

Metaphorical Implicitness: A Holistic Linguistic Approach

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Abstract—This study analyzes the implicit meanings of mountains as metaphorical sources in contrasting contexts. In Chinese metaphorical idioms (CMIs), mountain-related meanings are explicit and clear. In unmodified lexical metaphors (ULMs), however, these meanings are less explicit and more variable. Despite this difference, the core mountain symbolism remains consistent across both groups, with CMIs systematically clarifying the implicit meanings found in ULMs.

Keywords—metaphorical implicitness, idiomatic metaphors, polysemy

I. INTRODUCTION

Lakoff's groundbreaking research on metaphors shifted the focus of linguistic studies by demonstrating that metaphors are not merely ornamental but fundamentally pervasive in human cognition and language [1]. This paradigm shift, later extended through cognitive developments, revealed how metaphorical thinking underpins our conceptual system. Cognitive studies further identified that the interpretation of non-literal language involves complex mental operations such as re-categorization, cross-domain mapping, selective projection, compression and blending, counterfactual reasoning and conceptual integration. These processes converge to illustrate how meaning is dynamically extended or constructed [2-5].

Metaphorical meanings are widely recognized as inherently implicit. Theoretical conceptualization of this implicitness, however, remains underdeveloped. Metaphor semantics selectively highlight the most salient conceptual mappings, while relegating implicit meanings to the periphery of interpretation. Yet implicitness serves as both the foundation for exploring metaphorical semantics and the cognitive interface connecting surface linguistic forms to their underlying conceptual systems, a systematic investigation of metaphorical implicitness can unveil the organizational principles of semantic structures, shedding light on how language encodes and transmits culturally embedded knowledge.

Devoted research on metaphorical implicitness has so far been scarce. Translation studies employ strategies such as explicitation and implicitation to examine how source-language units are reconfigured in target languages — especially when culture-specific concepts necessitate substitution with semantically analogous yet categorically distinct expressions. However, such cross-linguistic research offers limited insight into perceiving metaphorical implicitness within a single language system [6]. Relevance Theory introduced implicature and implicitness as key mechanisms for decoding non-literal communication. It prioritizes contextual inference over rigid linguistic forms,

framing interpretation as an ostensive-referential process where listeners derive meaning from cognitive and situational cues. While this approach aligns with cognitive linguistics' foundational view of metaphors as cross-domain mappings that encode culture-specific knowledge and implicit associations, its interpretation of metaphorical meanings remains perspectival and contextually constrained [7].

II. BASICS OF METAPHORICAL IMPLICITNESS

The source and target of a metaphor are fundamentally distinct if interpreted literally. Yet, through cognitive mapping, metaphors generate meanings that transcend the literal senses of both domains. Implicitness is therefore a fundamental prerequisite for metaphorical constructs to achieve their intended meaning. In the metaphor "Juliet is the sun," the implicit understanding between the speaker and listener—that the source (sun) and target (Juliet) are not literally equivalent—allows the transfer of symbolic attributes (e.g., warmth, radiance, vitality) from the sun to Juliet. This cognitive process, rooted in conceptual metaphor theory, hinges on shared cultural and experiential knowledge to bridge disparate domains [1]. Similarly, when Sīmǎ Qiān described Confucius as admiring lofty mountains (高山仰止), he implicitly invoked the culturally entrenched symbolism of mountains in Chinese thought, which represents the historian's panegyric on Confucius' lifetime achievements, moral elevation, and greatness [8].

While this implicit nature of metaphorical meaning might appear self-evident, it demands systematic exploration with main purpose to elaborate its inner workings. Without addressing implicitness, foundational linguistic phenomena—such as polysemy (e.g., bright denoting intelligence or light in English, or mountain denoting a range of disparate yet tacitly associated qualities) remain incompletely understood, as their interpretations often rely on implicit metaphorical extensions. Implicitness is not the absence of explicitness; it is a dynamic cognitive process involving selective projection, conceptual blending and contextual inference:

- Cross-domain mapping: Transferring attributes from source to target while suppressing literal incongruities (e.g., "Time is money" implies scarcity/value but excludes physical exchange).
- Contextual negotiation: Meanings emerge from clashes between literal expressions and situational cues (e.g., "My doctor is a butcher" requires rejecting literal truth to infer incompetence).
- Cognitive economy: Compression of complex ideas into simplified, culturally shared schemas (e.g., "heart" representing emotion in idioms).

