below the wrist
- 2) “hand” to refer to the indication of the motion of hand
- 3) “hand” to refer to style of handwriting
- 4) “hand” to refer to skill in using the hands
- 5) “hand” to refer to personal possession, control, direction, supervision
- 6) “hand” to refer to one of two sides of an issue or argument
- 7) “hand” to refer to unit of measurement, about four inches
- 8) “hand” to refer to the feel of cloth or leather or tactile reaction to its textural qualities of smoothness, flexibility, softness
- 9) “hand” to refer to assistance or aid, participation, applaud
- 10) “hand” to refer to order, sequence.

And we still have the varieties between the Chinese lexicon and English lexicon. Those, form the semantic point view, mainly due to the different culture and the various life styles.

There are the following expressions which have exclusively existed in Chinese:

- 1) “Hand” is often used as handcuffs, fetters or chains
- 2) “Hand” is used instead of “head”
- 3) “Hand” can be used to refer to “寸口” (a person’s pulse on the wrist) in traditional Chinese medicine.

However, there are only two entries in English, which are quite unique from Chinese. They are:

- 1) “Hand” can be referred to pointer on a clock, dial, etc.
- 2) “Hand” can be referred to promise to marry.

Thus, from the semantic meanings’ point view, in order to get a clear idea of the similarities and differences among the hand expressions both in Chinese and in English, we have the table below:

The similarities	Chinese	English
ones who performs a particular work	+	+
the motion of hand	+	+
handwriting	+	+
skill, ability	+	+
control, possession	+	+
sides, aspects	+	+
unit of length	+	+
the feeling	+	+
assistance, concern, approval	+	+
order, sequence	+	+

The varieties	Chinese	English
handcuffs, fetters or chains	+	-
head	+	-
寸口 (a person's pulse on the wrist)	+	-
pointer on a clock, dial, etc.	-	+
promise to marry	-	+

### 3. Reasons for the Similarities and Varieties of “Hand” Metaphors in English and Chinese

With the abundant expressions of the “hand” phrases, we can infer that: it is the wide use of our hands in routine works, human beings formed the semantic lexicon of “hand” in the same way, in that, no matter in Eastern or Western cultures, and “hand” performs the same functions from the practical daily lives.

Then, how can these coincidences of forming the same “hand” lexicon took place even if they are under different cultures and backgrounds? Are there the same mechanisms of cognition? And do they share the similar motivations of the metaphoric and metonymic conceptualization and categorization?

#### 3.1. Universality in Metaphor

All these metaphors are based on some underlying similarities between human body and concrete objects. “Similarity is the sharing of certain features.” (Goatly, 1997: p. 16) Similarities between the two languages can be attributed to the common human bodily experience and physiological structure of human body. It is generally recognized that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical by mapping concrete domains onto abstract domains. And metaphorical mapping is said to be not random, that is, conceptual metaphors are grounded in basic human experience. As we have mentioned in the above chapter, we can imagine that our ancestors got to know the world from getting to know the space and themselves, so the space concept and body parts are the two main bases for our formation of abstract concepts. Turner (1987) stated that the human body is the important source of metaphor about social components and disintegration. “Body is a kind of environment (part of nature), and also the medium for itself (part of culture). Body lies rightly in the combination point where human labor acts on nature through media such as writing, language and religion. Therefore, body definitely lies in the combination point between the world’s natural order and the world’s cultural result.” So our ancestors’ thought had a feature of “body cognition” and they often considered the human body and experience as the criteria to measure the world around. This is determined by the cognitive order of human beings. Human beings firstly get to know the solid, corporeal and concrete things around themselves, which surely include the human body and its organs. Then when cognition comes into further advanced stage, human beings begin to consider the things they are familiar with as the bases to know, to expe-

rience and to describe other things in the world, especially those immaterial, abstract and indefinite things. So expressing abstract concepts with the help of words of concrete things has formed the correlative metaphor language between different concepts (including metaphorical language of the human body).

### 3.2. Cultural Variation

Reasons for the differences between the two languages are a little complicated, which requires us to get to the root of specific cultures, since the bodily experience can only tell what possible metaphors are and whether these potential metaphors are actually selected in a given culture is largely dependent upon the cultural models. According to Quinn (1991), it is a cultural model that plays a major role in constituting our understanding of the world and constrains the selection of metaphors.

People's way of thinking is greatly influenced by culture. Facing the same thing, people from different cultures tend to observe and grasp the clue from different perspectives. Different perspectives of observation will in turn influence associations, a basic component of metaphorical understanding, which is caused by images. Association contains nationality. Different associations will directly form different tropism.

For example, dog is metaphorically used to refer to people in both English and Chinese, but the metaphorical meanings fall into two polarities. In the western world, dog is raised as pet and regarded as a friend of people, so commendatory metaphorical meanings are formed in English.

### 4. Conclusion

The fact that similar body parts and similar expressions are found in different languages like English and Chinese supports the claim that metaphor is not arbitrary but motivated by bodily experiences. The existence of shared conceptual metaphors between the two languages supports the claim that metaphor is a product of cognition or thinking, not just a literary device.

On the other hand, there are some differences between the two languages. This is because the two languages are not related and they are used in different societies with different cultures and different environments. Although this thesis has attempted to make a complete analysis of "hand" metaphors from a cognitive semantic point of view, it's difficult to image how human beings think in a metaphorical way and how human beings understand non-literal meanings. This is because human mind is so complex. Moreover, this paper has compared "hand" metaphors of only two languages: English and Chinese. There is a need for further studies to compare "hand" metaphors across a large number of languages. As the human body is the same everywhere, understanding the extent to which a broad range of language is similar or different in their body metaphors should improve our understanding of human cognition.

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