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BRIDGING LANGUAGE AND CULTURE: A STUDY OF CHINESE  
GUANYONGYU COMPOUNDS

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ABSTRACT

The present study takes a linguistic and cognitive approach to examine characteristics of Chinese *guanyongyu* compounds. It first analyzes the features of metaphorical imageries, language / cultural specificity, and time salience. It also investigates compounds in three linguistic domains: The relationship between rhythm patterns and grammatical forms, semantic properties, and pragmatic functions. The study demonstrates that both the prototype and metaphorical meanings of *guanyongyu* compounds bridge language and culture by providing vivid expressions that reveal cultural phenomena, social events, historical background, people's conceptualization, and their attitude in that culture. *Guanyongyu* compounds are a special case where linguistic features and cultural perspectives are closely intertwined.

SUBJECT KEYWORDS

Chinese culture, Chinese semantics, Compounds, idiomatic expressions

INTRODUCTION

*Guanyongyu* is a category of Chinese idiomatic lexical compounds. A compound is composed of two or more words bound together to form one word (Chao, 1968). *Guanyongyu* compounds are idiomatic, lively, and very frequently used (Cui, 2005). *Guanyongyu* broadly reflects popular conceptions, traditional values, and cultural attitudes with extraordinary vividness. The form is short (usually three syllables) with set rhythm patterns that easily facilitate memorization. What has made *guanyongyu* different from most Chinese compounds is its culturally specific semantics. The meaning of the *guanyongyu*

is figurative and metaphorical, derived from cultural and social events. The usage of *guanyongyu* is based on the understanding of its original meaning and extended cultural connotations. The pragmatic function of *Guanyongyu* is often in either a commendatory or derogatory sense.

Semantic and pragmatic properties of *guanyongyu* compounds pose difficulties, especially to learners of Chinese as a second language. As Zhang (1996) states, the study of compounds is difficult because of its ever-expanding and ever-combining word formation. The frequently used characters number approximately 4,500, but the combination of 4,500 characters can be much greater in number. The meaning of a new compound, especially a *guanyongyu* compound, is not merely the sum of the original morphemes. In addition, the culturally specific feature also poses a formidable task for learners. Liu (1992) states that students make frequent errors because they do not understand the cultural background of the compounds. The errors that learners make include taking the word meaning literally (e.g. 走后门 “to go by the back door” with the metaphorical meaning “to secure advantages through influence, to make deals under the table through connections and personal relationships”), misunderstanding of the cultural and historical background of the compound (e.g. 小皇帝 “little emperor” refers to the only child of a family because of the one child one family policy since the 1970s), and using the word in the wrong context. It would be almost impossible to learn *guanyongyu* compounds without understanding their socio-cultural backgrounds.

What has made learning even more difficult is the fact that the Chinese language is rich in imageries and metaphorical expressions. *Guanyongyu* compounds are distinctively featured with these properties. Metaphorical meanings, not literal meanings, are most frequently used in communication. That is why there exist sayings such as 老黄牛不是牛, 向阳花亦非花 “An old yellow cow is not a cow, a sun flower is not a flower”. The former refers to “a person who is diligent and conscientious in serving the people” (*Dictionary of Chinese Idioms, 1991*) and the latter refers to peasants of the people’s commune in the late 1950’s and 1960’s.

In this paper, I will take a linguistic and cognitive approach to the study of *guanyongyu* compounds. I will first discuss two features 1) metaphorical imageries and language / cultural specificity, and 2) time salience. I will then

examine *Guanyongyu* compounds in three linguistic domains, the relationship between rhythm patterns and grammatical forms, semantic properties, and pragmatic functions. Finally, I will discuss pedagogical implications of the study. Through my study, I will demonstrate that both the prototype and metaphorical meanings of *guanyongyu* compounds bridge language and culture by providing vivid expressions that reveal cultural phenomena, social events, historical background, people's conceptualization, and their attitude in that culture.