III. FORMULATING THE RESEARCH QUESTION

This research is based on two corpuses, ULMs exemplified by the Chinese mountain metaphor as in the journalistic title *Nǚxìng kěyǐ shì huā yě kěyǐ shì shān* 女性可以是花也可以是山 (*Women can be flowers or mountains*) [9] and CMI such as *wěn rú tài shān* 稳如泰山 (as steady as Mount Tai). While both groups of metaphor expressions employ mountains as the source domain, they exhibit distinct degrees of implicitness:

In *women can be flowers or mountains*, the meaning of mountain demonstrates higher implicitness and ambiguity. Here, the girl's qualities are simultaneously mapped to the quality (fragility/beauty) of flowers and that (the resilience/majesty) of mountains, requiring deeper contextual and cultural inference. Both flowers and mountains inherently carry multifaceted symbolic meanings across cultures, especially when devoid of context. For instance, Mount Tai represents steadfastness, prosperity, authority and longevity in Chinese tradition. Depending on the variety, flowers may represent rugged beauty, fragility, prosperity (e.g. peonies), untamed vitality (e.g., rhododendrons) etc. The question is, which qualities of the mountain are mapped to the women, to be precise?

wěn rú tài shān 稳如泰山 (as steady as Mount Tai) is unambiguous and relatively explicit due to frequent idiomatic usage and the additional literal indication of the descriptive word motionless or stable. The idiom's conventionalization in Chinese stems from Mount Tai's iconic status as a cultural emblem of stability.

Although the same metaphorical source domain (e.g., mountain) is expected to generate uniform conceptual mappings, its divergent interpretations across contexts reveal the critical need to quantify and qualify metaphorical implicitness scales—a gap in current cognitive linguistics research.

CMIs consist of long-conventionalized metaphorical idioms in Mandarin with histories spanning centuries or even millennia (e.g., 高山仰止, *gāo shān yǎng zhǐ*, “to revere lofty mountains as moral exemplars”) whose denotations are fixed and explicit. All of these examples demonstrate the profound significance of mountains as quintessential cultural symbols in China. Their symbolic meanings—particularly the deeply rooted traditional conceptions of mountains as embodiments of stability, spiritual power, and cosmic order—are systematically documented in classical texts including *Yi Jīng* (Book of Changes), *Shī Jīng* (Book of Songs), *Shǐ Jì* (Records of the Grand Historian), and *Lún Yǔ* (Analects of Confucius).

Lexical research and studies on semantics of compositional versus non-compositional idioms mirrored advancements in cognitive linguistics and pragmatic theory, with divided tendencies either to distinguish the literal from non-literal meanings or to integrate them. In the dual-process model proposed by Komlósi and Schnell [10], categorical separations between literal and metaphorical meanings of idioms are preferred in analyzing source-target mappings. On the other hand, separationist proposed that literal meanings conformed to established uses yet non-literal meanings simply depend on them [11].

The continuum perspective becomes problematic when examining divergent metaphorical meanings of the same

lexical item, as it fails to account for the context-dependent selective projection of source-domain features. E.g. the examples of two English metaphors with the same source word of snowflake:

- A child is a snowflake: emphasizes uniqueness of the child
- Youth is a snowflake: connotes ephemerality of the youth.[12]

By our test of EFL learners in China, the snowflake mapping to either uniqueness or ephemerality proves to be equally confusing. By the same token, metaphors of the Chinese mountain can be challenging for learners, as in the following journalistic titles:

1. *Zhèng Qīnwén de gāo shān!* 郑钦文的高山! *Zheng Qinwen's Mountain!* [13]
2. *Bú jù 'gāo shān', wǒ yǒu gèng yuǎn de mùbiāo---* *zhūanfāng Zhèng Qīnwén* 不惧“高山”，我有更远
的目标 *Fear no 'mountain'—I aim higher: An exclusive interview with Zheng Qinwen.*[14]
3. *Nǚxìng kěyǐ shì huā yě kěyǐ shì shān* 女性可以是花也可以是山 *Women can be flowers or mountains* [9]
4. *Fùqīn, nín shì nà zuò gāo shān* 父亲，您是那座高山 *Father, you are that towering mountain* [15]

To decode the implicit meanings of “mountain” (山) in these titles, the best approach is to analyze their semantic connections with clear Chinese metaphorical idioms. This reveals their cultural and conceptual foundations. Chinese preserves the mountain's rich meanings through established metaphorical expressions. The character “山” appears in over 100 idioms with more than a dozen distinct meanings, most deeply rooted in Chinese culture. The Chinese concept of “mountain” (山) carries multiple, sometimes conflicting meanings that resist simple categorization, as shown below:

- 高山仰止”admiring lofty mountains”) symbolizes moral reverence;
- 愚公移山 “the Foolish Old Man moves mountains”) frames mountains as obstacles to perseverance;
- 藏之名山”entrusting writings to famous mountains”) associates mountains with cultural preservation;
- 关山重重”layers of mountain passes”) evokes hardship or insurmountable barriers.

