A Multimodal Study on Image Metaphor in Cartoon Image Paintings – A Case Study of the Artistic Creation of the "New Cartoon Generation" in China

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Abstract. Cartoon image painting is a new type of diversified art work created by artists integrating the formal language of animation, cartoon, traditional Chinese painting and oil painting and applying image elements and related attributes. Among them, the metaphorical nature of images, as an important attribute of images, has also been widely applied and reflected in the creation of Chinese New Cartoon Generation art group. It is through the construction of the multi-level metaphorical mode of the mutual interpretation between the metaphorical mode of the image and the image text that the painter realizes the precise metaphor and reference of the image of the source domain to the image of the destination domain, and expresses his thoughts on the surrounding life and social reality from the perspective of self-concern.

Keywords: Chinese New Cartoon Generation · Multi-modal construction of image metaphor · Source domain image and destination domain image

1 Introduction

Cartoon-style paintings, as the name suggests, refer to the new artistic works created through incorporating well-known cartoon characters or elements into easel paintings. Born in the twentieth century in which information, picture reading, mass media, and consumerism prevailed, such works abound with artists' utilization and representation of the attributes and functions of pictures, among which the metaphoricity of pictures is the attribute most widely utilized.

The metaphoricity of pictures, an attribute based on the denotative function of pictures, refers to the ability pictures possess to be metaphors for themselves and other pictures. A picture combined with painting language can deliver not only the conventional message the picture conveys but the message relating to a specific scene or context, which indicates another relevant picture. The research on image metaphor is firstly guided by W.J.T. Mischel's idea that an image can be a metaphor for itself or other images in the concept of "meta-image" [1]. Secondly, Forceville scholars in Amsterdam

put forward the viewpoint of "monomodal metaphor" [2] – the metaphor that source domain and destination domain are presented or represented in the same mode [3] – as the theoretical support. In addition, In his book "Pictorial Metaphor in Advertising" [4], Forceville also rescued the study of metaphor from a single linguistic mode and extended it to other modes of non-linguistic mode, laying a solid theoretical foundation for the study and establishment of image metaphor and multimodal metaphor. On the basis of this research, the author puts forward the core of this research – the multi-modal construction of image metaphor in cartoon image paintings.

Two things, namely the source domain (the visual image) and the target domain (the represented object), are the premise of the construction of multimodal pictorial metaphors in cartoon-style paintings. There must be some correlation or similarity between the source and target domain, and conversely, such correlation or similarity is the consequence of the two domains being matched. Artists can take a visual image as a metaphor for the represented object because the similarity between the two can be easily noticed. They can also juxtapose a visual image with an object, which bears little resemblance to each other on the surface, based on their perception of the world, and create some similarity between the two, hence taking one as a metaphor for the other. The newly created similarity between the two things can serve as a new viewpoint for artists and viewers, enabling them to get new insights into the visual image and the represented object.

2   Composition and Function of Pictorial Metaphorical Modes in Works of China's "New Cartoon Generation"

China's "New Cartoon Generation," with Xiong Lijun, Li Jikai, and Xiong Yu as the representatives, refers to a group of artists born between 1975 and 1990 who imparted a cartoon style to their paintings by incorporating cartoon elements into their works. Focusing on the small and employing an abundance of visual symbols and imagery, the artists represented in their works the spirit and psychological state of the people at the time and people's feelings about reality. The works of the "New Cartoon Generation" have a strong resonance for the viewers and are thus well-received by the public. With the contribution of these artists, China's cartoon-style paintings can even rival that of other countries.

In the works of the "New Cartoon Generation," before the source domain of a metaphor can denote the target domain, a metaphorical mode should be established. The metaphorical mode can be either a simple one made up of a single picture or a multi-layer one that combines a picture with text.

2.1   Pictorial Metaphorical Mode Made Up of a Single Picture in the Source Domain

When there is a high similarity or correlation between the source and target domain, the metaphor can function immediately. Pictures, in this case, can convey a specific message without the assistance of text and can constitute pictorial metaphorical modes independently, hence activating pictorial metaphors.

Li Jikai's "A Child Standing on a High Platform" can be seen as an example. The artist takes a picture of a skinny boy standing on the edge of a tall wooden stake with his eyes closed as the source domain of the metaphor and conveys the message, which is the target domain, of the loneliness and spiritual emptiness of the younger generation who, represented by the artist, lived under enormous pressure in a consumer society. While evoking nervous feelings in the viewers by portraying a boy who may fall off the stake at any time, the artist creates a sense of tranquility by depicting the serene and concentrated look of the boy who is immersed in his world. A sense of composure is communicated through the solid-colored background and the overall tone of the work, which relieves the viewers' nervousness and imparts a poetic vibe to the painting by implying a situation where time stops when the boy is feeling his soul. With such a pictorial metaphor combined with painting language, the artist gets his message through to the viewers in a short time and aligns his perception of the work with that of the viewers. The pictorial metaphorical process and the construction process of the metaphorical mode in this work are shown in Fig. 1.