#### METAPHORICAL IMAGERIES AND CULTURALLY SPECIFIC FEATURES

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) stated that human reasoning is very much metaphorical. It is based on our experience as human beings in particular cultures. Metaphor is primarily a matter of thinking that represents our way of perception and conceptualization in a particular language with its cultural significance. Lakoff (1987) further proposes that "human categorization is essentially a matter of both human experience and imagination of perception, motor activity, and culture on the one hand, and of metaphor, metonymy, and mental imagery on the other." (1987:8 ) *Guanyongyu* compounds are metaphorical expressions that are packaged with the experience of Chinese people and their perceptions and conceptualizations of the world. Literal meanings of *Guanyongyu* compounds are rarely used. They are, however, important because they are perceptually distinctive, visually vivid, and conceptually concrete, upon which extended meanings and metaphorical usages are associated and developed. For example, the compound 开绿灯 "turn on the green (traffic) light" means to provide opportunities and convenience to favorable people by abusing one's privilege. The compound activates the cognitive association with the concept of corruption. It connects the function of the green traffic light to the conceptions of privilege, corruption, and inappropriate human connections. The cognitive associations are presented through metaphorical imageries. The compound 飞毛腿 "flying-hair legs" refers to the legs that run very fast. It stands for people who can run swiftly. The compound activates the mental image of "flying speed". It is imagination of perception and motor activity since nobody practically has legs with flying hairs. It is the mental imagery of "fast runners or athletes" that conveys the semantic function of the compound. From the examples we can see that the metaphorical

imageries are closely associated with the literal or original meaning of the compound. They reflect the way we perceive objects, events, and actions around us. They also reveal how our experiences with the world are organized, and our perceptions are conceptualized.

The metaphors presented in *Guanyongyu* compounds are primarily language and culture specific. They must be learned through experience with the language and understanding of the culture. Only a few are coincidentally cross-culturally shared, e.g. the compound 活字典 “living dictionary” stands for a person who is knowledgeable and erudite in both Chinese and English languages. A majority of *Guanyongyu* compounds are culturally specific. Even if languages have similar imageries, the expressions differ across cultures. For example, the compound 拍马屁 “pat horse butt” means to over-flatter someone. The metaphor associates with the conception of “being snobbish” and the mental imagery of “kissing someone’s ass” (*Dictionary of Chinese Idioms, 1991*). The similar expression in English is “licking one’s boots”. The semantic and metaphorical categories vary enormously across languages. As Bowerman (1998) posits, “in most conceptual domains there are significant options from among which language can ‘choose’ in structuring the categories of meanings to which words, grammatical morphemes, or construction patterns are linked.” (p. 142). Human beings conceptualize metaphors largely on the basis of their experience, culture, and language. The compound 拍马屁 “pat horse butt” was originated by Manchurians who used horses to roam in vast Manchuria. They patted the horse’s butt when praising its quality. The metaphorical meaning reflects their horse-praising practice and the conventional conceptual systems in that social setting.

#### TIME SALIENCE

*Guanyongyu* compounds are products of the times. They are born on the fertile land of culture, expressed in the lively language, blooming with historical events in the social environment, and fade away when the socio-cultural phenomena gradually die down. They are created constantly, and modified along with the changes in society. In the past three decades, the Chinese economic reform and fast development of modernity have brought many colorful *Guanyongyu* compounds. The compounds in turn reflect the salient

features of the period. China had a socialist system and planned economy up to the early 1980's. The government owned all enterprises and properties. Compounds 1-3, most frequently used during that period, reveal the economic and social characteristics in that regard:

1. 铁饭碗 iron bowl – security of a job (Everyone had a job and no one would ever be fired).
2. 大锅饭 big pot meal – Everyone received similar salary and benefits regardless of work performance.
3. 走后门 to take back door – to make deals under the table through connections and personal relationships – corruption.