The Chinese mountain metaphor follows similar patterns to other cultural symbols more or less. In English, “snowflake” maps onto youth through competing ideologies: positively as uniqueness (a 19th-century individualistic ideal) and negatively as fragility (post-2016 political critiques). This duality shows how metaphors encode opposing values through cultural framing.

Western readers easily grasp the dual meaning of “snowflake” (both individuality and fragility) in Anglo-American culture, but this polysemy poses challenges for Chinese EFL learners. Their native conceptual frameworks, shaped by collectivist values, lack direct equivalents for individualistic metaphors like “snowflake generation”—a term that paradoxically praises uniqueness while criticizing hypersensitivity in U.S. discourse. Chinese metaphors similarly contain culture-specific contradictions that challenge universal cognitive theories.

Chinese mountain-themed idioms have evolved over

millennia to encapsulate a spectrum of symbolic meanings, reflecting the cultural-cognitive sedimentation of natural imagery in linguistic expression. For instance, “高山仰止” (gāo shān yǎng zhǐ, “to admire the lofty mountain”), originating from the *Shijing* (Classic of Poetry)[16], metaphorizes moral exemplarity through the mountain’s towering grandeur; “愚公移山” (yú gōng yí shān, “the Foolish Old Man who moved mountains”), documented in *Liè Zǐ*[17], allegorizes perseverance by transforming mountains from physical barriers into symbols of human determination.

These examples align with meanings of the mountain in classical texts like the *Lún Yǔ* [18] and *Yì Jīng* [19], where mountains are systematically conceptualized as: Hierarchical emblems (e.g., the emblem of mountain shapes are for dukes and kings only); Dynamic obstacles (e.g., divinatory hexagrams interpreting mountains as mutable challenges). These divergent mappings stem from *Yì Jīng*’s (易经) dialectical worldview, where symbols like mountains (山) or water (水) embody coexisting opposites (e.g., permanence vs. change).

While Bréal observed that polysemy presents no significant challenge synchronically since discourse context naturally selects the intended meaning while filtering out alternatives [20], unmodified cultural metaphors carrying culture-specific multivalent meanings require careful elucidation. These metaphors demand explanation through cultural schemas rather than reduction to oversimplified literal-nonliteral continuums - a principle equally crucial for both EFL instruction and AI language processing.

IV. LINGUISTIC EXPLICATION MECHANISM

Previous metaphor studies often depend on subjective interpretations, assuming cultural connotations are self-evident. Effective analysis requires empirical evidence from idiomatic corpora, historical texts, and cognitive frameworks quantifying cross-domain mappings. In the absence of empirical evidence, metaphorical analysis risks both oversimplifying cultural nuances and neglecting linguistic systems. Subjective interpretations may reduce culturally embedded meanings to arbitrary personal associations, failing to account for historically established symbolic layers (as seen in Chinese “山” representing either resilience or spiritual elevation).

Moreover, a mature language system naturally balances implicit and explicit expressions, enabling flexible transitions between these semantic domains. Specifically, language-specific mechanisms - particularly networks of conventionalized and unambiguous metaphorical idioms - function as underlying interpretive frameworks that decode the implicit meanings embedded in isolated metaphors, as found in journalistic headlines containing the standalone mountain metaphor.

In cultural linguistics research, cultural metaphorical meanings have been analyzed through historical documents and cross-cultural comparisons, particularly with their English equivalents [21, 22]. These findings have contributed to folk linguistics and motivated the current study to examine the relationships among various dimensions of implicit meanings, including metaphorical interpretations and broader

contextual significances. The analysis of metaphorical implicitness across linguistic units (lexical items, phrases, idioms, and clauses) reveals a historically stratified hierarchy, wherein culturally entrenched implicit meanings in metaphors can actually attain explicit realization through distinct linguistic forms within shared cultural frameworks.

Chinese exhibits a clear hierarchy of implicitness between single-character metaphors (e.g., 山 mountain) and idiomatic expressions. While the standalone character 山 carries implicit metaphorical meanings (potentially overlapping with its idiomatic senses), its idioms explicitly codify cultural values like moral loftiness and perseverance through conventionalized usage:

Single-Character Polysemy (山)

Literal Meaning: Primarily denotes a geological feature (e.g., “Mount Tai”).

