

A Contrastive Study of English and Chinese Color Term “Red” and 红 (hóng, Red) from the Perspective of Cultural Cognitive Linguistics

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Abstract

Color terms are important carriers of language and culture, reflecting human cognition and values. Addressing the gaps in existing research—such as the lack of diachronic perspective, limited corpora, and insufficient exploration of cultural cognition—this study, from the perspective of cultural cognitive linguistics, combines conceptual metaphor theory and basic color term theory to explore the semantic similarities and differences, metaphorical mechanism variations, and cultural cognitive motivations of “red” and “hóng”. The research adopts qualitative corpus analysis, synchronic-diachronic analysis, and comparative research methods, with corpora sourced from COCA, COHA, CCL, etc. Results show they share similar semantics in emotion, warning, danger, and assistance, but differ in economic and political fields and some unique meanings. In terms of metaphorical mechanisms, both start from the objective properties of red, follow the mapping logic of “from concrete to abstract”, and center on attribute-related mapping. Differences arise from different histories, social systems, and folk traditions between two nations, leading to distinct mapping paths in politics and economy as well as some unique areas. The cultural cognitive motivations for similarities lie in shared physiological-psychological perceptions and cross-cultural integration. For differences, they stem from variations in productive civilizations, religious cultures, political-historical cultures, and etiquette-folk cultures. This paper contributes to promoting language teaching and learning, cross-cultural communication as well as translation.

Keywords

“Red” and 红 (hóng, Red), Cultural Cognitive Linguistics, Metaphor, Contrastive Study

1. Introduction

Existing studies on English and Chinese color terms have yielded multi-dimensional findings. Berlin & Kay (1969) proposed the hierarchical theory of basic color terms, pointing out that “red” is a core color term emerging earliest after black and white. Focal colors possess cross-cultural universality, and the prototypical meaning of “red” refers to fire or blood. Bornstein (1975) revealed through experiments that the association between “red” and anger or danger in Western culture is culturally acquired. Lakoff & Johnson (1980) put forward the “source domain-target domain” mapping mechanism, providing a tool for explaining the metaphorical differences between “red” and “hóng”. Deng & Liu (1989) noted that “red” is mostly associated with violence or deficit, while “hóng” mostly denotes festivity or revolution, without involving cognitive mechanisms. Wierzbicka (1990) mentioned that the auspicious meaning of “hóng” has no direct equivalent in English. Kövecses (2002) elaborated the classification, cross-cultural differences and applications of metaphor in multiple fields. Lan (2005) compared the metaphorical target domains of “red” and “hóng”, finding that “red” mostly extends to negative domains, while “hóng” mostly extends to positive domains. Winawer et al. (2007) published an experiment, confirming that the cognitive perception of the prototypical colors of “red” and “hóng” is consistent, though there are differences in the categorization of peripheral colors. Siok et al. (2009) found differences in brain activation areas when processing the metaphors of the two terms through fMRI, confirming the physiological manifestation of cultural cognition. Zhang (2012) sorted out the diachronic semantic path of “hóng” and compared it with the semantic stability of “red”. Qian (2014) combined metaphor and metonymy theories to analyze the differences in metaphorical mechanisms between the two terms. Dou & Liu (2023) adopted the “usage + behavioral profile” analysis approach to study the metaphorical meanings of “bái (white)”, concluding that its meanings are determined by usage frequency and context. Qi (2023) studied the semantic evolution of “hóng” through diachronic behavioral profile analysis, traced the trajectory from its literal meanings to metaphorical meanings, and emphasized the influence of history and culture. Zhao & Abdullah (2024) analyzed the metaphorical functions of color symbols in literature, revealed their roles in plot and emotion, and filled the research gap in non-everyday language contexts. Wang (2025) compared the metaphorical meanings of “red” and “hóng” from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, illustrating the shaping role of culture.

Previous studies have achieved certain results. Addressing their limitations—lack of diachronic dimension, limited corpora, and insufficient exploration of cultural cognitive factors, this study integrates conceptual metaphor theory and basic color term theory within cultural cognitive linguistics framework, adopting corpus-based qualitative, synchronic-diachronic, and comparative methods. The research questions are as follows: (1) What are the similarities and differences in semantic categories of “red” and “hóng”? (2) What are the similarities and differences in their metaphorical mechanisms? (3) What are the cultural cognitive mo-

tivations behind these aspects? By addressing these questions, it aims to contribute to language teaching and learning, cross-cultural communication as well as translation.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Cultural Cognitive Linguistics

Cultural Cognitive Linguistics, as the latest development of cognitive linguistics, is an interdisciplinary field. Its core lies in exploring the interactive relationship between language, culture and cognition, aiming to reveal the connection between language structure, use and cultural cognition under different cultural backgrounds, thereby exploring the mysteries of human language and cognition (Wen, 2024).

