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Metaphor in culture: LIFE IS A SHOW in Chinese

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Abstract: This study analyzes the linguistic patterns via both qualitative and quantitative data that manifest the underlying conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A SHOW in Chinese. It starts with an analysis of the PERFORMING ARTS frame as the source domain of the SHOW metaphor. The frame comprises three major aspects: PEOPLE, PERFORMANCE, and VENUE, and each of them has a focal element, respectively ROLE, OPERA, and STAGE. It argues that the second one, OPERA, which refers to “Chinese opera”, a prominent form of performing arts in traditional Chinese culture, is the central element that dominates the whole frame. A systematic qualitative analysis of linguistic data shows that, because its source domain centers on CHINESE OPERA, the LIFE IS A SHOW metaphor generates a large number of culture-specific linguistic instantiations in Chinese. A quantitative perspective supported by corpus data reinforces the argument that this metaphor plays a central role in the Chinese conceptualization of events and phenomena in various domains of life, constituting a core component of the Chinese cultural model of life. The study concludes that the SHOW metaphor has a salient subversion LIFE IS AN OPERA in Chinese, in contrast with its sister LIFE IS A PLAY found salient in English.

Keywords: conceptual frame, conceptual domain, conceptual metaphor, cultural model, LIFE IS A SHOW, Chinese

1 Introduction

According to the conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) of cognitive linguistics (see, e.g., Fusaroli and Morgagni 2013; Gibbs 1994, 2008; Gibbs and Steen 1999; Johnson 1987; Kövecses 2005, 2010, 2015; Lakoff 1987, 1993; Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999; see also Gibbs 2011, 2013, 2014 for evaluations of the theory), alternative conceptualizations can be achieved via different source concepts mapped

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metaphorically onto the same target concept. Systematic metaphor analyses with respect to which source concepts are central in their mappings onto a particular target in different languages can provide reliable clues for discovering how different cultures conceptualize their experiences, leading us toward the understanding of such important issues as cognitive universality and cultural variation (Kövecses 2005, 2015). For example, Kövecses (2005) argues that *LIFE IS A SHOW*, which is located at one level higher than that of *LIFE IS A PLAY* and *LIFE IS A MOVIE*, is a central or foundational metaphor that lies at the heart of American culture. While cultures may be characterized by certain central metaphors, systematic studies of such metaphors and their lower-level versions can help us gain insights into the worldview of a culture and, in that respect, commonalities and differences across cultures.

The concept *LIFE* has many facets to it: a particular living being or living beings in general, the active force that makes living beings alive, the state or period of living, a way or manner of living, the activity or spirit that constitutes the living existence, the living existence as social life and relationships, and so on. Its applicability ranges from the micro level of individual plants, animals or humans to the macro level of organizations, nations or societies. For this reason, *LIFE* is understood metaphorically via a variety of source concepts: *PRECIOUS POSSESSION*, *FIRE*, *LIGHT*, *DAY*, *JOURNEY*, *GAME*, *WAR*, *STORY*, *PLAY* or *SHOW*, among others (Kövecses 2005, 2010).

This is a cognitive-semantic study of the conceptual metaphor *LIFE IS A SHOW* as manifested systematically in the Chinese language. It focuses on a salient phenomenon in Chinese where linguistic expressions of performing arts are used metaphorically to denote various other aspects of life. According to CMT, such expressions constitute systematic linguistic instantiations of the underlying metaphorical mappings across conceptual domains. In the case under discussion, the source domain is *PERFORMING ARTS*, or *SHOW* for short, and the target domain is other events or phenomena of life in general. The conceptual mappings can be summarized by a conceptual metaphor *LIFE IS A SHOW*, as is instantiated in (1) below:¹

- (1) a. 人生如**戏**，每个人都有固定的**角色** 如果某个人不再继续**扮演他的角色**，那整台**戏**就垮了。

‘Life is an **opera**, in which everyone has a fixed **role**. If someone should stop playing his/her **role**, then the whole **opera** would collapse.’

¹ In this paper we disregard the difference between metaphor and simile in traditional terms. Both are seen as linguistic instantiations of underlying conceptual mappings from a source to a target domain. In rendering the data, English translations, more literal on purpose, are provided below the originals in Chinese characters. The relevant parts are highlighted in bold.

- b. 人生如戏, 被动去演, 你就是受折磨, 自己导演, 你就是在享受, 你可以去体验各种角色。
 ‘Life is an **opera**; if you **perform** passively, you are suffering; if you serve as your own **director**, you are enjoying, and you can experience a variety of **roles**.’
- c. 人生如戏, 全靠演技。
 ‘Life is an **opera**, in which one relies entirely on one’s **acting skills**.’

In all three examples, the conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A SHOW is linguistically instantiated, in the context of Chinese culture, as “Life is an opera”, where “opera” refers to Chinese opera, represented by its prototype Beijing opera. Example (1a) emphasizes the importance for people to “play their own roles” because the social life, or the “opera”, as a whole depends on individual collaborative “parts” contributed by the people in that society. Example (1b), however, puts more emphasis on individual initiative in life. Now that life is an “opera”, it is important that you be your own “director” so that you can enjoy playing various “roles” in life. As in (1c), people leading their life as an opera are “actors” and “actresses” whose “acting skills” are of utter importance for their success or survival in this “show business”.²

In this paper we attempt to conduct a systematic analysis of the linguistic manifestation of the LIFE IS A SHOW metaphor in Chinese. Our data come from natural discourses, of which a major source is DW News (www.dwnews.com), a US-based Chinese language news net, and the CCL corpus (Center for Chinese Linguistics) at Peking University. Our goal is to unveil the intricate and complex pattern in which linguistic expressions instantiate the underlying metaphorical mappings. In what follows, we first contextualize our study in Section 2 in terms of conceptual frame as a coherent region of human knowledge with a system of concepts related in such a way that any one of them has to be understood in relation to the whole structure in which it fits (Croft and Cruse 2004; Fillmore 1975). We will provide, to the extent relevant to this study, a delineation of the PERFORMING ARTS frame in the context of Chinese culture. The PERFORMING ARTS frame serves as the source domain of the LIFE IS A SHOW metaphor, which maps SHOW, the source, onto the target LIFE in general. In Section 3, we enter into a systematic

2 In fact, 人生如戏 *rénshēng rú xì* ‘life is an opera’ in the three examples is a crystalized motto-like expression of a Chinese view of, or attitude toward, life, filled with cultural values in the Chinese context. As such, it is a popular theme in Chinese visual art (Chinese painting, calligraphy, and photography). See the Appendix for some examples of such artistic forms, collected from a Google search for “images for 人生如戏”. They constitute multimodal (visual, verbal, and calligraphic) realizations of “life is an opera” as cultural artifacts. There, Chinese brush paintings and photographic images, accompanied by calligraphic writings, feature various role types in Chinese opera.

analysis of linguistic data within the framework set up in Section 2. We then further our study with some quantitative analysis of the corpus data in Section 4. Section 5 is our conclusion.

2 The PERFORMING ARTS frame in the Chinese context

The source domain of the LIFE IS A SHOW metaphor is the performing arts, i. e., “art forms in which artists use their body or voice to convey artistic expression” (Wikipedia). As a generic or superordinate category, PERFORMING ARTS evokes in our conceptual system a complex frame consisting of three aspects: PEOPLE, PERFORMANCE, and VENUE.

As a form of social activity, the performing arts always involve people. The people involved in such an event can be divided into two groups: the producing and receiving groups. The interaction between the two, typically the latter’s reception of the former’s production, constitutes the essence of a performing arts event. While the latter as a group is called the “audience”, the former is much more complex. In general, the producing group can be divided into two subgroups: the performers, who perform artistically on the stage, directly watched by the audience; all “others” who contribute to the performance off the stage, in one way or another. The list of other contributors includes director, musical accompanist group, backstage staff, etc. Undoubtedly, the most salient element in PEOPLE IS PERFORMER, consisting of those who act artistically on the stage, namely actors and actresses.

What actors and actresses do is performing. The aspect of PERFORMANCE can be divided into two sorts: the “types of performance”, which may include opera, theatrical play, music, and dance, and the “acts of performance”, which performers carry out bodily, vocally, or by playing musical instruments. Artists’ performance is always carried out in a place. The aspect of VENUE refers to the physical setting of the performance, which typically takes the form of a facility known as a theater. Parallel to the division of PRODUCER and RECEIVER of a performance, a theater can be divided into two main parts: the viewing and performing quarters. The former consists of the audience’s seats whereas the latter centers on the stage, which is the locus of performance by the artists and the focus of attention from the audience.

The above characterization of the PERFORMING ARTS frame is summarized in Table 1. It is worth noting that, in the context of Chinese culture, the three elements highlighted by bold, i. e., PERFORMER, OPERA, and STAGE, are the most salient conceptual elements in their respective aspects. They are therefore three “focal points” among all elements in the frame. It is perhaps true of all cultures where the performing arts exist that PERFORMER and STAGE (or its equivalent) are the two most salient elements in the PERFORMING ARTS frame. In any

Table 1: Major components of the PERFORMING ARTS frame.