Implicit Extensions: open to a wide range of culture-specific associations which can be illustrated by any single or combinations of idiomatic mountain expressions as follows:

1. Place to be a recluse, as in *shān lín yǐn yì* 山林隐逸 (Chinese recluses historically embody Taoist wisdom about temporal and eternal life).
2. Huge container, as in *shān bāo hǎi róng* 山包海容: Magnanimous or all-encompassing in perspective.
3. Sign of danger, as in *jí jí kě wēi* 岌岌可危: Imminent collapse like an unstable mountain.
4. Otherworldly freedom, as in *shān rén* 山人: Ascetic mountain dwellers with extraordinary powers.
5. Promising enterprise, as in *kāi shān bí zǔ* 开山鼻祖: Pioneering founders of disciplines.
6. Immovability, as in *lì shān dài hé* 砺山带河: Han Dynasty oath comparing steadfastness to mountains enduring millennia.
7. Standstill, as in *kuī rán bù dòng* 岿然不动: Unshakable as a mountain.
8. Obstruction, as in *guān shān zǔ gé* 关山阻隔: Barriers like mountains or passes.
9. Awe-inspiring power, as in *jiǔ yǎng shān dòu* 久仰山斗: Reverence akin to viewing Mount Tai.
10. Weightiness, as in *tài shān hóng máo* 泰山鸿毛: Contrasting Mount Tai’s gravity with a feather’s lightness.
11. Reliability, as in *Tài shān kě yǐ* 泰山可倚: Dependable as Mount Tai; or *kào shān* 靠山: Powerful protectors.
12. Crushing pressure, as in *Tài shān yā dǐng* 泰山压顶: Overwhelming force like Mount Tai’s weight

The metaphorical meaning of *mountain* in titles like Zhèng Qīnwén’s Mountain can be explicitly interpreted through these peak-related perspectives:

a. 山岳般的对手 (Shānyuè bān de duìshǒu) ‘Summit-like opponent’: Zhèng’s opponent stands as an insurmountable peak, mirroring the towering challenges she faced against top-ranked players like Sabalenka, whose dominance seemed “as daunting as scaling Everest” during their matches.

b. 崇山峻岭的敬重 (Chóngshān-jùnlǐng de jìngzhòng) ‘Reverence for lofty ranges’: The opponent commands respect akin to the awe inspired by sacred mountains (e.g., 五岳), reflecting Zhèng’s acknowledgment of rivals’ skills even in defeat.

c. 巅峰成就 (Diānfēng chéngjiù) ‘Pinnacle achievements’ Both players reach admirable summits of success, symbolized by their Grand Slam or Olympic finals—Zhèng’s 2024 Paris gold medal marked her “ascent to tennis’ summit” alongside legends.

d. 巍峨的对手 (Wēi’é de duìshǒu) ‘Magnificent rival’ A worthy opponent’s magnificence parallels the grandeur of mountain ranges, as seen in Zhèng’s tactical battles where “even rivals became co-stars in a Himalayan-scale drama”.

e. 险峻的挑战 (Xiǎnjùn de tiǎozhàn) ‘Precipitous difficulty’ The competition’s extraordinary steepness mirrors high-altitude climbs, evident in Zhèng’s grueling matches where ‘every point felt like traversing a knife-edge ridge’.

f. 移山之难 (Yíshān zhī nán) ‘Difficulty of moving mountains’ Defeating such opponents requires Herculean effort, akin to Zhèng’s ‘rock-breaking resilience’ (破釜沉舟) against match points in cliffhanger victories.

This interpretation does not universally apply to all unmodified mountain metaphors. For the journalistic heading *Nǚxìng kěyǐ shì huā yě kěyǐ shì shān* (女性可以是花也可以是山) ‘Women can be flowers or mountains’—from *Zhāng Guìméi’s Women’s Day letter to girls*—the symbolic meanings encompass:

a. High achievement (e.g., towering peaks representing excellence).

b. Strength and resilience (like unshakable mountains enduring storms).

c. Nurturing potential (mountains as life-giving ecosystems, paralleling women’s capacity to foster growth).

d. Admiration and respect (evoking awe, akin to sublime natural landscapes).

e. Steadfast perseverance (symbolizing unwavering resolve, as seen in Zhāng Guìméi’s advocacy for girls’ education).