Its theoretical foundation is derived from cognitive linguistics, cultural linguistics, anthropological linguistics and intercultural communication studies. It emphasizes that cognition is culturally embedded. Culture shapes cognition from multiple dimensions such as cognitive processes, cognitive motivation and emotional cognition, and is transmitted and maintained through linguistic symbols (Wen, 2024).

Key research areas include the characteristics of cultural cognition (cultural dependence, socialization, dynamism, etc.) and various forms of cultural conceptualization (cultural categorization, cultural metaphorization, cultural metonymization, cultural schematization, cultural framing). It also analyzes how language (vocabulary, grammar, pragmatics) reflects cultural values and cognitive models, such as the cultural differences between Chinese and English color words and kinship terms (Wen, 2024; Wen, 2025).

It breaks through mechanical analysis of language structure in traditional linguistics, focusing on the role of cultural cognitive models in meaning construction. Ultimately, it helps deepen the research on relationship between language, culture and cognition, and promotes cross-cultural understanding and communication (Wen, 2024; Wen, 2025).

2.2. Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Conceptual metaphor, a core theory in cognitive linguistics, was first put forward by Lakoff & Johnson in 1980 in *Metaphors We Live By*, marking a shift from viewing metaphor as mere rhetoric to a cognitive approach. Later, in *The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor* (1993), they systematically expounded it: the essence of conceptual metaphor is understanding and experiencing one thing through another. It is not just a rhetorical device or linguistic phenomenon, but an abstract, patterned mode of human thinking—our conceptual system, which underpins thoughts and actions, is inherently metaphorical. Conceptual metaphor theory comprises two parts: conceptual metaphors (the underlying structures of metaphors) and metaphorical expressions (how metaphors manifest in context). Moreover, metaphor and abstract concepts have a systematic equivalent relationship in expression or cognition. Humans create metaphorical thinking patterns to per-

ceive the world because our cognitive abilities are limited by time, space, and sensory organs—thus, metaphor becomes a mandatory choice. We invariably use visible, known, and concrete concepts to grasp invisible, unknown, and abstract ones (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

A typical example is “TIME IS MONEY”. Expressions like “You’re wasting my time,” and “How do you spend your weekend?” treat time as something that can be wasted or spent (just like money), making the abstract concept of time comprehensible. In this theory, metaphor is not a peripheral decoration of language and thought, but the center of thought and therefore the center of language—an indispensable cognitive tool for humans to conceptualize the world (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

2.3. Basic Color Term Theory

The theory of basic color terms was proposed by American anthropologist Brent Berlin and linguist Paul Kay in 1969. They investigated languages from twenty different language families, analyzed color corpora by means of color chip classification, and concluded that there are eleven basic color categories in human languages, namely white, black, red, green, yellow, blue, brown, purple, pink, orange, and gray. Meanwhile, they put forward four criteria for judging basic color terms: having a single lexical structure (containing only one morpheme); not being a hyponym of another color; having wide applicability and not referring exclusively to a single thing; and not being the semantic extension of a certain thing representing that color. The research also found that the division of colors in different languages is not arbitrary, and basic color terms share similar central meanings. Moreover, the arrangement of color terms in different languages follows a universal structure: white, black < red < green, yellow < blue < brown < purple, pink, orange, gray (if A < B, it indicates that if B exists in a language, A must exist, but the existence of A does not necessarily mean the existence of B). This theory reveals the commonalities and laws of human color cognition.

3. Research Design

3.1. Data Source

This study employs a corpus-based approach, drawing on COCA, COHA, CCL, the Old English Corpus and the Middle English Dictionary as sources. Its overarching goal is to investigate similarities and differences in semantic properties and metaphorical mechanisms of “red” and “hóng”, as well as to unpack the underlying cultural and cognitive motivations shaping these patterns. This investigation is conducted from synchronic and diachronic perspectives, with the integration of multimodal corpora to enhance analytical depth. The multimodal corpora are sourced from television series, films, songs, images, and other multimedia materials. Audio and video contents have been transcribed into textual form to streamline the analytical process and enhance clarity of presentation. For Chinese, only CCL is utilized, as it enables access to linguistic materials spanning from

ancient China to contemporary era. COCA and COHA have temporal limitations. Their data only date back to the 19th century. To address this gap and ensure comprehensive historical coverage, this study supplements their scope with data extracted from the Old English Corpus and the Middle English Dictionary.