PERFORMING ARTS					
PEOPLE		PERFORMANCE		VENUE	
PRODUCER	RECEIVER	TYPES	ACTS	PERFORMING	VIEWING
PERFORMER	AUDIENCE	OPERA	BODY	STAGE	AUDIENCE'S SEATS
DIRECTOR		PLAY	VOICE	BACKSTAGE	
PLAYWRIGHT		DANCE	INSTRUMENT	LIGHTING CONTROL	
...		MUSIC		...	
		...			

performing event, performers, especially leading performers, are naturally the focus of attention. Since they perform on the stage, it is also natural that the stage is the focus of attention in a theatrical setting. However, we must stress that the selection of OPERA as the prototype among various types of PERFORMING ARTS as a superordinate category is unique to Chinese culture because by “opera” we really mean all the traditional varieties of Chinese folk opera, or “Chinese opera” (戏剧 *xìjù* or 戏曲 *xìqǔ*) as a cover term.

Chinese opera has a long history of over two thousand years. It is said that it originated in the Qin (221–206 BC) and Han (206 BC–220 AD) dynasties, took shape in Sui (581–618) and Tang (618–907) dynasties, and reached its mature form in Song (960–1279) and Yuan (1279–1368) dynasties (Gao 2005). In traditional Chinese culture, Chinese opera is regarded as the “national entertainment” (国娱 *guóyú*), enjoying tremendous popularity among aristocrats and commoners alike (Zhang 1998: 3). It has as many as around 360 regional varieties, with Beijing opera as the prototype or best example. A national icon, Beijing opera is called a “national treasure” (国粹 *guócuì*), contributing enormously to “feelings of a shared Chinese identity” (Mackerras 1997: 21). In contemporary China, however, Chinese opera, Beijing opera included, has declined gravely in popularity, under the increasing impact and pressure from popular culture and modern media. “Nevertheless, opera-related concepts and conceptualizations have long been deeply rooted in cultural cognition of the Chinese, having invaded and penetrated other conceptual domains” (Yu 2011a: 618). Our focal argument for this study is that OPERA (i. e., Chinese opera) is *the* central element that dominates the PERFORMING ARTS frame as the source domain of the LIFE IS A SHOW metaphor. Therefore, it has the privilege and priority in setting “Chinese opera” as the default performance type in a neutral context.

Following on Table 1, Table 2 summarizes the opera-centered PERFORMING ARTS frame in Chinese culture, focusing on PERFORMANCE, i. e., PERFORMER in PEOPLE and STAGE in VENUE.

Table 2: Chinese opera-centered PERFORMING ARTS frame focused on PERFORMANCE.

Chinese Opera-Centered PERFORMING ARTS Frame			
PERFORMER		OPERA	STAGE
Role prominence	Role type	Opera variety	Stage component
Leading role	Male role (生 <i>shēng</i>)	Beijing opera (<i>jīngjù</i>)	Platform
Supporting role	Female role (旦 <i>dàn</i>)	Henan opera (<i>yùjù</i>)	Curtain
	Painted-face role (净 <i>jìng</i>)	Shaoxing opera (<i>yuèjù</i>)	Background
	Middle-aged man role (末 <i>mò</i>)	Cantonese opera (<i>yuèjù</i>)	Prop
	Clown role (丑 <i>chǒu</i>)	Kun opera (<i>kūnqū</i>)	Lighting
		Sichuan opera (<i>chuānjù</i>)	...
		...	

As shown in Table 2, the role types in Chinese opera have their special names. Each type is also classified into subtypes according to the roles' gender, age, and character, as is characterized by their special facial makeups and costumes. In modern Chinese opera, the type of *mò*, which usually refers to the role of a middle-aged man, is merged into *shēng* 'male role' and regarded as a subtype of the latter, thus resulting in the four basic types. In everyday expression, however, it is still retained as a distinct type. The stage, as in Table 2, consists of a few components: an elevated platform, curtains, backgrounds, props, etc., of which the first two are more salient.

In sum, with the help of Table 2 we want to show that the Chinese frame of PERFORMING ARTS typically centers on Chinese opera. Such a frame is obviously specific to Chinese culture, constituting the core of the Chinese cultural model of performing arts. More importantly, serving as a source domain of metaphorical mapping, this conceptual frame also constitutes a vital part of the Chinese cultural model of various phenomena and events of life in general. In the next section, we will unveil the complex pattern of linguistic expressions that manifest the underlying LIFE IS A SHOW metaphor in Chinese.

3 Linguistic expressions in a complex pattern

3.1 The framework of metaphorical mappings

The conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A SHOW could be, presumably, found in different languages and cultures. What is special to Chinese is, however, the rich

expression and complex pattern in which this conceptual metaphor is manifested in the language. Furthermore, as already suggested, the linguistic manifestation centers on Chinese opera, the dominant performing artistic form in traditional Chinese culture, although this metaphorical mapping expands to other types of performing arts as well, drawing on a rich array of source concepts. In this section, we attempt to analyze the patterns of Chinese expression manifesting the metaphor. We cite many examples from online sources other than the CCL corpus mainly because the former are found in recent discourses on current real-life issues and affairs, and for that matter are more “relevant” to the immediate life surrounding us. We want to highlight in this way the fact that the metaphor under discussion is one of the “metaphors we live by” in real life. In the next section, when we switch to a quantitative analysis, we will limit ourselves to the data from the CCL corpus only. Before going into details, we first lay out an outline of conceptual mappings involved under the LIFE IS A SHOW metaphor, thus constructing a framework to which details can be added.

(2) The source and target of the LIFE IS A SHOW metaphor

2A PEOPLE

- a. PLAYWRIGHT → PLANNER OF EVENTS
- b. DIRECTOR → COMMANDER OF EVENTS
- c. PERFORMER → PARTICIPANT IN EVENTS
- d. ROLE OF PERFORMER → FUNCTION OF PARTICIPANT
- e. AUDIENCE → OBSERVER OF EVENTS

2B PERFORMANCE

- a. SCRIPTS → PLANS/REGULATIONS OF EVENTS
- b. REHEARSALS → PREPARATIONS FOR EVENTS
- c. OPERAS → EVENTS
- d. PLOTS → CONTENTS AND PROCESSES OF EVENTS
- e. ACTS OF PERFORMANCE → ACTIONS OF PARTICIPANTS

2C VENUE

- a. STAGE → CONTEXT OF EVENTS
- b. CURTAINS → BEGINNING/ENDING OR PUBLICITY CONTROL OF EVENTS
- c. LIGHTING → ATTENTION
- d. SEATS → STATUS OF OBSERVERS

This list presents some of the entailments or inference patterns of the LIFE IS A SHOW metaphor with systematic mappings from the source to the target domain.

In the following three subsections we will focus on each of the three sections of the list, although the three components cannot be separated from one another in actual linguistic expressions.

3.2 PEOPLE in and for the show

It is worth pointing out at this juncture that *PEOPLE* here refers to all those involved in a performing arts event in our conceptual frame. When this frame serves as the source domain of *LIFE IS A SHOW*, *PEOPLE* can be instantiated by real people or not, depending on the context of metaphor. If it is not real people, we have a case of personification, by which nonhumans are conceptualized as humans, as part of the basic and extended Great Chain Metaphor system (e. g., Kövecses 2010; Lakoff and Turner 1989; Musolff 2005). First, look at the examples in (3):

- (3) a. 无可置疑, 美国是各种地区多边安全平台的“编剧”、“导演”和“主角”。
 ‘Without doubt, the U.S. is the “**playwright**”, “**director**”, and “**leading role**” on the various multilateral security platforms.’
- b. 美国难以兼任世界舞台演员和导演。
 ‘The U.S. can hardly remain an **actor** and a **director** concurrently on the **world stage**.’
- c. 政客实际上都是人生舞台的戏子。
 ‘Politicians, actually, are all **opera performers** on the **stage of life**.’

In (3a) the U.S., the sole superpower in the post-Cold-War era, is said to be playing a three-in-one role, simultaneously functioning as “playwright”, “director”, and “leading role” in dealing with security issues of the world. That is, the U.S. is perceived as the world leader in formulating, implementing, and enacting the rules and regulations regarding security issues. Example (3b) presents a different perception of the “roles” that the U.S. plays in current international politics: it can no longer be the “director” of the show as well as an “actor” in the show at the same time. In (3c), *xìzǐ* (lit. ‘opera person/child’) is a derogatory term for Chinese opera performers, used especially in old times when they were taken by the nobles as their servants for entertainment and amusement. When used as the source concept in the *LIFE IS A SHOW* metaphor, it reflects this traditional value and underscores a negative attitude toward politicians as “lowly performers” on the “stage of life”.

Performers are people in the show business who play roles in specific shows. “Roles” in the show are the focus of the following examples.