The new economic policy brought many fundamental changes to people's life in the 1980's. The government encouraged people to creatively become rich. Business connections were established and private sectors appeared; immediately many people made financial fortunes. Compounds 4-8 reflect the emerging phenomena in the 1980's.

4. 关系网 relationship nets – one's back-scratching connections in a relationship of mutual back scratching – corruption.
5. 个体户 privately-owned business.
6. 暴发户 suddenly becoming wealthy – upstart – to become rich, politically powerful, or famous overnight.
7. 工薪族 to make a living as a salaried employee.

The 1990's witnessed further economic and social changes. State-owned enterprises and businesses were bankrupt. Thousands of employees lost their jobs. A great number of people took advantage of opportunities and became wealthy. *Guanyongyu* compounds in this period include:

8. 炒鱿鱼 to stir-fry squid – to fire (squids become curly and hard after being stir-fried).
9. 万元户 ten thousand dollar individual – financially wealthy.
10. 大锅债 big pot debt – bankruptcy of the state-owned enterprises and business (The compound co-references with Compound 2. “Bankrupt” consequently resulted from the practice of 大锅饭 “big pot meal”).

Table I includes the linguistic and cultural features of Compounds 1-10. Firstly, all the compounds are culturally specific. The connotations of the compound are meaningful only in Chinese language. Secondly, they are time-

salient. They are time-marked with economic and social events. Some are slightly aged as society advances (e.g. Compounds 1-2). Others are so young that they do not even have fully developed metaphors (Compounds 5, 7, and 9), therefore the literal meanings of the compounds are being used. Thirdly, most compounds contain a commendatory or derogatory sense in usage. This pragmatic feature is derived from the social perspectives organized through people's experience and attitude.

Table 1 *Guanyongyu* compounds emerged in the last three decades

Compound	Physical referent	Literal meaning being used	Metaphorical referent	Economic effects	Social effects	Commendatory	Derogatory
铁饭碗 iron bowl	+	-	+	+	-	-	+
大锅饭 big pot meal	+	-	+	+	-	-	+
走后门 to take back door	+	-	+	-	+	-	+
关系网 relationships p nets	+	-	+	+	+	-	+
个体户 private- owned business	+	+	-	+	-	-	-
暴发户 suddenly becoming wealthy	+	+	+	+	-	-	+

工薪族 making a salaried living	+	+	-	+	-	-	-
炒鱿鱼 to stir-fry squid	+	-	+	+	+	-	+
万元户 ten thousand dollar individual	+	+	+?	+	-	-	-
大锅债 big pot debt	-?	-	+	+	-	-	+

### RHYTHM PATTERNS AND GRAMMATICAL FORMS

Most *guanyongyu* compounds consist of three syllables. The rhythm pattern is A + BC (e.g. 戴高帽 wear a tall hat -- to flatter) and AB + C (e.g. 笑面虎 smiling face tiger -- an outwardly kind and inwardly cruel person). The compounds of three syllables with two rhythms are so deeply rooted in Chinese spoken language that people are not even consciously aware of them but cannot help feeling "right" when using them. For one thing, they are short, easy to pronounce and remember. For another, the rhythm pattern goes closely with the grammatical structure that makes the compound systematic and distinctive.

One feature of *guanyongyu* compounds is the relationship between the rhythm pattern and the grammatical constraint on the syllable of the verb. The rhythm pattern of A + BC is frequently used in three surface word orders:

Verb + nominal compound (Compounds 11-14),

Adverb + verb + object (Compounds 15-16),

Verb + complement (Compound 17).

The verb is monosyllabic, and the nominal or the complement is bisyllabic. If the object is a single syllable, an adverb is placed before the verb to form a three syllable structure of Adv. + V. + Obj. as in Compounds 5-6. A bisyllabic verb

rarely occurs. Bisyllabic verbs must be more constrained and less flexible than monosyllabic verbs. The relationship between the grammatical word order and the rhythm pattern of A + BC is presented in Table 2.