3.2. Data Collection

This study samples 1000 randomly sorted excerpts from COCA, sourced from diverse disciplinary fields. These excerpts are subsequently stored in folders and subjected to secondary sampling via the Concordance Sampler software, resulting in the selection of 500 excerpts for subsequent analysis. The same sampling procedure is applied to other corpora included in the study. Following sampling, the corpus excerpts are annotated, and a detailed analysis is conducted to determine whether “red” denotes the color itself or undergoes cross-domain mapping from color domain to other conceptual domains. This analytical process aims to identify similarities and differences in meaning and metaphorical mechanisms of “red” and “hóng”, as well as to unpack the underlying cultural and cognitive motivations. For CCL, the research timeline is divided into the following periods: Pre-Qin Period to Han Dynasty, Tang Dynasty to Ming-Qing Dynasties, 1920s-1940s, 1950s-1970s, 1980s-1990s, and 21st century to the present. For English corpora, the research timeline is divided into the following periods: Old English Period, Medieval Period to Early Modern English Period, and Modern English Period. By analyzing semantic characteristics of “red” and “hóng” across each period, this study summarizes the similarities and differences in their historical evolutionary trajectories.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1. The Similarities and Differences of the Meaning of “Red” and “Hong” Between English and Chinese

4.1.1. Similarities

Both “red” and “hóng” map to intense emotions such as anger, shyness, excitement, sadness and so forth. In English, “red-blooded males” means people who are active and energetic. “See red” means someone who is angry. “Red-headed” means “furious”. “Red-faced officials” means an official who feels ashamed of attempting to do something but in vain. “Red-hot anger” means extreme anger. “Flash red in the face” means flush with shame. “A red rag to a bull” means something that provokes one’s anger. In Chinese, “一和异性说话他就脸红心跳” uses “脸红” to convey shyness. “那人红着眼恶狠狠地说” uses “红着眼” to express anger. “听到这个悲伤的消息，他的眼眶红了” uses “眼眶红了” to show sadness. “他这个人脾气不好，总是动不动就跟别人红脸” uses “红脸” to stand for anger.

Both “red” and “hóng” follow a “red-blood-danger” two-step mapping to associate with bloodshed and violence. This connection stems from the universal human experience that red directly corresponds to the color of blood—a substance closely linked to injury, harm, and aggression. In English, “red hands” means

hands stained with blood, “red revenge” means bloody revenge, and “the red rules of tooth and claw” means the violent law of the jungle, emphasizing survival through force. In the wedding scene of the Western film *The Godfather*, although elements like red roses and red tablecloths appear, red always creates a contrast within the dark color palette alongside dark brown suits and characters in shadows. Red only subtly hints at festivity, while in the shots of “blood soaking the red carpet” in subsequent assassination scenes, it directly links red to violence and danger. In Chinese, “侵略者一路血洗而入” implies violent slaughter. “血色染红战场” uses “染红” to depict a bloody scene.

Due to the longest wavelength and highest visibility of “red” in the visible spectrum, both “red” and “hóng” are mapped to concepts like danger, prohibition, and boundaries, serving as universal visual warning symbols. In English, “red light” is a traffic signal indicating prohibition or stop, “red flag” is a flag used to warn of danger, “red alert” means an emergency alert for imminent threats, and “red card” is a card shown to penalize rule-breaking in sports. In Chinese, “红灯亮了, 他不得不紧急刹车” uses “红灯” as a traffic stop signal. “古巴队教练提出抗议, 遭到红牌警告” employs “红牌” for sports penalties. “在海洋环境敏感区、关键区等划定生态红线” uses “红线” to represent an uncrossable boundary for protection.

Both “red” and “hóng” are associated with war and death, as war is inherently linked to blood and flame—two elements that are visually red, evoking tension and fear. In English, “red battles” means bloody wars and “red ruin” means destruction caused by war or fire. In Chinese, “战火映红了巴格达的天空” uses “映红” to describe the fiery glow of war. “侵略者一路血洗而入” uses “血洗” to describe the invaders’ brutal, blood-soaked massacre.

Due to the inherent sense of warmth and visual impact of “red”, it can metaphorize passionate emotions, often reinforcing this meaning through natural symbols that are cross-culturally associated with love. In English, red roses are a classic example—seen in lyrics like “Lies the seed that with sun’s love, in the spring become the rose,” where red roses symbolize romantic love. “Red-hot passion” means fiery, intense love. In Chinese, in the poem “红豆生南国……”, red beans represent longing for a loved one. Additionally, “红娘” is a matchmaker who facilitates romantic relationships and in the lyric “玫瑰玫瑰我爱你”, “rose” symbolizes love.

Both “red” and “hóng” symbolize “aid and rescue”, because red is the official color of many global welfare organizations. In English, “American Red Cross” is a humanitarian organization. “International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement” is the world’s largest humanitarian aid network. In Chinese, “红色救援通道” is designated during major disaster rescue efforts to ensure priority passage for ambulances, rescue vehicles, and material transport vehicles. “红十字志愿者服务” means that volunteers engaged in aid work often wear red cross badges and carry out voluntary services.

The diachronic semantic evolution of “red” and “hóng” originate from pure color description, and later their meanings were extended along with social and

cultural contexts. However, “hóng” has always focused on becoming a core cultural symbol with positive tendencies, while “red” coexists with positive and negative meanings, showing scattered semantics and failing to form a unified core symbol.

The similarities in their diachronic semantic evolution are as follows. In early stages, “red” and “hóng” only served the function of concrete color and had no extended meanings. “Hóng”, from Pre-Qin Period to Han Dynasty, specifically referred to “light red”, which was only used to describe the color of fabrics. “Red”, during the Old English Period, corresponded to “the color of fire and blood”. It was solely used to describe the appearance of objects (e.g., “rēad weall” [red wall]).