- (4) a. 中国过去是世界政治舞台上的“群众演员”，冷战时期成了“配角”，今天进一步成为“主角”之一。
 ‘China used to be an “**extra**” on the **political stage of the world**, became a “**supporting role**” during the Cold War, and has further changed into one of the “**leading roles**” today.’
- b. 要当主角先要从龙套做起，即使是龙套也要准备好有一天当主角。
 ‘In order to play a **leading role** one has to start from a **walk-on part** (lit. **dragon-robe part**). Even if one plays a **walk-on part**, one should get ready for a **leading role** someday.’
- c. 这是一个巨大的舞台，在这个舞台上，每个人或大或小地扮演着一些角色。可正是因为这出戏过于华丽，很容易让本来不过是场务、龙套的你产生错觉，以为自己是主角是导演是制片。
 ‘This is a gigantic **stage**, on which everyone is **playing some roles**, big or small. It is just because this **opera** is so magnificent that it makes you – a mere **studio assistant** or **walk-on part** (lit. **dragon-robe part**) – feel as if you were the **leading role** or the **director** or the **film producer**.’

Example (4a) describes China’s rise on the “political stage of the world” from an “extra” to a “supporting role” to a “leading role” in the past decades. The Chinese counterpart for “extra” literally means a “mass actor/actress”, i. e., “actors and actresses appearing in masses”. It is a term usually used for films. An opera jargon is found in (4b), where *lóngtào* (lit. ‘dragon robe’) refers to the “costume with dragon designs worn by actors playing a walk-on part in Chinese opera”, but by metonymic extension it also refers to an actor playing such a part (Wu and Cheng 2004: 1002). Example (4c) describes the situation in which some people may become confused about their real “roles” in life simply because they are involved, one way or another, in a “big opera” performed on a “big stage”. They may have an illusion that they were playing a “big role” when in fact having a “small part”. Apparently, it contains a “mixed metaphor” that inserts film elements (film producer, studio assistant) into the context of Chinese opera represented metonymically by the “dragon-robe” part. It is worth mentioning that this example, in effect, involves two conceptual metaphors: LIFE IS A SHOW and IMPORTANT IS BIG. The second one is a primary metaphor that involves a simple mapping from sensorimotor experience (SIZE) onto subjective experience and judgment (IMPORTANCE) (see, e. g., Grady 1997a, 1997b; Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 2003; Yu 2011a, 2011b, 2015).

Other types of roles in Chinese opera also appear metaphorically in everyday expressions. Given in (5) are some examples.

- (5) a. 在前几轮比赛中, 常昊战胜了古力、胡耀宇等“当红小生”。
 ‘In the first few rounds of games, Chang Hao defeated such “extremely popular **young male roles**” as Gu Li and Hu Yaoyu.’
- b. 上海轻工行业遵循市场对商品“喜新厌旧”的规律, 已经使所有“当家花旦”“旧貌”换“新颜”。
 ‘Shanghai’s light industry follows the market law of “liking the new and disliking the old” in commodity demand, having made all of its “**master female roles**” change looks (by replacing their old faces with new faces).’
- c. 从严治军有时会得罪人, 但如果需要, 我来唱黑脸。
 ‘To be strict in military discipline can sometimes give offence, but if so needed, I will be the one to **play** (lit. ‘sing’) **the black-face**.’
- d. 美欧对俄态度不一, 又打又拉唱尽红白脸。
 ‘The U.S. and Europe exhibited different attitudes toward Russia, pushing and pulling it simultaneously, and **playing** (lit. ‘singing’) both the **red-face** and the **white-face** to fullness.’
- e. 本想弄个高学位为自己脸上贴金, 结果露了马脚, 成了丑角。
 ‘He thought he would cover his face with gold foil (i. e., prettify himself) by getting a high academic degree, but he betrayed himself and turned himself into a **clown role**.’

The roles mentioned here all fall into the basic role types of Chinese opera in Table 2. Example (5a) refers to the chess game of go, very popular in East Asia. The young male chess players with national fame are referred to with an opera jargon, as “extremely popular young male roles”. Example (5b) is interesting in that the opera role is deployed not for people in other walks of life, but products of light industry. The “master (flowery) female roles” refers to the top-quality, name-brand commodities that enjoy high popularity among consumers. Moreover, as consumer goods, they are attractive because of, among other things, their “beautiful looks” in design. That is why they are “female” rather than “male” even though the Chinese language does not distinguish gender among “things”. The opera terms in (5c) and (5d) belong to the role type of *jīng* ‘painted face’, also commonly called “flowery face”, because the face is painted with various colors. The stereotype is such that the “black-face” represents the role of a rough, fierce, and impartial man, the “red-face” the role of a hero, and the “white-face” the role of a villain. Thus, the Chinese saying that literally means “one sings the red-face while the other sings the white-face” actually means: “One coaxes while the other bullies”. It is believed that the cooperation between the two in a “complementary” manner is more effective in changing the behavior of the third party. Example (5d) characterizes the difference in attitude

between the U.S. and Europe in dealing with Russia with respect to the situations in Ukraine and Crimea.

At this point, we switch from producers to receivers. In Chinese, at least two words can mean “audience”: *guānzhòng* (lit. ‘viewing crowd’) and *kànkè* (lit. ‘watching guest’), the former being more commonly used than the latter.

- (6) a. 如果人生是**舞台**，她便是**戏台前**感应力最强的**观众**：崇拜**主角**，赞叹**布景**，期待**情节**。
 ‘If life is a **stage**, she is then the most responsive **audience** in front of this **opera stage**: idolizing the **leading roles**, marveling at the **setting**, and anticipating the **plots**.’
- b. 更为不幸的是，尽大多数人甚至连**舞台**的**边际**都未涉足，完全成了台下黑压压人头攒动中的一个**看客**。**看客**，成为了你人生**扮演的角色**。
 ‘More regrettably, the vast majority of people have never set foot even on the edge of the **stage**, merely being one in a black sea of bobbing heads of the **audience** below the **stage**. An **audience**, that becomes the **role** you **play** in your life.’
- c. 你既是**演员**，又是**观众**。你正在**演**那位**苦旦**，同时又是**苦旦**的**戏迷**。
 ‘You are both an **actress** and an **audience**. You are **playing** that **bitter female role**, but concurrently a **theater buff** chasing that **bitter female role**.’

In (6a), “she” enjoys being an “audience” rather than getting involved in the “opera” of life. In (6b), the vast majority of people remain as audience, and being an audience itself, however, is also a role, a role that one plays in one’s life. Example (6c) is a linguistic instantiation of the SUBJECT-SELF metaphor, by which a person is conceptualized as consisting of two parts, the Subject and the Self (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: Ch. 13). In this case, the person being addressed is both a “performer” and a “viewer” of the “show” of life.

In sum, this subsection on PEOPLE has shown that Chinese opera is the most salient performance type, with various role types and subtypes in Chinese opera engaged as source concepts in the mappings. We will show that this is the case with PERFORMANCE, TOO.

3.3 PERFORMANCE of the show

In this aspect, as mentioned above, OPERA, or Chinese opera with Beijing opera as its prototype, is the central concept, around which a great number of other concepts form a conceptual network. In fact, *xì* ‘opera’ should be regarded as

one of those cultural keywords, through which cultures can be studied and understood (Wierzbicka 1992, 1997). Such keywords offer invaluable insight into cultures because they embody and manifest core cultural values and serve as “clues to the different cultural universes associated with different languages” and as “significant evidence for cultural history” (Wierzbicka 1992: 63).³

In this subsection, we discuss examples involving source concepts related to PERFORMANCE. These source concepts are centered on, even though not limited to, Chinese opera.

- (7) a. 虽说人生如**戏**,但你可以选择**舞台和剧本**。一旦作出选择,就要好好地**演**。
‘Although we say that life is an **opera**, you still have a choice of the **stage** or **libretto**. Once the choice has been made, you should try your best when you **perform**.’
- b. 在他们看来,共和党保守派没有按照**剧本**来,也许有必要采取纠正措施。
‘To them, the Republican conservatives did not follow the **script**, and perhaps should be corrected with necessary measures taken.’
- c. 它曾是“**主角**”之一,现在已经退为“**配角**”,它在担心属于自己的**台词**越来越少。
‘It used to be one of the “**leading roles**”, but has been reduced to a “**supporting role**”. It is worried about getting fewer and fewer **lines in the script**.’
- d. 从欧洲到中东,普京抢奥巴马**戏份**。
‘From Europe to Middle East, Putin robbed Obama of his **opera share** (i. e., amount of performance in the show).’
- e. 常人眼中,如果说富豪的人生是一出引人的**剧目**,那么对于怀揣百亿的**主角**刘汉来说,庭审则成了他最后的“**公开演出**”。此间**剧情**,值得玩味。
‘If, in ordinary eyes, the life of the richest people is an engaging **program of operas**, for the billionaire Liu Han, the **leading role**, his court trial became his final “**public performance**”, of which the **plot** is well worth pondering.’

The first two examples in (7) contain “libretto” or “script”, which prescribes what performers do in a show like an opera or a play. Performers can choose what and where to act, but have to act the best they can (7a) following the script (7b). The script contains “actor’s lines”, which usually vary in quantity according to the “opera share” of the roles (7c and 7d). Example (7e) contains “program of operas or plays” and “plot”, among other things, both of which being related

³ For an extensive study of a Chinese cultural keyword, 心 *xīn* ‘heart’, see Yu (2009).

to librettos or scripts. This example is about a recent spotlighted trial of one of the richest people in China, who was charged with serious crimes.