For *Fùqīn, nín shì nà zuò gāo shān* (父亲, 您是那座高山) ‘Father, you are that towering mountain’ the metaphor carries profound cultural and emotional connotations. The following analysis explores its layered meanings:

a. Silent yet full of care: Like a mountain’s quiet presence, paternal love often manifests through actions rather than words, offering steadfast support without ostentation. This reflects the Confucian ideal of *yán jiào* (言教, teaching by words) versus *shēn jiào* (身教, teaching by example).

b. Reliable and unwavering: Mountains symbolize unshakable stability, mirroring a father’s role as the family’s emotional and practical anchor. In Chinese idioms, *wēi rán bù dòng* (巍然不动, “towering and immovable”) captures this resilience.

c. Nurturing and full of potential: Though seemingly austere, mountains sustain ecosystems—echoing how fathers foster growth. The phrase *fù ài rú shān* (父爱如山, “father’s love like a mountain”) underscores this duality of strength and life-giving capacity.

d. Important and respectable: In traditional Chinese culture,

mountains are sacred (*shān shén*, 山神 Mountain devine) and associated with wisdom (e.g., Confucius’ saying *zhì zhě lè shuǐ, rén zhě lè shān* 智者乐水, 仁者乐山 ‘The wise find pleasure in water; the virtuous find pleasure in hills.’). Fathers, similarly, embody authority and moral guidance.

e. Steadfast and not giving up: The metaphor aligns with perseverance, as seen in *wēi rán bù dòng* 巍然不动 ‘Stand firm and unshaken’ *kuī rán bù dòng* 岿然不动 ‘Remain steadfast’.

Mountains are not unique in their multivalent meanings. Water serves as another prime example. Recently, an exceptional individual earned the nickname *Water Brother*¹ due to his water-related feat—identifying a subtly different cup among 520 identical ones on Super Brain, demonstrating extraordinary observational skills. This naming convention reflects cultural familiarity. Water embodies change and instability (as in *shuǐ xìng yáng huā* 水性杨花), yet transforms into eternity when becoming the sea (*hǎi shì shān méng* 海誓山盟). It represents gentleness (*wēn róu rú shuǐ* 温柔如水), while national collective memory also associates it with confusion and difficulty (*máng rán* 茫然). These multipolar emotional associations form part of its semantic storage. Though water may symbolize both positive and negative qualities, it inherently resists conveying persistent or extreme states of mind.

While mountains and water exhibit polysemous characteristics in these analyses, they are not formally classified as polysemes in standard dictionaries. The utility of labeling them as such remains questionable, since their meanings are fundamentally metaphorical and implicit rather than literal. This semantic complexity causes most analytical models to fail in interpretation, at least to some extent. Conversely, without proper contextual analysis, beginners and language learners may struggle to comprehend these concepts, as they lack direct equivalents in other linguistic systems.

V. CONCLUSION

While Wittgenstein’s dictum—“The limits of my language mean the limits of my world” suggests the impossibility of delineating implicit boundaries, we recognize that each word serves a distinct communicative function [23]. The implicit meanings of metaphorical language, though culturally embedded and context-dependent, are indeed interpretable. Their semantic margins may remain fluid, yet they maintain discernible differentiation despite associative complexities. Identifying metaphorical meanings as distinct from literal ones merely scratches the surface of a metaphor’s implicit depth. The true scope of implicitness lies largely hidden within our perceptual frameworks, where metaphors operate as cognitive devices. By synthesizing a metaphor’s core form with its contextual variations, this implicitness becomes both analyzable and communicable—accessible to any native speaker through shared linguistic and cultural cognition.

On the other hand, our observations show that seeking the

¹ Wang Yuheng, nicknamed “Water Brother” (*Shuǐ Gē* 水哥), earned this moniker after his legendary performance on *The Brain* (2015), where he identified a specific glass of water among 520 identical ones within 15 seconds—a feat dubbed “microscopic water discrimination” (*wēiguān biàn shuǐ*). His ability to “visualize water as art” (e.g., imagining ripples as

starscapes) cemented his reputation as an observation savant. The title also nods to his calm demeanor, described as “still as deep water” (*jìng shuǐ liú shēn*).

metaphorical meanings of unmodified sources in idiomatic expressions vary depending on both specific words and languages. For metaphorical meanings to develop and accumulate nuances through repeated use, a language needs to remain active over an extended period. Even basic natural images like mountains and water carry different meanings across languages, reflecting the diverse experiences and expressions of different cultures. As lexicographers note, some mountain-related meanings, e.g. *psychological struggles* (as in ‘there’s another mountain to climb now’), remain as novel metaphors without entering mainstream English dictionary definitions [24].

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Li Jiang and Yi Wang co-authored the manuscript. Li Jiang handled revisions and references, Yi Wang finalized the editing, and both approved the final version.

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