With social development, both terms broke out of the category of pure color and superimposed cultural associations or practical functional meanings. After Tang Dynasty, “hóng” had connotations of auspiciousness and nobility. “Red”, from Middle Ages onward, had meanings like sacredness and enthusiasm. In the modern stage, both integrated practical functions, such as “红色预警” and “红客” in Chinese and “red light” “red alert” in English.

4.1.2. Differences

“Hóng” in the political domain conveys revolutionary loyalty and national identity, and all these connotations are fully positive. “红军” is a revolutionary military force, “红色政权” represents a revolutionary government, “红色教育” means patriotic education, “五星红旗” is China’s national symbol embodying revolutionary victory and “红心向党” emphasizes devotion to the revolutionary cause. In Chinese film *Red Sorghum*, “hóng” is deeply intertwined with the vitality of resisting oppression and national spirit. The red sorghum fields radiate vibrant red light, serving as a natural battlefield for villagers to resist the Japanese invaders. In the scene where sorghum wine is stained with blood, blood seeps into the wine jars, and the crimson wine becomes a weapon for resistance. Villagers’ drinking the blood-stained wine before charging into battle is a revolutionary symbol of the people’s refusal to submit. In contrast, “red” mostly carries negative connotations, conveying radicalism, opposition, and panic. “Red Scare” refers to historical fear and suspicion of communism. “Red states” means U.S. states that typically support the Republican Party. There are no positive meanings attached.

“Hóng” in the economic domain is entirely positive, mapping to concepts of profit and income. “红利” means dividends, “分红” means profit distribution, “人口红利” means demographic dividend, an economic advantage arising from a large working-age population, and “红包” means envelopes filled with cash, symbolizing prosperity and good fortune. However, “red” has the opposite meaning, representing debt and loss. “In the red”, means “in debt”. “Red ink” means financial deficit. “Red cent”, refers to a tiny, practically worthless amount of money, emphasizing insignificance or lack of value.

There are exclusive meanings of “hóng” in Chinese. First, “hóng” conveys femininity. This comes from traditional Chinese gender roles, where needlework was associated with women. “女红” means needlework, “红颜” refers to young and

beautiful women, and “红颜知己” refers to a male’s female confidante. Second, “hóng” denotes popularity and high attention. “走红” means rise to fame. “网红” means online celebrities who gain fame through the internet. “老板的大红人” means the boss’s most valued or favored employee. “大红大紫” means someone who is extremely famous or successful. Third, “hóng” symbolizes loyalty, rooted in Chinese cultural idioms and historical figures. “红脸关公” is a historical figure with a red face, who is a symbol of loyalty. “红心向党” means a loyal heart for the Party. “赤胆忠心” means whole-hearted loyalty. Fourth, “hóng” represents good luck, a meaning tied to Chinese folk beliefs that red wards off evil and brings prosperity. “走红运” means be blessed with good fortune. “开门红” symbolizes a successful start. “红运当头” means be in the midst of great luck.

There are exclusive meanings of “red” in English. First, “red” conveys licentiousness, originating from Western historical practices where red lanterns were hung outside brothels. “Red-light district” is an area with brothels, “red waste of life” means wasting one’s life on sensual or immoral pleasures, and the “red letter A” in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* refers to a red letter “A” that is forced upon the protagonist as punishment for adultery, symbolizing shame and immorality. Second, “red” is associated with bureaucracy, derived from the 17th-century British practice of using red ribbons to bind official documents, which later became a metaphor for tedious administrative procedures. “Red tape” and “red typism” symbolize bureaucratic delays and formalities.

The differences in their diachronic semantic evolution are as follows. When it comes to semantic tendency, the meanings of “hóng” are mostly positive. From the meaning of auspiciousness and festivity in Tang Dynasty and royal nobility in Ming and Qing Dynasty to modern connotation of revolutionary progress and contemporary national rejuvenation, “hóng” has always maintained positive attributes. “Red” coexists with positive and negative meanings. Positive ones include sacredness (e.g., cardinals), enthusiasm (e.g., red-hot), and honor (e.g., red carpet) while negative ones include sin in religious contexts (e.g., red sin), financial loss in economic contexts (e.g., in the red), and danger in safety contexts (e.g., red zone).

When it comes to the status of core symbol, initially, “hóng” semantically referred to light red. By the Tang Dynasty, it completed semantic expansion and status enhancement, replacing “赤(chì)” to become the general core term for the red spectrum in Chinese. Since then, it has gradually developed into a core cultural symbol carrying folk customs, imperial power, politics, etc. In modern times, it evolved into a revolutionary symbol (e.g., the Red Flag), a national image symbol (e.g., the red color of the national flag), and a symbol of national rejuvenation. It has formed a unique and stable core symbol that runs through the changes of social culture. “Red” has always been a multi-context semantic carrier with no unified core. Its meanings are scattered across contexts, such as “Red Power” (the Native American rights movement), “in the red” (economic context), and “red light” (traffic context).