- (8) a. 人生没有彩排的机会, 每时每刻都是在现场直播。
 ‘There is no opportunity for **rehearsal** in one’s life, with every moment of it being **live televised**.’
- b. 俄欧美都将乌克兰问题作为未来世界格局争势预演。
 ‘Russia, Europe, and the U.S. all consider the Ukrainian crisis as the **preview** of the future political competition in the world.’

In the case of an opera, the performers’ practices would lead to one or more formal “rehearsals” (8a), and sometimes there is also a “preview” (8b) by a special audience before it becomes available to the general public. Example (8a) also includes the element of television, the kind of mass media that makes it possible for an event to be watched live by people around the world. The nature of live television is such that there is no chance of editing anything “in the air”. Therefore, it means that life as a “show” without a chance for “rehearsal” gives the performers very little margin for error.

As a cultural keyword in Chinese, *xì* ‘opera’ can combine with various elements to form a rich array of collocations. One of them is *dàxì* (lit. ‘big opera’) ‘grand opera’, referring to full-length, full-scale Chinese operas, and sometimes also suggesting a magnificent level in cast, costumes, stage properties, etc. The three sentences in (9) are just examples containing it.

- (9) a. 政府鼓励他们从配角转变成主角, 自己搭台去领衔上演大戏。
 ‘The government encouraged them to switch from the **supporting roles** to the **leading roles**, and to **set up a stage** for themselves so that they could **star in grand operas**.’
- b. 作为2011年的开幕大戏, “胡奥会”吸引了全世界的关注。
 ‘As the **curtain-opening grand opera** of 2011, the meeting between Hu and Obama attracted the attention of the whole world.’
- c. 在亚洲安全的大舞台上出现了两台大戏, 一个是美国唱了多年的同盟大戏, 另一个就是中国与俄罗斯新开场的战略互信大戏。
 ‘Two **grand operas** appeared on the **big stage** of Asian security: one is the **grand opera** of alliance that the U.S. has been **performing** (lit. ‘**singing**’) for many years, and the other is the **grand opera** of strategic mutual trust which China and Russia have just **put on the stage**.’

Example (9a) is to be interpreted in the context of economic and political reform in China, where the government has imparted more autonomy and authority to

individual economic entities in order to tap their initiative for economic growth. In (9b), the “grand opera” refers to the event, widely perceived as significant at the time, of the meeting between President Hu of China and President Obama of the U.S. in the White House in 2011. The “grand opera” is modified by “curtain-opening” because this event took place in January, at the beginning of the year. Example (9c) invokes the image of two “grand operas” being performed simultaneously on one “big stage”, characterizing the strategic competition and tension that seems to be becoming more intense in the Asian-Pacific region in the past few years.

In Chinese, as shown in (9c) above, competition or confrontation between two sides can be conceptualized and expressed by evoking an image of two operas being performed simultaneously in close proximity to each other. In fact, an idiomatic expression in Chinese, *chàng duìtái xì* (lit. ‘sing operas on the two stages opposite to each other’), exactly expresses this meaning “to stage rival shows (against each other)”, as illustrated by (10a).

- (10) a. 其实奥巴马并不是真的要 and 北京唱对台戏。
 ‘Actually, Obama did not really want to **stage a rival show** against Beijing (lit. to **sing an opera on a stage opposite to** that of Beijing).’
- b. 第三次国内战争 (1945年到1949年), 国共两党唱对手戏。
 ‘In the third civil war (1945–1949), the Nationalist and Communist Parties **“sang the opposite-hand opera”** (i. e., fought each other as enemies).’
- c. 这个舞台不只是习一个人, 还有李与其同台搭戏。
 ‘This stage does not belong to Xi alone, and Li is **“building the opera on the same stage”** together with him (i. e., cooperating with him).’
- d. 奥巴马演戏米歇尔入戏。
 ‘Obama **put on the opera** and Michelle **entered into the opera** (i. e., played a role in it).’
- e. 习安会安倍欲唱主戏让中方敲边鼓。
 ‘With regard to the meeting between Xi and Abe, Abe wanted to **sing the major opera** while making the Chinese side **beat the side drum**.’

While rival competition is depicted as two operas being performed simultaneously on two stages right across from each other in (10a), (10b) characterizes a brutal war between two rival political parties as an opera in which two leading actors of equal caliber play roles of more or less equal importance in competition, as well as in cooperation, with each other. That is, “sing the opposite-hand opera” usually expresses the relationship of cooperative competition or competitive cooperation. Differently, “build an opera on the same stage” in (10c) stresses cooperation between the two, in this case, President Xi and Premier Li

of China. Both (10d) and (10e) are headlines of recent online news articles. The former is about the U.S. first lady's visit to China in spring 2014. It suggests a different kind of cooperation in which President Obama “puts on the opera” of diplomacy whereas the first lady “plays a part in it”. The latter is about a possible but uncertain meeting between President Xi of China and Prime Minister Abe of Japan at APEC to be held in Beijing in November 2014. What this headline means is that Abe wanted to “take center stage” while making Xi “a percussive accompanist off the stage” (cf. 12 below).

The examples in (11) contain expressions that indicate various parts of an opera.

- (11) a. 厂领导决心转变工作作风，**开台戏**就是领导干部值班实行三班倒。
 ‘The factory leaders were determined to change their work style; their **stage-opening opera** (i. e., the beginning part of the opera) is that all the leaders will be on duty on three-shift rotation.’
- b. 奥巴马访日是这次亚洲行的**重头戏**。
 ‘Obama’s visit to Japan is the **heavy-part opera** (i. e., the most important part) of his trip to Asia.’
- c. 要说副总理重返东风公司的**高潮戏**，恐怕还算是访问发动机厂的动人场景。
 ‘Speaking of the **climatic opera** of the vice premier’s return to the East Wind Corporate, perhaps it should be the touching scene of his visit to the motor engine factory.’
- d. 世界杯足球赛将在洛杉矶**降下帷幕**，意大利队和巴西队将在**压轴戏**中唱主角。
 ‘The World Cup will **lower its curtain** in Los Angeles, and Team Italy and Team Brazil will **play** (lit. ‘sing’) the **leading roles** in the **grand finale**.’

As a canonical sequence of an opera would unfold, the part of show with which the “stage is opened” is of vital importance to its success (11a). The “heavy-part opera” (11b) refers to an “important part of an activity” (IMPORTANT IS HEAVY). In Chinese, a commonly-used compound for “important” literally means “heavy and big” (重大 *zhòngdà*). As part of our knowledge, an opera should reach a “climax” before winding down to an end (11c). That “climatic part” may very well be the “grand finale” of the opera or the championship game of the World Cup (11d).

A salient component of Chinese opera is its use of the Chinese-style percussions, especially drums and gongs. This characteristic is also reflected in the linguistic expression of LIFE IS A SHOW, as exemplified in (12).

- (12) a. 目前乌克兰总统选举的准备工作正在**紧锣密鼓**地进行。
 ‘At present, the intense beating of gongs and drums (i. e., an intense publicity campaign) is going on in preparation for the Ukrainian presidential election.’
- b. 整风清党**大戏开锣**。
 ‘The **grand opera** to rectify incorrect work styles and to purify the party started with the **striking of the gong**.’
- c. 克里米亚的未来，普京已经写好了**剧本**，**演员**也已经到位，现在就等着**好戏开锣**。
 ‘For the future of Crimea, Putin has already written up a **script**, the **performers** have also arrived, and everything is ready for the **striking of the gong to start the good opera**.’
- d. 这里**撞响**了全方位开放的**开台锣鼓**，**拉开了**大规模开发建设的**帷幕**。
 ‘Here, the **stage-opening gongs and drums** are being **beaten** to start the opening in all directions, and the **stage curtains** are being **pulled apart** to start the large-scale development and construction.’

As a set pattern of Chinese opera, rapid beating of gongs and drums precedes the beginning of the show. Typically, the beating intensifies, leading to the parting of the stage curtains. The four examples above all tap into this frame as the source domain of the OPERA metaphor.

In the following group are examples that contain expressions indicating specific acts of performance in Chinese opera. They are all conventionalized linguistic instantiations of the OPERA metaphor.

- (13) a. 中国消费电子产品**亮相**美国大展。
 ‘China’s consumer electronic products **struck a pose** (i. e., made their debut) on a major U.S. exhibition.’
- b. 这项工作要注重实效，不能**走过场**。
 ‘We should emphasize practical results of the work instead of **reducing it to mere formality** (lit. ‘**merely crossing the stage**’).’
- c. 一个朋友凑上来打**圆场**：“别误会，他是在开玩笑呢。”
 ‘A friend came up to **mediate** (lit. ‘**do the round-the-stage walk**’): “Don’t get him wrong. He was just kidding.”’
- d. 美俄外交官联合国直面**叫板**。
 ‘The American and Russian diplomats **confronted each other** (lit. ‘**transitioned from speaking to singing**’) face-to-face at the U.N.’