2.2 A Multi-layer Metaphorical Mode Combining Text with the Picture in the Source Domain

The picture in the source domain can combine with explanatory text or a title to make the metaphor function. Such multi-layer metaphorical modes can be further categorized into three types.

First, when the picture is itself distinctly metaphorical, the textual mode plays just an accessory role. In Xiong Yu's "A Man Pulling Strings" a man with wings who looks rather tired is pulling several strings laboriously. The picture, as a pictorial mode, combined with its title, as a textual mode, constitutes the source domain of the metaphor, which
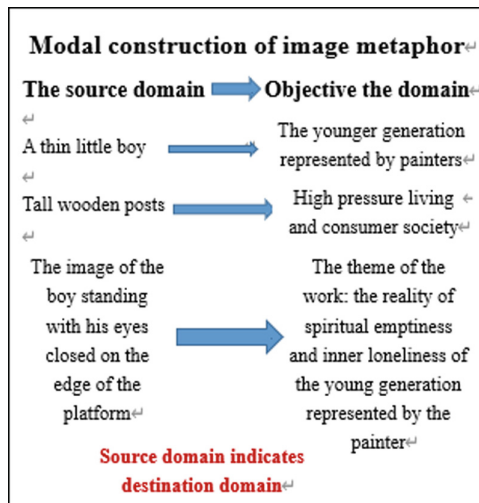

Fig. 1. "A Child Standing on a High Platform" Image metaphor process diagram. Source: Painted by the author

serves as a metaphorical representation of the target domain or the theme of the work. That is, the young people represented by the artist were exhausted by the pressure the society put on them and were eager to escape from reality but still rose calmly and determinedly to the challenges the society posed. With the help of the multi-layer metaphorical mode in which the pictorial mode plays the main role, and the textual mode plays the accessory role, the artist, through his introspection, portrays the complicated psychology of the younger generation, of which he himself is a representative. Amid the feeling of loneliness and emptiness caused by the enormous pressure in life, the younger generation has both a longing for the carefree childhood days and a determination to be true to themselves, and a love for life. The work has a strong resonance for viewers with the same emotional experience. Hence, the communication between the artist, the viewers, the picture, and the work the picture constitutes is strengthened. The pictorial metaphorical process and the construction process of the metaphorical mode in this work are shown in Fig. 2.

Second, when a picture and text are combined to explain each other, a multi-layer metaphorical mode that combines a pictorial mode with a textual mode should be established to make the metaphor function. The picture is still metaphorical in this case but less metaphorical than the picture in the first case. In Xu Maomao's "A Large Stomach", the artist, drawing inspiration from herself, creates the image of a woman with her stomach cut open but still wearing a smile. The woman and the fruits, vegetables, burgers, and lobsters that fill her stomach constitute the source domain, which serves as a metaphorical
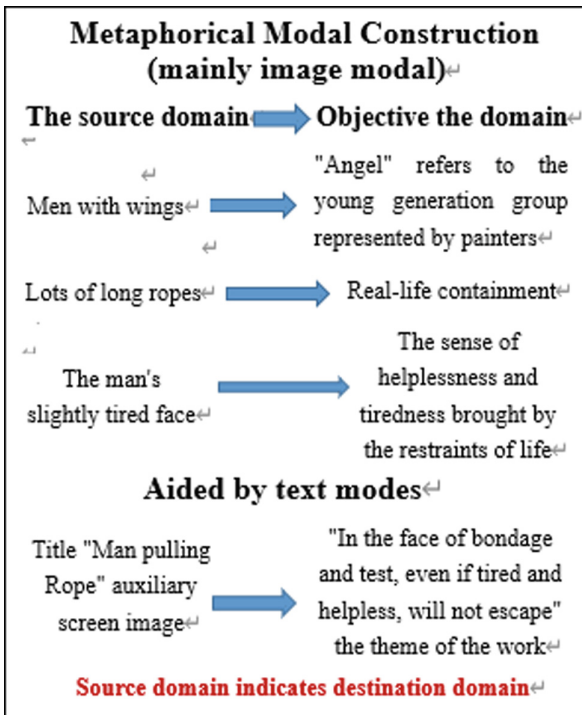

Fig. 2. "A Man Pulling Strings" Image metaphor process diagram. Source: Painted by the author