When it comes to the driving force of evolution, the core driving forces of “hóng” are political narration and cultural superimposition. Politically, it evolved from revolutionary legitimacy (e.g., the Red Army) and regime symbol (e.g., Red China) to national rejuvenation (e.g., the red country, a metaphor for China under socialist leadership). Culturally, it superimposes traditional folk customs (e.g., red couplets) and modern commerce (e.g., red tourism). The core driving forces of “red” include religious influence, daily cognition, and modern functions. In Middle Ages, the meaning of “red” differentiated into positive and negative ones under the influence of Christianity (e.g., “hellfire” means sin while “martyrs’ blood” means sacredness). In modern times, it extended its functions to meet the needs of modern society (e.g., traffic warnings, economic accounting).

4.1.3. Summary

“Red” and “hóng” exhibit overlapping semantic mappings, encompassing intense emotions, violence, warning, war, love, and aid. Notably, they diverge in political and economic domains. “Hóng” carries positive connotations of revolutionary loyalty and national identity and economically maps to profit, while “red” is associated with negative implications of radicalism and economically denotes debt and loss. In exclusive semantics, “hóng” encompasses femininity, popularity, and auspiciousness, whereas “red” is linked to licentiousness and bureaucracy.

The evolution of “hóng” is a focused process, from a single color gradation to a positive cultural symbol and finally a national symbol, reflecting the changes of Chinese society from folk customs to politics. In contrast, the evolution of “red” is a scattered process, from pure color to positive-negative differentiation and finally multi-context functions, reflecting the diversity and flexibility of its social culture. The essence of their difference lies in cultural divergence between the collective core symbol in Chinese culture and the individual contextual semantics in Western culture.

4.2. The Similarities and Differences in the Metaphorical Mechanisms between “Red” and “Hong”

4.2.1. Similarities

The shared metaphorical mechanisms of “red” in English and Chinese start from people’s shared cognition of objective attributes of “red” and follow the mapping logic of “from concrete objects or attributes to abstract concepts”. The core is attribute-associated mapping, specifically divided into three categories.

Firstly, a two-step mapping mechanism from “red” to objective objects and then to abstract meanings. Both languages first associate “red” with cross-culturally universal objects (blood, fire), and then extend to abstract meanings through the attributes of these objects, forming fixed mapping chains with identical logical structures. For example, mapping from red to blood and then to danger, violence or death. People share the cognition that blood is red and bleeding means threat to life. Thus, both languages map the meanings of danger, violence, or death based on the association between red and blood. In English, “red hands” means violent

acts and “red ruin” means war-induced damage. In Chinese, “血色染红战场” is associated with bloody scenes and “血洗” means violent slaughter. Another example is mapping from red to fire and then to passion or warmth. The red appearance of fire and its attributes of warmth and energy are universally recognized. Therefore, both languages map the meanings of passion and love based on the association between red and fire. In English, “red-hot passion” means intense emotions and red roses symbolizes love. In Chinese, red bean represents yearning.

Secondly, a direct mapping mechanism from “red” to physical attributes and then to functional meanings. Based on the physical attribute of “red” having the longest wavelength and highest visibility, both languages directly map “red” to functional meanings such as warning, prohibition, and boundaries. In English, “red light” means no entry, “red alert” means urgent warning, and “red card” means punishment for rule-breaking. In Chinese, “红灯” is a stop signal, “红牌警告” is connected with sports penalty, and “生态红线” means protection boundaries.

Thirdly, a consensus-based mapping mechanism from “red” to symbolic attributes and then to exclusive meanings. Both languages regard “red” as the symbolic color of globally recognized organizations and map the meaning of “aid and rescue” based on symbolic consensus. Since global welfare organizations such as the “Red Cross” use red as their official color, both English and Chinese have formed the mapping that “red means aid”. In English, “American Red Cross” means humanitarian rescue and in Chinese, “红十字会” means charitable aid.

4.2.2. Differences

The different metaphorical mechanisms of “red” in English and Chinese originate from unique historical events, social systems, and folk traditions of each culture.

In the political domain, based on the cultural memory of China’s revolutionary history, “red” is tied to exclusive cognition of revolution and patriotism. Thus, starting from the association between red and revolutionary events, it maps positive meanings of loyalty and national identity. “红军” means revolutionary forces, “红色教育” means patriotic education, and “红心向党” means loyalty to the Party. However, based on the historical background of “Red Scare” in the West (fear of communism), “red” is tied to exclusive cognition of radicalism and opposition. Thus, starting from the association between red and communism, it maps negative meanings of radicalism and panic. “Red terrorism” means radical violence.