In (13a), *liàngxiàng* (lit. ‘show face’) ‘strike a pose’ is a salient performing act in Chinese opera when a role, after getting onto the stage, would make a sudden

pose turning the face to the audience. Metaphorically, it refers to an impressive appearance in a significant venue understood as a “stage”. In (13b) *zǒu guòchǎng* originally refers to the scene in a Chinese opera where the performer simply crosses the stage from one end to the other without stopping. When extended into other domains metaphorically, it means “make a gesture to give impression of doing something”. The term *yuánchǎng* from Chinese opera refers to performers’ act of “walking in circles on the stage”, and in everyday usage it means “mediate a dispute” (13c). In (13d) *jiàobǎn* refers to a sort of “transition from a spoken to a singing part” in Chinese opera, but is used in everyday language to refer to verbal confrontation.

In the final part of this subsection we switch to the audience’s response to the performance, which is also reflected in the linguistic expression contributing to the conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A SHOW.

(14) a. 小说没出来, 捧场的文章就能先出来呢。

‘Essays **flattering** (lit. ‘**supporting** [a performer] **in the theater**’) a novel could have come out even before the novel itself comes out.’

b. 这也是世界对中国发出的喝彩, 因为永中是第一家应邀参加这个IT盛会的中国企业。

‘This is also the world’s **cheers** (lit. ‘**shout cheers**’) to China because Yongzhong is the first Chinese enterprise invited to this grand gathering in the IT field.’

c. 史学著作能一洗枯燥板涩的旧陈规, 代之而起新颖脱俗的亮相, 满堂彩当然会随之而来!

‘A history book was able to free itself from a conventionally dry and dull style, and instead **struck a pose** with a new and fresh look. **Full-house cheers** (i. e., cheers that fill the whole theater) would come with it for sure!’

d. 有的人出生在衣食无忧的名门, 一出场就是众星捧月的碰头彩。

‘Some people are born in eminent families free of worries about clothing and food, and encounter **instant cheers** (lit. ‘**bump-head cheers**’) upon **getting on the stage** (i. e., being born), like the moon being held up high by a crowd of stars.’

e. 领导干部尽说空话群众是要喝倒彩的。

‘If leaders and officials indulge in empty talks, the masses will **respond with boos** (lit. ‘**shout upside-down cheers**’).’

In (14a) *pěngchǎng* (lit. ‘scooping/holding up the theater in both hands’) originally refers to fans being present in a theater to show their support of a performer (by cheering and applauding, etc.) when the latter is performing. In this

example, the concept has extended into the domain of literature and literary criticism. The relevant expressions in (14b–e) originally refer to various kinds of reactions, vocal and gestural, from the audience in a traditional opera house when they are watching operas. In (14b) *hècǎi* (lit. ‘shout cheers’) refers to the audience’s cheering and applauding in response to what they feel as brilliant performances in Chinese opera. Such a response can be “full-house cheers” if they come from all the people in the audience (14c). This is when the brilliant performance “brings the house down”, as the English idiom goes. In (14d), *pèngtóucǎi* (lit. ‘bump-head cheers’) refers to the situation in which performers receive immediate cheering from the audience as soon as they get onto the stage with an impressive act. Such cheering “bumps the head” of the performer due to our “head-first” embodied experience. As (14d) shows, children born into eminent rich families are privileged to encounter “bump-head cheers” from the people surrounding them. Example (14e) contains the expression that refers to the audience’s negative response. In Chinese, “boos” are “upside-down cheers”.

This subsection has looked at various expressions that originate mostly from Chinese opera, whereas the focal point is the concept expressed by the overarching keyword *xì* ‘opera’. This keyword taps into an extremely rich frame of cultural knowledge of Chinese opera.

3.4 VENUE of the show

The last subsection turns attention to *VENUE*. As pointed out in Table 1, the center of the venue of performing arts is the stage, which is the locus of performance and focus of attention. It is around this center that the performing arts as social activities revolve. In fact, *STAGE* and others related to *VENUE* have occurred recurrently in the examples of the preceding subsections on *PEOPLE* and *PERFORMANCE*. This subsection will just make concepts related to *VENUE* the focus.

- (15) a. 我以为在人生的剧场演剧的人，比台上背剧本的玩意儿，不单是彻底许多，也艺术化许多了！
 ‘I believe that the people who **act in plays** in the **human-life theater** are not only a lot more realistic, but also a lot more artistic, than those who do the playful thing of reciting scripts on the stage.’
- b. 他们与北京市政府的领导接触，共同搭起经济技术洽谈会这座戏台。
 ‘They contacted the leaders of the municipal government of Beijing, and built with them an **opera stage** – the conference for business talks on economy and technology.’

- c. 人生舞台上往往穿插着悲喜剧的瞬间转换。
‘On the **life stage**, **tragedies** and **comedies** usually alternate, transforming into each other instantaneously.’
- d. 我国代表积极参加了联合国的各种活动, 活跃在这个最大的国际舞台上。
‘The representatives of our country actively partake in various activities of the U.N., getting involved vigorously on this **biggest international stage**.’

In (15a), which is quoted from a well-known modern Chinese writer, Shen Congwen, the source concept of THEATER is involved in relation to VENUE. In his opinion, people “performing” in the “life theater” are much more significant than those who literally act, reciting their lines from the script, on the stage. In contrast to (15a), the remaining examples contain the VENUE concept as STAGE represented by compound words that literally mean “opera stage” (15b), or “dance stage” (15c, d). On the “life stage” (15c), people act in a play that can swing instantaneously between comedy and tragedy. In (15d), there is a reference to the physical dimensions of the stage as the “biggest” in size. The “biggest” international stage is the “most important” one. The following examples involve spatial concepts of a different kind.

- (16) a. 未来亚太尤其是东亚地区将成为世界政治的**中心舞台**。
‘In the future, the Asian-Pacific region, especially the East Asian area, will become the **central stage** of the world politics.’
- b. 国际上成功的公司都将沟通策略置于经营**舞台中心位置**。
‘Successful corporates in the world all place communication tactics in the **central location** of the management **stage**.’
- c. 国际政治**舞台边缘**的杰出的政治人物, 再杰出也只能充当国际政治**舞台边缘**的“大群众”角色。
‘Those outstanding political figures on the **periphery** of the international political **stage**, no matter how outstanding they are, can merely fill up the **role** of “big masses” on the **periphery** of the international political **stage**.’

As can be seen from these examples, the abstract concept IMPORTANCE is metaphorically understood in terms of the CENTER-PERIPHERY image schema. The pair of primary metaphors at work is IMPORTANT IS CENTRAL and UNIMPORTANT IS PERIPHERAL. AS in (16c), the reality of international politics is such that individual political figures, regardless of how outstanding they are as individual politicians, can only play the role of “big” (i. e., IMPORTANT IS BIG) ordinary people as long as they are found in the periphery of the stage. This is determined by the pattern of international politics and the structure of international relations.

There is a wide variety of “stages” of life while life itself is conceptualized metaphorically as a “show”. Each kind of stage represents a particular domain of life, for instance, political stage, historical stage, social stage. These domains of life, abstract in nature, are conceptualized metaphorically as “bounded locations”, and more specifically as “stages” upon which events of life unfold and people in life act. After all, “stage” is a salient element metonymic for *xì* ‘Chinese opera’, which, as a cultural keyword, dominates the metaphorical conceptualization of many other target domains in Chinese.

- (17) a. 这届内阁刚登台,便面临垮台的危险。
 ‘No sooner had the new cabinet **come to power** (lit. ‘**mounted the stage**’) than it faced the danger of imminent **collapse** (lit. ‘**stage collapse**’).’
- b. 双方就敏感问题罕见地激烈交锋,从以前的幕后直接走向台前。
 ‘Both sides furiously confronted each other on sensitive issues in a manner rarely-seen before, having walked from **behind the curtains** directly to the **front stage**.’
- c. 国家无论大小、强弱、贫富,都应该做和平的维护者和促进者,不能这边搭台、那边拆台,而应该相互补台、好戏连台。
 ‘Nations, whether big or small, strong or weak, rich or poor, should be peace keepers and promoters. It should not happen that some of them are **building up stages** whereas others are **tearing them down** (i. e., counteract each other’s efforts); instead, they should **repair each other’s stages** (i. e., help each other out) so that **good operas will show in succession stage after stage** (i. e., one after another).’

The examples above all revolve around *STAGE*. The last one is quoted from a keynote speech by President Xi of China on the 2013 Boao Forum for Asia. He was promoting cooperation instead of counteraction so that everyone can benefit from virtuous interaction. The idea, however, is expressed in a Chinese way embracing the concepts of *OPERA* and *STAGE*.

Another salient component of the stage in a theater is the curtains, which are used to open and close an opera and the acts within it, and to control what the audience can and cannot see on the stage. The functions of curtain operation have already been touched upon above (e. g., 9b, 11d, 12d, 17b), and are further illustrated below.

- (18) a. 贸易保护战拉开序幕。
 ‘**The curtains** have been **pulled apart** for the **prelude** to the trade protection war.’

- b. 该文披露了他下台的内幕。
 ‘This article revealed the **inner curtains** (i. e., inside story) of his **stepping down from the stage** (i. e., being forced out of office).’
- c. 土地征用过程**黑幕**重重。
 ‘There were layers and layers of **black curtains** in the process of land requisition.’
- d. 只有在人生的**舞台谢幕**之后,我们才能悠哉游哉。
 ‘We could relax only after we have **answered curtain calls** (i. e., retired) on the **stage of life**.’