11. 打棍子 to beat a stick – to beat with a stick – to persecute someone (The compound was most frequently used during the Cultural Revolution).

12. 戴帽子<sup>1</sup> to put a hat – to politically label someone arbitrarily (The compound was most frequently used during the Cultural Revolution).

13. 抓辫子<sup>2</sup> to seize one's queue – to seize upon one's mistakes, to capitalize on one's vulnerable points (The compound was most frequently used during the Cultural Revolution).

14. 穿小鞋<sup>2</sup> to wear small shoes – to make someone wear tight shoes - make things hard for someone.

15. 急刹车 to rapidly brake car – to bring to a sudden halt.

16. 干瞪眼 dry stare eyes – to look on in despair, to stand by anxiously and helplessly.

17. 老掉牙 old fallen teeth -very old, dated, obsolete.

Table 2. VN, AVP, and VC order with the rhythm pattern of A + BC:

Compounds	V.+N.	Adv.+ V.+N.	V.+Comp.	Rhythm A+BC
打棍子 beat a stick	+	-	-	+
戴帽子 put a hat	+	-	-	+
抓辫子 seize one's queue	+	-	-	+
穿小鞋 wear small shoes	+	-	-	+
急刹车 rapid break car	-	+	-	+
干瞪 dry stare eyes	-	+	-	+
老掉牙 old fallen teeth	-	-	+	+

One error that students frequently make is to take the rhythm pattern of A + BC for AB + C, and the monosyllabic verb for the bisyllabic verb. For example, students misinterpret the compounds 保护伞 “protect umbrella – a protecting power”, 省油灯 “save oil lamp – a low cost person”, 拦路虎 “block road tiger – an obstacle”, 拿手戏 “take hand drama – the play that an actor/actress does best - one’s specialty / strength”, 夹生饭 “press-in raw meal, half-cooked meal – a job not thoroughly done” as the VO structure (Cui, 2005). Although the first morpheme of each *guanyongyu* compound is a verb, they do not belong to the VO structure. Indeed they belong to a different rhythm pattern (AB+C) and the surface word order of modifier + noun. The knowledge of the rhythm pattern and grammatical form might help learners in that regard.

It is worth noting that the surface word order is constrained by the grammatical relationship. Although Compounds 11-14 all have the word order of V. + N., the relationship between the verb and nominal are different. The nominal “stick” in Compound 11 is not the object but the instrument of the verb “to beat” despite the fact that it is in the object position. The surface word order “to beat a stick” makes no sense in usual situations. The compound violates the grammatical constraint of VO. Native Chinese speakers have no difficulties in understanding it and using it despite the fact that Chinese language uses the word order of VO.

In addition to the structure of VN, AVO, and VC in the rhythm pattern of A + BC as discussed above, another frequently used rhythm pattern is AB + C. It has the surface order of Modifier + Verb and Modifier + Nominal in relation to the grammatical form. The structure of Modifier + Verb word order is strictly to the rhythm pattern of AB + C where the verb is monosyllabic (Compounds 18-20). This is grammatically consistent with the VN, AVO, and VC order where the verb has one syllable (Compounds 11-17). In other words, in the form of three-syllable *guanyongyu* compounds, the verb is consistently monosyllabic.

18. 对着干 opposite behave – to do oppositely, to rebel (It came from the Cultural Revolution when Mao encouraged the youth to rebel).

19. 窝里斗 nest inside fight – to conflict within a group.

20. 满天飞 all sky fly – to go everywhere – to scatter everywhere, widely spread.