In the economic domain, based on Chinese cultural habits where red symbolizes auspiciousness and dividends represent gains, “red” is tied to economic benefits and auspicious implications, mapping meanings of profits and good luck. “红利” means investment returns, “现金分红” means profit distribution, and “红包” means auspicious wealth. The mapping basis is local economic folk customs, with all meanings being positive. Based on Western bookkeeping tradition of using red ink to record losses, “red” is tied to financial losses, mapping meanings of debt and worthlessness. “In the red” means in debt, “red ink” means deficit, and “red

cent” means a negligible amount of money.

In culture-exclusive domains, both languages have metaphorical mechanisms unique to their own cultures. The mapping bases are folk customs, history, or social cognition exclusive to the local culture, with no corresponding mappings in the other culture. Based on traditional Chinese folk customs or historical figures, three unique mappings are formed. Firstly, from “red” to female needlework or beautiful women and then to femininity. “女红” means women’s embroidery and “红颜” means attractive females, based on traditional gender division of labor. Secondly, from “red” to popularity or attention and then to fame. “网红” means online celebrities and “大红大紫” means extremely famous, based on the folk cognition that red is eye-catching. Thirdly, from red to Guan Gong or loyal heart and then to loyalty. “红脸关公” means justice and loyalty and “红心向党” means a loyal heart with devotion to the Party.

Based on western history or social habits, two unique mappings are formed. Firstly, from “red” to red-light districts or scarlet letter A and then to licentiousness or shame. “Red-light district” means areas with brothels and “red letter A” means punishment for adultery, based on the Western history of hanging red lanterns outside brothels. Secondly, from “red” to red ribbons or official documents and then to bureaucracy, which was based on the 17th-century British tradition of tying official documents with red ribbons. “Red tape” means administrative hassle.

4.2.3. Summary

The similarities in the metaphorical mechanisms of “red” in English and Chinese essentially reflect the cognitive commonalities of humanity towards the objective world. The differences, on the other hand, reflect cultural specificity, forming mapping paths unique to each culture based on local historical events, folk customs, or social habits, with distinct semantic directions and conceptual scopes. Together, they constitute a system of metaphorical mechanisms based on cognitive commonalities and supplemented by cultural differences.

4.3. The Cultural and Cognitive Drivers Behind Similarities and Differences between “Red” and “Hong”

4.3.1. Similarities

The similarities mainly stem from consistent human physiological and psychological structures and the integration of cross-cultural communication.

Both “red” and “hóng” refer to the color of blood or flame, which essentially reflects people’s instinctive responses to the visual salience and physiological relevance of red. From a visual physiological perspective, red-with the longest wavelength and strongest penetration in the visible spectrum-is rapidly detected by human retinal cones. This salience, combined with humans’ danger-avoidance instinct, drives the mapping of “red” to safety warning symbols, such as global traffic red lights and red for fire engines or extinguishers. “Red” has become a universal marker of high-standard ceremonies, such as “red carpet ceremonies”. From Chi-

nese award shows and national conference receptions to Western events like the Oscars and royal engagements, “red carpet” symbolizes the utmost respect for those in attendance.

When people experience intense emotions, they exhibit physiological changes such as facial blood vessel dilation or blushing and increased body temperature. The red color of blood or flame is naturally associated with the high temperature and intensity of these physical states. This link between physiological response and color attribute leads both English and Chinese to use “red” as a metaphor for intense emotions. Phrases like “red with rage” and “气红了脸” both use “red” to visualize the physiological expression of anger. “Red-hot passion” and “热恋中的红玫瑰” extend the intensity of emotion through red of flame. Both follow the cognitive path of “physiological response-color symbol-abstract emotion”.

In addition, the integration between different cultures is another vital factor. “Red” is mostly derogatory, but sometimes it also indicates joy and festivity. “A red-letter day” means a happy day, “paint the town red” describes an orgy, “roll the red carpet for sb.” means warmly welcome sb. Similarly, “hóng” is mostly commendatory. Nevertheless, due to the influence of English culture, “风化区” means “weathering district”.

4.3.2. Differences

The differences mainly stem from disparate historical productive civilization, religious culture, political culture, as well as etiquette and customary culture.

As descendants of the Yan and Huang Emperors, the Chinese associate “Yan” with “red”, a connection deeply rooted in the dependence of agrarian civilization on sun or flame for survival. The core of agrarian civilization is crop harvest and disaster prevention, and “red” is associated with the sun (providing light) and flame (providing warmth). In ancient times, red artifacts were used as sacrificial offerings in Sun God worship, because people believed that red could please the Sun God and bring harvest. People hang red lanterns and paste red couplets during the Spring Festival to pray for a bumper harvest in the coming year. The cognition of “red” gradually evolved into the metaphor of auspiciousness. “红包” symbolizes prosperity in the coming year. “红双喜” symbolizes happy marriage.