As shown in the examples cited so far, the “curtains” are said to be opened or closed to start or end a particular event. In (18b), the “inner curtains” (or metonymically what is behind them) are not visible from the audience’s side because they are behind the outer curtains. This example also involves a primary metaphor KNOWING IS SEEING OR UNKNOWN IS UNSEEN. In (18c), the “curtains” are “black” only in a legal or moral sense. The color black is mapped onto what is illegal or immoral: ILLEGAL/IMMORAL IS BLACK (see Yu 2015). Example (18d) is an elaboration on LIFE IS A SHOW. On the “life stage”, we are busy “playing our roles” and we can relax only after our “show” is over, i. e., after we “answer curtain calls”. In our retirement, we no longer “play roles”; instead, we are the “audience” watching others performing on the stage.

Apart from curtains, other elements of the stage can also appear in figurative expressions. Rather than entrenched in metaphoric usage like “stage” or “curtains”, these elements usually do so as a result of elaboration on the SHOW metaphor.

- (19) a. 其实,许丽被耍了,她不过做了回活道具。
 ‘Actually, Xu Li was tricked; she did nothing but serving as a living **prop**.’
- b. 《星期日泰晤士报》说,这一悲剧“令**聚光灯**照到了英国社会一个更为黑暗的角落”。
 ‘*The Sunday Times* commented that this tragedy “put in the **spotlight** an even darker corner of British society”.’

In the performing arts, a prop is an object on the stage with an auxiliary function contributing to the setting as demanded by the plot. In (19a), Xu Li was tricked into serving as a “living prop” for someone else. In (19b), the element “spotlight”, commonly used in the performing arts, is deployed in the figurative expression as a linguistic instantiation of the conceptual metaphor ATTENTION IS LIGHT OR HIGHLY FOCUSED ATTENTION IS SPOTLIGHT. In a theatrical setting, spotlight is used to attract and

focus attention. Moreover, the expression also carries a moral overtone: MORAL IS LIGHT and IMMORAL IS DARK (Yu 2015). In this case, therefore, the source concept LIGHT is mapped onto two target concepts simultaneously: ATTENTION and MORALITY.

Finally, we cross over from the producing to the receiving side of the VENUE aspect, i. e., the audience's seats.

- (20) a. 他们成为“观众席上最幸福的人”。
 ‘They became the “happiest people in the **audience’s seats**”.’
- b. 然而，在他的心中一贯秉持的想法是自己只不过是历史这个**舞台剧**中的**替身演员**，只要有一个更具伟大个性的人物**登场**，他就会让**出主角的宝座**，自己返到**观众席**去，或许这就是他最大的愿望了。
 ‘However, the thought that he had always had on his mind was that he was nothing but a **stand-in actor** in the history as a **play on the stage**. As long as a character with an even greater personality had **mounted the stage**, he would then let this character take over his throne of the **leading role**, himself returning to the **audience’s seats**. That was, perhaps, the biggest of his wishes.’
- c. 他们现在搬个**凳子**打算看大马和中国的**对掐好戏**。
 ‘They were now each carrying a **stool** with them, planning on watching the **good opera** of Malaysia and China pinching each other.’

In (20a), the “people in the audience’s seats” refers to retired senior people (cf. 18d). Having spent their life “playing roles” and having “responded to curtain calls”, they can now happily enjoy watching the “show” in the “audience’s seats”. Based on a similar metaphorical conceptualization, (20b) includes *tìshēn yǎnyuán* (lit. ‘replace-body actor’), referring in film production to actors or actresses who “stand in” to replace leading roles in stunt or sexual scenes. Example (20c) comes from an article speculating on a conspiracy theory for the disappearance of MH370 in 2014: those who had plotted the conspiracy targeted this flight because it was a Malaysian airplane carrying mostly Chinese passengers. Having carried out the conspiracy, they “were now each carrying a stool with them”, ready to watch the “good opera” of Malaysia and China fighting each other. A speculation at the best, the “theory” is expressed in a language that taps into a rich frame of cultural knowledge. Traditionally, especially in rural China, mobile troupes travel around to perform Chinese operas. Very often, they have to “build a stage” (cf. 9a, 17c) on which to “sing opera” (see also Yu 2011a: 622–623). Such a theatrical site is usually an open-air ground, to which “theater goers” have to bring their own seats.

In this subsection, we have focused on STAGE and CURTAIN, two more salient elements in VENUE. The metaphorical mappings from these two source concepts

are so entrenched that these two concepts are found in numerous expressions conventionalized in their target domains. More often than not, “stage” and “curtains” in these conventional expressions have to be interpreted figuratively, as instantiating the underlying *SHOW* metaphor.

4 A further look in a quantitative perspective

In Section 3 we outlined the rich and complex linguistic patterns that manifest the underlying *LIFE IS A SHOW* metaphor on the basis of a Chinese *PERFORMING ARTS* frame laid out in Section 2. That frame has three major aspects: *PEOPLE*, *PERFORMANCE*, and *VENUE*, each of which has a most salient element, *ROLE*, *OPERA*, and *STAGE* respectively. The main meaning focus (Kövecses 2005, 2010) of the *LIFE IS A SHOW* metaphor is: [PEOPLE–PERFORMERS] [FULFILL SOCIAL FUNCTIONS–PLAY ROLES] [IN A SOCIAL CONTEXT–ON A STAGE]. The central element of all, however, is *OPERA* encoded by *xì* ‘Chinese opera’, which we argue is a cultural keyword. That is, *OPERA* dominates the whole frame and sets Chinese opera as the default performance type, with all other elements converging under it, in a neutral context. This special, privileged status for Chinese opera is what cognitive linguists would call prototype effect in categorization. Further, since this frame serves as the source domain of the *SHOW* metaphor, the opera-related terms, many of which being Chinese opera jargons, play a central role in the realization of the metaphor in Chinese. In so doing, they have become highly metaphorical in usage, mapped onto domains of life other than the performing arts itself. In this section we further our argument with some quantitative data collected exclusively from the CCL corpus.

In collecting the data, we searched lexical items that have meanings originating in the performing arts in general and Chinese opera in particular. After obtaining the total number of hits for each item, we manually distinguish between the total numbers of its metaphorical and literal uses, eliminating the irrelevant ones (noises), and calculated its percentage of metaphorical uses. Since the *PERFORMING ARTS* frame is defined as the source domain of the *SHOW* metaphor, any mapping within that frame, for instance, from Chinese opera to TV or film, is not considered metaphorical (though metonymic) since this is a mapping within the *PERFORMING ARTS* domain. In collecting the data, if an item’s total hits exceeded 1,000, we used the first 1,000 hits for identification and calculation. Our findings show a high metaphorical percentage of many relevant items. Table 3 lists the results of three items that encode the three most salient concepts in the main meaning focus of the *SHOW* metaphor.

Table 3: Results for the three most salient elements in the main meaning focus of the metaphor.

Lexical items	English translations	Total number	Metaphorical Number (1 st 1000)	Metaphorical percentage
角色 <i>juésè</i>	Role in (a) performing arts, (b) other domains	11,105	772	77.2
做/作戏 <i>zuòxì</i>	(a) act in an opera, (b) put on a show, play-act	407	355	87.2
舞台 <i>wǔtái</i>	Stage in (a) performing arts, (b) other domains	14,688	474	47.4

As can be seen, *zuòxì* (lit. ‘make opera’), meaning primarily “perform in an opera” and metaphorically “put on a show” or “play-act”, reaches as high as 87.2 percent in metaphorical usage. Owing to its privileged status as a cultural keyword and a central element in the PERFORMING ARTS frame in the Chinese context, *xì* ‘Chinese opera’ has the power to impart its conceptual content onto the other two words for “role” and “stage” as their default values. Table 4 presents the results of more examples from the three aspects of the performing arts – PEOPLE, PERFORMANCE, and VENUE – whose total numbers exceed 100. The metaphorical percentage ranges from 32.9 to 100. The lowest percentage falls on *lóngtào* ‘walk-on part’ (lit. ‘dragon-robe’) mainly because the majority of the tokens were metonymic in nature, utilizing this Chinese opera jargon in the contexts of, for instance, movie and TV drama series production. Those tokens are not metaphorical according to our criteria, but are still figurative (at about 67%). The item *chàngxì* ‘sing Chinese opera’ has the second lowest percentage at 41.5 simply because the majority of the hits literally concern Chinese opera performance, which is still a prominent, though not necessarily popular, type of performing arts in China today. It remains to be a cultural icon.

The high percentage of metaphorical usage, as shown in Table 4, suggests that the metaphorical senses of the opera-related terms are highly conventionalized in life domains beyond that of performing arts. Now, we switch to different viewpoints. As already pointed out, ROLE and STAGE are the most salient elements in the PEOPLE and VENUE aspects, reflecting the main meaning focus of the SHOW metaphor. They are especially salient because they expand through linguistic elaboration in the form of collocation. Both of them are found in a large number of collocations. First, we zoom into *juésè* ‘role’, which appear in a great number of collocations that are especially metaphorical, such as *shèhuì juésè* ‘social role’, *zhèngzhì juésè* ‘political role’, and *jīngjì juésè* ‘economic role’. Table 5, however, lists eight conventional collocations that are not biased toward a metaphorical reading.