representation of the target domain – that is, the younger generation, represented by the artist herself, experienced great pleasure brought about by the material comforts in the consumer society. The horrified look of the woman in the stomach, also a source domain, serves as a metaphorical representation of the target domain. That is, after experiencing the pleasure that consumerism produced, people found that they were increasingly numb and empty spiritually. Moreover, the title of the work, "A Large Stomach," as a textual mode, combined with the image and painting elements in the picture, constitutes another source domain that serves as a metaphorical representation of the two harsh facts that constitute the target domain – that is, the prevailing consumerism were eroding people's mind and spirit, and the inflow of foreign culture, represented by the fast-food culture, stank of cultural colonization. The work, based on the artist's introspection, conveys the artist's reflections on the social reality of her time. The pictorial metaphorical process and the construction process of the metaphorical mode in this work are shown in Fig. 3.
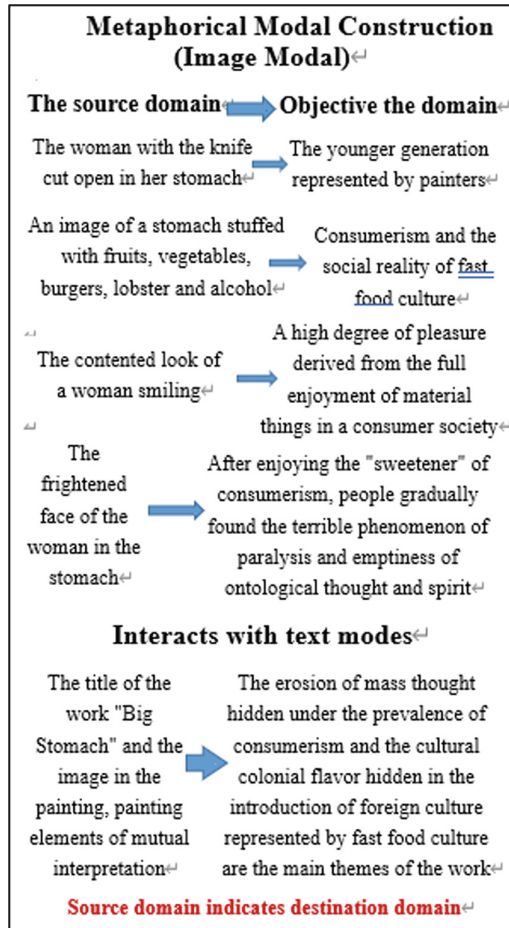

Fig. 3. "A Large Stomach" Image metaphor process diagram. Source: Painted by the author

Third, when a picture is just implicitly metaphorical, the text is needed to establish a multi-layer metaphorical mode in which the textual mode plays the main role, and the pictorial mode plays the accessory role. In Gao Yu's "From a Swimmer to a Drowned Man", the artist combines the source domain in the pictorial mode – the colorful concentric circles and the water splashed up, with the source domain in the textual mode – the word "HELP" in the picture as well as the title of the work, and gives full play to the explanatory function of the textual mode. The work thus conveys the message that the younger generation, represented by the artist himself, enjoyed and propelled the development of a variety of new cultures, including mass consumption and pop culture, while being the victims of the development of these cultures as well as the subjects of the massive experiment. The artist expresses in his work his concern about the empty inner world, which belonged exclusively to the self-centered younger generation who lived under the influence of a variety of new and foreign cultures. The work implies that artists, after enjoying the development of the new cultures and blindly propelling their
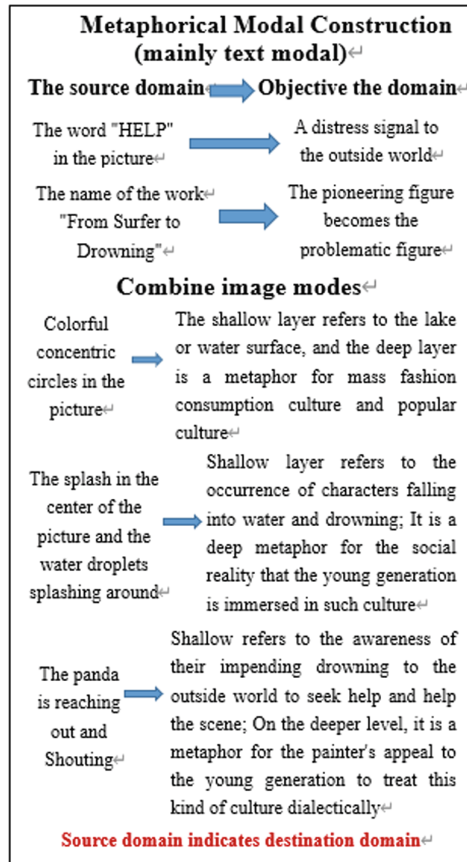

Fig. 4. "From a Swimmer to a Drowned Man" Image metaphor process diagram. Source: Painted by the author

development, should realize what they had done. Otherwise, they would descend from creators of new art forms who swam with the tide of the time to "painters" whose works reflected no thoughts and had no artistic values. The pictorial metaphorical process and the construction process of the metaphorical mode in this work are shown in Fig. 4.

3 Conclusion

To sum up, in the works of China's "New Cartoon Generation," pictorial metaphors are employed mainly in two ways – the pictorial metaphorical mode, where a picture makes practical sense independently, and the pictorial metaphorical mode, where a picture is combined with text to convey the message. The latter case is concerned with the construction of multimodal metaphors, which can be further categorized into three types. In the first type, the pictorial mode plays the main role while the textual mode plays the accessory role; in the second type, the roles played by the pictorial mode and the textual mode are equally important; in the third type, the textual mode plays the main role while the pictorial mode plays the accessory role. The construction and functionalization of multimodal pictorial metaphors can reflect, in reverse, the themes and general ideas of the works that contain such metaphors. The works can thus, apart from manifesting the artists' intention to express themselves, convey to the viewers the artists' reflection on the social reality of their time based on their introspection.

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