By contrast, Western “red wariness” originates from nomadic and industrial civilizations, where red is cognitively linked to blood and danger. In medieval Europe, nomadic peoples relied on hunting for survival, and “red” was the color of animal blood, associated with killing and danger. In bullfighting culture, red cloth can provoke bulls, further reinforcing the cognition of red equaling to danger. “The red rules of tooth and claw” refers to the law of the jungle characterized by violence. Before the Industrial Revolution, red dyes were cheap and commonly used by common people (nobles preferred expensive colors like purple and blue), leading “red” to be associated with lower-class commoners. “Redneck” (a derogatory term referring to conservative rural residents in the southern US) contrasts sharply with “红人” (a term referring to someone who is valued and influential), essentially reflecting the shaping of red cognition by social stratum culture.

In Chinese Buddhism, red is a symbol of spiritual practice and sacredness. The red walls of Buddhist temples symbolize the solemnity of Buddhist dharma. This cognition of red equaling to sacredness, combined with “红尘” (the mundane world), allowing “hóng” to be associated with both the vibrancy of the mundane world (e.g., “滚滚红尘” refers to the bustling life of the world) and the piety of the sacred (e.g., “红山佛国” refers to a Buddhist sacred site), further consolidating its commendatory tendency.

In western Christian classics and legends, red is mostly associated with betrayal and bloodshed. Judas, who betrayed Jesus, is often depicted wearing a red robe in religious paintings, making red equal to betrayal. “As red as Judas” refers to being as evil as Judas. Christianity holds that the blood of Christ’s crucifixion is the price of redemption, but this has more often been extended to violence and suffering. “Red martyr” refers to martyrs killed for their faith, emphasizing bloody sacrifice. This contrasts with “红军烈士”, emphasizing glorious dedication. This essentially reflect different cultural interpretations of religious symbols.

During the 20th-century Chinese revolution, “red” was endowed with symbolic meanings of the spark of revolution and class unity. “红旗” symbolizes revolutionary ideals. “红军” symbolizes progressive forces. “又红又专” became an evaluation standard for ideological correctness plus professional competence. This cognition was continuously strengthened through education system (red-themed textbooks and red-themed study tours in primary and secondary schools) and public spaces (red memorial halls, street names like “红旗路”), making “red” a synonym for patriotism and progress and even extending to modern “red tourism”.

After the early 20th-century “Red Scare” in the US (fear of communism), “red” in political contexts was mostly associated with radicalism and danger. “Red revolution” (referring to left-wing revolutions) is often accompanied by implications of instability and violence in media coverage. Although “red states” in the US (states that support the Republican Party) have no explicit derogatory meaning, the political symbolic meaning of “red” has deviated from ideological progressiveness and become merely a party identifier (corresponding to “blue states”). This cognitive difference reflects the long-term impact of political historical trauma on cultural cognition.

There are differences between the Chinese and English nations in terms of wedding customs, festival customs, daily communication etiquette and so on.

In traditional Chinese weddings, “hóng” is the undisputed centerpiece, infusing every aspect of the wedding. Brides wear “red wedding dresses” (adorned with phoenix motifs and red silk), a tradition rooted in the ancient belief that “red wards off evil”. Ancient Chinese believed red could dispel malevolent spirits and protect the couple’s marriage from supernatural interference. “红双喜” characters (written on red paper) are pasted in the bridal chamber, conveying the wish for a lifelong partnership. Red curtains are hung, symbolizing marital harmony and festivity. The couple drinks “cross-cupped wine” from red cups, and elders present

the newlyweds with “red envelopes”. These all carry the meaning of conveying family blessings and praying for the couple’s life to be prosperous and thriving.

The dominant colors in traditional Western weddings are white (symbolizing purity) and blue (symbolizing fidelity). Red roses may occasionally be used to symbolize passionate love, but their meaning is limited to emotional expression—they have no connection to marital longevity or evil-warding. In medieval Europe, red was associated with sex workers who often wore red dresses to attract clients, making red seen as impolite in weddings and even avoided. Some Western religious weddings (e.g., Catholic ceremonies) explicitly prohibit red attire, viewing it as excessively ostentatious and a violation of the religious etiquette of humility. This rejection of red in Western weddings stems from the Christian cultural logic that white symbolizes holiness and purity, a direct contrast to the Chinese belief that red brings auspiciousness and wards off evil.

In Chinese traditional festivals, “hóng” is an indispensable symbol of blessing. During the spring festival, beyond red lanterns and couplets, families also display “red paper cuttings” (carved with auspicious patterns like “福” (blessing) and “鱼” (fish)), symbolizing prayers for prosperity in the new year. Children wear “red waistbands” to ward off evil and ensure safety. Red acts as the core medium for dispelling misfortune of the old year and welcoming good luck of the new year. During the lantern festival, red lanterns (with candles inside) are hung to illuminate the future and dispel darkness, while “red lantern riddles” (written on red paper) are solved, combining festivity with wisdom and symbolizing prayers for a smooth year. The core logic of using “hóng” in Chinese festivals is to leverage “the association of red with life-giving symbols (the sun, fire)” to fulfill the folk need of “seeking blessings and warding off disasters.”