Table 4: Results for more specific items encoding the source concepts of the show metaphor.

Lexical items	English translations	Total number	Metaphorical number (1st 1000)	Metaphorical percentage
主角 <i>zhǔjué</i>	Leading role	4,726	544	54.4
配角 <i>pèijué</i>	Supporting role	673	319	47.4
龙套 <i>lóngtào</i>	Walk-on part (lit. dragon-robe [part])	234	77	32.9
看客 <i>kànkè</i>	Audience (lit. watching guest)	287	263	91.6
好戏 <i>hǎoxì</i>	Good opera	1,480	623	62.3
大戏 <i>dàxì</i>	Grand (full-length) opera	699	349	49.9
压轴戏 <i>yāzhòuxì</i>	Last and best opera	135	116	85.9
重头戏 <i>zhòngtóuxì</i>	Opera where great exertion needed to act	955	915	95.8
对台戏 <i>duìtáixì</i>	Rival opera	132	127	96.2
唱戏 <i>chàngxì</i>	Sing (i. e., perform) Chinese opera	1,067	415	41.5
扮演 <i>bànyǎn</i>	Play the role/part of	5,946	531	53.1
亮相 <i>liàngxiàng</i>	Strike a pose on the stage	5,030	857	85.7
叫板 <i>jiàobǎn</i>	Transition from a spoken to a singing part	284	238	83.8
开锣 <i>kāiluó</i>	Strike the gong to start an opera	135	131	97.0
紧锣密鼓 <i>jǐnluómìgǔ</i>	Wildly beating gongs and drums	1,237	1000	100.0
上台 <i>shàngtái</i>	Ascend the stage	5,711	608	60.8
下台 <i>xiàtái</i>	Descend the stage	2,626	947	94.7
搭台 <i>dātái</i>	Put up the stage	466	416	89.3
拆台 <i>chāitái</i>	Pull down the stage	116	111	95.7
开幕 <i>kāimù</i>	Open the stage curtains	30,198	997	99.7
闭幕 <i>bì mù</i>	Close the stage curtains	10,382	994	99.4
落幕 <i>luòmù</i>	Lower the stage curtains	1,579	996	99.6

As we can see, their metaphorical percentage ranges from 38.5 to 100, most of them being positioned toward the high end. In Table 6, we switch further our viewpoint, focusing on the wide variety of collocations for *wǔtái* ‘stage’ that are necessarily metaphorical. As mentioned previously, the concept STAGE maps onto DOMAIN OF LIFE in the SHOW metaphor. To identify the metaphorical kinds of “stage” collocations we went through the first 1,000 tokens of the search for *wǔtái*

Table 5: Examples of “role” collocations and their percentages of metaphorical usage.

“Role” collocations	English translations	Total number	Metaphorical number	Metaphorical percentage
重要角色 <i>zhòngyào juésè</i>	Important role	601	544	90.5
主要角色 <i>zhǔyào juésè</i>	Major role	257	99	38.5
进入角色 <i>jìnrù juésè</i>	Enter into (the spirit of) the role	222	182	82.0
扮演角色 <i>bànyǎn juésè</i>	Play a role	66	32	48.5
角色扮演 <i>juésè bànyǎn</i>	Role play	87	83	95.4
角色转换 <i>juésè zhuǎnhuàn</i>	Role change/transformation	97	94	96.9
角色定位 <i>juésè dìngwèi</i>	Role definition/position	71	70	98.6
角色冲突 <i>juésè chōngtū</i>	Role conflict	27	27	100

Table 6: Variety and frequency of metaphorical “stage” collocations.

“Stage” collocations	English translations	Total number
国际舞台 <i>guójì wǔtái</i>	International stage	978
政治舞台 <i>zhèngzhì wǔtái</i>	Political stage	576
历史舞台 <i>lìshǐ wǔtái</i>	Historical stage	445
世界舞台 <i>shìjiè wǔtái</i>	World stage	286
经济舞台 <i>jīngjì wǔtái</i>	Economic stage	234
人生舞台 <i>rénshēng wǔtái</i>	Human life stage	96
外交舞台 <i>wàijiāo wǔtái</i>	Diplomatic stage	56
社会舞台 <i>shèhuì wǔtái</i>	Social stage	43
文化舞台 <i>wénhuà wǔtái</i>	Cultural stage	41
体育舞台 <i>tǐyù wǔtái</i>	Sports stage	24
生活舞台 <i>shēnghuó wǔtái</i>	Life stage	22
竞争舞台 <i>jìngzhēng wǔtái</i>	Competition stage	21
市场舞台 <i>shìchǎng wǔtái</i>	Market stage	19
科技舞台 <i>kējì wǔtái</i>	Science and technology stage	19
学术舞台 <i>xuéshù wǔtái</i>	Academic stage	17
发展舞台 <i>fāzhǎn wǔtái</i>	Development stage	13
科学舞台 <i>kēxué wǔtái</i>	Scientific stage	12
军事舞台 <i>jūnshì wǔtái</i>	Military stage	10
时装舞台 <i>shízhuāng wǔtái</i>	Fashion stage	10
奥运舞台 <i>àoyùn wǔtái</i>	Olympic stage	9
竞技舞台 <i>jìngjì wǔtái</i>	Athletic stage	9
影视舞台 <i>yǐngshì wǔtái</i>	Film and TV stage	9
经营舞台 <i>jīngyíng wǔtái</i>	Business management stage	7

(continued)

Table 6: (continued)

“Stage” collocations	English translations	Total number
贸易舞台 <i>màoyì wǔtái</i>	Trade stage	7
思想舞台 <i>sìxiǎng wǔtái</i>	Ideological stage	7
改革舞台 <i>gǎigé wǔtái</i>	Reform stage	5
合作舞台 <i>hézuò wǔtái</i>	Cooperation stage	5
公关舞台 <i>gōngguān wǔtái</i>	Public relations stage	4
投资舞台 <i>tóuzī wǔtái</i>	Investment stage	4
教育舞台 <i>jiàoyù wǔtái</i>	Educational stage	4
建设舞台 <i>jiànshè wǔtái</i>	Construction stage	4
投资舞台 <i>tóuzī wǔtái</i>	Investment stage	4
创新舞台 <i>chuàngxīn wǔtái</i>	Innovation stage	3
公众舞台 <i>gōngzhòng wǔtái</i>	Public stage	3
商业舞台 <i>shāngyè wǔtái</i>	Business stage	3
革命舞台 <i>gémìng wǔtái</i>	Revolutionary stage	3
商贸舞台 <i>shāngmào wǔtái</i>	Business & trade stage	2
企业舞台 <i>qǐyè wǔtái</i>	Enterprise stage	2
科普舞台 <i>kēpǔ wǔtái</i>	Popular science stage	2
谈判舞台 <i>tánpàn wǔtái</i>	Negotiation stage	2
理论舞台 <i>lǐlùn wǔtái</i>	Theoretical stage	1
法律舞台 <i>fǎlǜ wǔtái</i>	Legal stage	1
立法舞台 <i>lǐfǎ wǔtái</i>	Legislative stage	1
管理舞台 <i>guǎnlǐ wǔtái</i>	Administrative stage	1
竞选舞台 <i>jìngxuǎn wǔtái</i>	Election stage	1
边贸舞台 <i>biānmào wǔtái</i>	Border trade stage	1
食界舞台 <i>shíjiè wǔtái</i>	Food business stage	1
咨询舞台 <i>zixún wǔtái</i>	Consultation stage	1
仲裁舞台 <i>zhōngcái wǔtái</i>	Arbitration stage	1
物理舞台 <i>wùlǐ wǔtái</i>	Physics stage	1

‘stage’ (currently 14,688 total). During the period of our research, the CCL corpus was updated in 2014. Table 6 lists the 50 different types of four-character collocations (modifier + head) that we found in two such searches. Thirty (30) types were found in the first search before the update, and twenty (20) more new types were found in the second search after the update. The items are ranked according to the total number for each of them in the corpus to give a sense of relative scope and strength of the *SHOW* metaphor in the Chinese discourse. It is true that many of them are of low frequency, but that demonstrates, for our purpose, the flexibility and productivity of such metaphorical “stage” usage. It is with such lexical elaborations that the concept of *STAGE* gains its saliency through the *SHOW* metaphor.

5 Conclusion

From our linguistic study, both qualitative and quantitative, in the preceding sections, two findings have emerged: first, *LIFE IS A SHOW* is a salient conceptual metaphor with an exceptionally rich and systematic linguistic manifestation in Chinese; secondly, the source domain of this metaphor, *SHOW*, largely converges and focuses on *CHINESE OPERA*, making its linguistic realization culture-specific to a great extent. Besides, the target domain, *LIFE*, is a very general concept, including all possible aspects or areas of human life, private or public, individual or social. For example, the *LIFE IS A JOURNEY* metaphor often refers to the advancement of individual or social entities along a particular life “path” – very often just a segment of it – such as biological, educational, professional, organizational, or national. In the same vein, the *LIFE IS A SHOW* metaphor is often applied to the social interaction among individual or social entities on a particular life “stage”, be it international or local, historical or political, economic or scientific, and so on and so forth. It is because *LIFE* is such an all-inclusive concept with multiple facets to it that we need a wide range of conceptual metaphors for it as we think and talk about it, with each linguistic instantiation addressing a particular aspect of life with a specific meaning focus.