In Western traditional festivals, “red” plays a marginal role. During Christmas, red elements (e.g., Santa’s red suit, red stockings) originated from Coca-Cola’s advertising in the 20th century. They had no place in original Christmas folklore. Today, they only serve to embellish the atmosphere and carry no blessing connotations. The core color of Easter is pastel hues (e.g., dyed eggs, colorful flowers), symbolizing rebirth. Red is entirely absent, as Christianity associates it with the blood of Jesus’ crucifixion—a meaning incompatible with festive theme of resurrection. The dominant colors of Halloween are black (symbolizing witches or ghosts) and orange (symbolizing pumpkins). Red occasionally appears in bloody decorations (e.g. red ghost masks), but only to evoke horror.

In Chinese, “hóng” acts as a positive medium in daily etiquette, with its use centered on emotional transmission and financial wishes. During the spring festival, “red envelopes” are given to children. “Blessing red envelopes” are presented for occasions like birthdays, college admission, or housewarmings. These carry the meaning of conveying the elders’ care and praying for the recipient’s safety and good luck. Stores hold “red silk-cutting ceremonies” at openings because red silk symbolizes a prosperous start and the shopkeeper prays for profit. People bring “red apples” when visiting patients, symbolizing health and safety and avoid

white which is associated with funerals.

In English, “red” mostly functions as a warning symbol in daily etiquette and is even tied to taboos. “In the red” and “red ink” trace back to medieval European merchants. Profits were logged in black ink and losses in red. Today, these terms universally mean financial crisis. In some Western cultures (e.g., South Africa, Germany), red is considered a mourning color, and giving red gifts is seen as disrespectful.

4.3.3. Summary

The similarities between “red” and “hóng” stem from consistent human physiological and psychological structures and the integration of cross-cultural communication. Their differences arise from Sino-Western divergences in production modes, religions, political history, and folk needs, causing semantic shift from core overlap to peripheral differentiation. In short, “red” is a universal physiological symbol, while culture enables its personalized interpretations.

5. Conclusion

This study integrates three theories. Basic Color Term Theory serves to identify “red” and “hóng” as cross-linguistically universal basic color terms, thereby laying the foundation for comparison. Through Conceptual Metaphor Theory, their mapping from prototypical domain to abstract domains is analyzed. With Cultural Cognitive Linguistics as the core, the reasons for similarities and differences in their semantic and metaphorical mechanisms are elucidated from a cultural-cognitive perspective. These three theories are integrated hierarchically, not only constructing a complete analytical framework but also highlighting the necessity of multi-theory integration for color term research.

Corpus retrieval from the aforementioned corpora yields following results. “Red” and “hóng” share common semantic extensions, including emotions, love, warning, war, rescue and festivity. However, their semantic connotations diverge entirely in economic and political domains. “Red” carries unique semantic meanings, such as licentiousness and bureaucracy, while “hóng” has distinct connotations like femininity, popularity, and loyalty. Overall, “red” bears more negative connotations, whereas “hóng” is predominantly positive.

With respect to diachronic evolution, in the early stages, neither term carried extended symbolism, functioning solely as concrete color descriptors. As cultures and societies developed, their semantics transcended pure color category and accumulated cultural associations. In modern times, the semantics of both terms have integrated practical functions of contemporary society. Key differences in their diachronic evolution lie in three aspects: semantic tendency, core symbolic status and evolutionary driving forces.

Regarding metaphorical mechanisms of “red” and “hóng”, their commonalities lie in the fact that both take objective attributes of “red” as starting point, follow the mapping logic of “from the concrete to the abstract”, and center on attribute-associated mapping. Their differences stem from culture-specific divergent map-

ping paths, originating from unique historical events, social systems, and folk traditions in Chinese and English, leading to entirely distinct mapping paths in domain-specific areas. Additionally, “red” and “hóng” each exhibit language-specific unique mappings that are not shared across two languages.

This paper also analyzes cultural and cognitive motivations behind above-mentioned similarities and differences. The similarities stem from shared physiological and psychological perceptions of Chinese and English nations as well as cross-cultural integration. The differences result from disparities in productive civilizations, religious cultures, political and historical cultures, as well as etiquette and folk cultures between two nations.

This study can reduce semantic conflicts in cross-cultural communication and provide practical references for the integration of cultural dimensions in language teaching and the contextual adaptation in translation. In terms of language teaching, teaching can be designed by integrating the semantic differences and distinct metaphorical mechanisms between “hóng” and “red”, along with cultural backgrounds and specific contexts. This helps learners understand culture-specific meanings and avoid semantic misunderstandings. In translation practice, culture-specific expressions (e.g., “红双喜”, “红色教育”) require cultural annotations, while cross-culturally consensual expressions (e.g., “Red Cross”) can be translated literally.

6. Limitations

There are two main limitations. First, the corpus focuses on standard English as well as Mandarin, excluding their dialects, which limits the generalizability of the conclusions to language variants. Second, while anchored in corpus data, qualitative metaphor analysis involves potential biases in subjective interpretations, requiring further validation through subsequent studies.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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