As shown in this study, the saliency of the *LIFE IS A SHOW* metaphor in Chinese lies in its productive elaboration at both conceptual and linguistic levels. At the conceptual level, the mappings listed in (2) in subsection 3.1 are manifested richly and systematically. In the source domain, while all the constituent elements in Tables 1 and 2 are deployed, some of them, especially those characteristic of Chinese opera, such as the role types and subtypes, particular performing acts, and percussive accompaniment, are exploited in breadth and depth. Thus, for instance, various roles are distinguished not only by their leading or supporting status, which may be common in the performing arts cross-culturally, but also by a wide variety of types and subtypes as found in Chinese opera only (see, e. g., 4 and 5). In the target domain, for example, a broad range of interrelated and interactive entities in various real-life events and phenomena, along with a large number of abstract concepts, such as significance, importance, function, preparation, progression, cooperation, competition, confrontation, ambition, attention, pretention, illusion, and so on, are “dramatized” with concrete dynamic images invoked by the source elements from a rich *PERFORMING ARTS* frame as found in the context of Chinese culture.

Through an analysis of linguistic and corpus data, which merely constitute a very small portion representative of a large amount of data that we collected over time, we hope to have illustrated how rich and systematic the linguistic manifestation of the *LIFE IS A SHOW* metaphor is in Chinese. Many of the

metaphorical expressions are originally Chinese opera jargons, which help us structure and understand many other domains of life in terms of this most prominent form of performing arts in traditional Chinese culture. At the linguistic level, it is particularly worth noting the elaborate lexicalization revolving around the cultural keyword 戏 *xì* ‘Chinese opera’ (see, e. g., 9–11). Such lexical items, in the form of compounds and idioms, have literal meanings related to Chinese opera but are often used metaphorically to characterize the structures of events and phenomena in other domains of life.

Our analysis, based on a characterization of the Chinese PERFORMING ARTS frame in Section 2, focused on the three major aspects or categories separately in three subsections of Section 3 – PEOPLE, PERFORMANCE, and VENUE – although they are really intertwined in the fabricate of discourse as many of our examples have shown. Each of the three categories has a central element of its own: ROLE, OPERA, and STAGE. The second one, OPERA, refers to “Chinese opera” and is central and responsible for the setting of the SHOW source domain in the Chinese context (for the relationship between metaphor and context see Kövecses 2015). That is, with LIFE IS A SHOW, the “show” is fundamentally “Chinese opera”, the most prominent form of performing arts in traditional Chinese culture. In Chinese, therefore, this metaphor, with its particular linguistic instantiations such as those analyzed in Section 3, taps into a specific frame of cultural knowledge about Chinese opera, triggering, in the minds of those who know this folk form of performing arts, mental images of its unique vocal and bodily artistic expressions, costumes and makeups, and musical and percussive accompaniment. That is the reason why it has been argued that in the Chinese context this widespread metaphor is “embraced in a highly culture-specific scenario” of Chinese opera in general and Beijing opera in particular, which are in stark contrast with, for instance, Shakespearean plays or Western operas: “While sharing some common properties of fruits at a more abstract level, at a concrete level an apple is an apple and an orange is an orange” (Yu 2011a: 626) (see Appendix).

As the “national entertainment”, Chinese opera has well-defined elements and relations among them, and well-defined patterns that these elements and relations take. As a well-structured artistic form and due to its prominence in traditional Chinese culture, Chinese opera is an ideal source domain for the metaphorical conceptualization of many other domains of life. Therefore, LIFE IS A SHOW is such a salient conceptual metaphor with exceptionally rich manifestation in the Chinese language, and with its target concepts found in a rich array of domains of life. It needs to be stressed that such metaphorical conceptualizations are collectively shared by the Chinese and, as such, are part of their cultural cognition (Sharifian 2003, 2008). In other words, we believe that the LIFE IS A SHOW metaphor, which draws upon the cultural knowledge about shows,

constitutes a core component of Chinese cultural models for understanding structures of events and phenomena of life. Cultural models are cognitive configurations of knowledge about, and coherent organizations of experience with, a certain domain that are rooted in individual minds but shared by members of a cultural group and, as such, they are taken-for-granted but play a central role in their holders' understanding of the world and behavior in it (Bennardo and de Munck 2014; Holland and Quinn 1987; Kövecses 2005, 2015; Ungerer and Schmid 2006). That is why we claim that 戏 *xì* 'Chinese opera' is a cultural keyword, the study of which can yield important clues to the Chinese cultural universe. In short, the keyword represents a critical source concept of metaphor that serves as a lens through which the Chinese view their life and world. It is worth pointing out, however, that seeing the LIFE IS A SHOW metaphor as lying at the core of the Chinese cultural model of life does not mean a unified view of life held by all the Chinese. In fact, as a conceptual metaphor with profound influence in Chinese culture, LIFE IS A SHOW has different metaphorical entailments and "shapes" different views of life depending on which entailments are "highlighted" or "hidden" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

Moreover, SHOW as a source concept is at the superordinate level. The LIFE IS A SHOW metaphor has different subversions: LIFE IS A PLAY (Kövecses 2005, 2010; Lakoff and Turner 1989), LIFE IS A MOVIE (Gabler 1998; Kövecses 2005), LIFE IS AN OPERA (Yu 2011a), and so on. Lakoff and Turner (1989: 20) formulated LIFE IS A PLAY as "an extraordinarily productive basic metaphor for life" based on the English examples such as *It's curtains for him; She always wants to be in the spotlight; That's not in the script; You missed your cue; and He blew his lines* (see also Kövecses 2005, 2010). This is because, as they suggested, "our schema for a play is very rich", with their formal and narrative structures, and "the ways in which a play can be made to correspond to life are extensively developed and conventionalized in our culture" (1989: 20). This makes perfect sense in the English-speaking culture, or Western culture in general, where play has been a major form of performing arts, as represented and highlighted by the Shakespearean tradition, through its history of civilization.

While LIFE IS A PLAY and LIFE IS A MOVIE exist in Chinese as well, and some examples (e. g., 4a, 4c, 15a, 20b) in our analysis may be taken as instantiating those metaphors due to some commonalities between plays, movies, and operas as formats of performing arts, our study has shown beyond doubt, however, that the dominant subversion in Chinese is LIFE IS AN OPERA, where OPERA, in the context of Chinese culture, specifically refers to Chinese opera with Beijing opera as its prototype. Considering this cross-cultural difference, therefore, we argue that LIFE IS AN OPERA should be a sister version of LIFE IS A PLAY, LIFE IS A MOVIE, etc., and that our finding supports the proposal that LIFE IS A SHOW be a generic-level metaphor dominating the subversions at the specific level (Kövecses 2005).

Finally, we would like to touch upon some implications that our study holds for the relationship between language, culture, and cognition revolving around the *SHOW* metaphor. On the basis of our study and others, it seems plausible to suggest that there exists a conceptual metaphor *LIFE IS A SHOW* cross-culturally. The evidence for this metaphor being conceptual rather than merely linguistic is that it can be manifested in a multimodal rather than verbal-only fashion (see Yu 2011a; Appendix). This conceptual metaphor, in effect, is formulated within embodied and socioculturally-situated contexts. It so happens, however, that the performing arts in different cultural contexts share some common properties at a schematic level, namely at the level of *PEOPLE*, *PERFORMANCE*, and *VENUE*. It follows, therefore, that different cultures could appear to have the same *SHOW* metaphor at an abstract, superordinate level. Due to formal differences at a more specific level of performing arts within and across cultures, this conceptual metaphor could manifest itself in variants, that is, subversions such as *LIFE IS A PLAY*, *LIFE IS A MOVIE*, and *LIFE IS AN OPERA*. It is entirely up to the shaping of cultural contexts that one or more of them appear to be central or dominant in different languages and cultures. The one or ones that are central and dominant play an important role in respective cultural models for understanding domains of life other than the performing arts. It is worth noting that linguistic manifestations of conceptual metaphors in characteristic patterns in languages are not just a simple consequence of conceptual mappings in thought. Instead, characteristic linguistic patterns in a language influence its speakers' way of viewing the world and their experience in it. They constitute whole-sale packages that the speakers of the language inherit as part of their cultural and cognitive heritage. For that matter, they carry special weight on and for those who carry them.

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Appendix

Examples of Chinese visual art that are multimodal (visual, verbal, and calligraphic) realizations of “Life is an opera” as cultural artifacts



These images are taken as examples from a large pool of “images for 人生如戏” in Google search, accessed in July, 2015 at the following link: https://www.google.com/search?q=images+for+%E4%BA%BA%E7%94%9F%E5%A6%82%E6%88%8F&biw=1366&bih=657&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ved=OCBwQsARqFQoTCLTJ8J_3_McCFYFZPgodOgQMLA