Table 3 MV and MN order with the rhythm patterns AB + C and A + BC:

Compounds	Mod.+V	Mod.+N	Rhythm AB+C	Rhythm A+BC
对着干 do oppositely	+	-	+	-
窝里斗 nest inside fight	+	-	+	-
满天飞 all sky fly	+	-	+	-
狐狸精 fox spirit	-	+	+	-
千里马 thousand-mile horse	-	+	+	-
落水狗 fallen water dog	-	+	+	-
铁公鸡 iron male chicken	-	+	-	+
老黄牛 old yellow cow	-	+	-	+

Different from the structure of Modifier+Verb, the structure of Modifier + Nominal can have the rhythm pattern of AB + C (Compounds 21-23) or A + BC (Compounds 24-25). The modifier can be monosyllabic or bisyllabic, as can the nominal. The relationship between the rhythm pattern and the word order of Modifier+Nominal is flexible with a tendency toward the AB + C (Compounds 21-23) rhythm pattern. Table 3 summarizes the relationship between the grammatical word order and the rhythm patterns AB + C and A + BC.

21. 狐狸精 fox spirit – a seductive woman.

22. 千里马 thousand-mile horse – A mythical horse that can cover thousands of miles in one day – great speed / highly talented person.

23. 落水狗 fallen water dog – A dog that fell in the water – a mean person that has been disgraced.

24. 铁公鸡 iron male chicken – Iron cock (from which not one feather can be plucked) – a stingy person.

25. 老黄牛 old yellow cow – a willing cow – a person who speaks little and is conscientious in serving the people (It came from the Cultural Revolution when Mao encouraged to serve the people).

The syllabic variation of the modifier poses difficulties for learners who frequently take the rhythm pattern of A + BC for AB + C and vice versa (Cui, 2005). Both syntactic and semantic constraints on modifiers may provide information to decrease this misunderstanding. Take Compound 22 with the rhythm pattern of AB + C for example. When a noun is modified by a number, a measure word is syntactically obligatory. The measure word goes with the number to form a number+measure compound. This is true to many *guanyongyu* compounds: 五斗米 “five M rice”, 三家村 “three M village”, 万元户 “ten thousand M household”, 二把刀 “the second M knife” where the number and the measure word are bounded syntactically. Compound 13 is different since both the adjectives 老 “old” and 黄 “yellow” modify the noun 牛 “cow”. The grammatical features of modifiers are helpful in parsing the compound. The character, 老 “old” is a noun prefix. Such prefixes also include 小 “small”, 公 “male”, 母 “female” as in 小百灵 “little lark”, 小算盘 “small abacus”, 老大哥 “old big brother”, 老姑娘 “old girl”, 母老虎 “female tiger”. These compounds all have the rhythm pattern of A + BC with the word order of prefix + Modifier + Nominal. Grammatical features such as prefixes and measure words provide helpful information for learners to parse the compound and understand the meaning. In addition, morphology also plays an important role. For example, 狐狸 “fox” in 狐狸精 “fox spirit”, and 百灵 “lark” in 小百灵 “little lark” are all bound morphemes that cannot be separated. They are bisyllabic words. Examples of such also include 公鸡 “rooster” in 铁公鸡 “iron cock”, 老虎 “tiger” in 母老虎 “female tiger”, and 姑娘 “girl” in 老姑娘 “old girl”.

It is interesting to note the internal relationship between rhythm patterns and grammatical forms of *guanyongyu* compounds. The word order of Verb and Object is more bounded than Adverb and Verb. That is why

compounds 15 and 16 are of the rhythm pattern of A + BC. The word order of Number and Measure is more bounded than that of Measure and Noun. This is the reason compounds such as 22 belong to the AB + C rhythm pattern. The word order of Adj. and Noun is more bounded than that of prefix and Adjective. That is why compounds such as 25 belong to the A + BC rhythm pattern.

#### SEMANTIC PROPERTIES

What has made *guanyongyu* compounds outstandingly distinctive is the language and culturally specific features. Researchers (e.g. Bowerman, 1989; Lakoff, 1987) have investigated different criteria on semantic categories across languages and cultures. Bowerman (1989) argues that since a semantic domain is partitioned differently across languages, the way human beings organize their perceptions and classify the elements of their experience also differ correspondingly. Wang (1990) proposed “cultural semantics”. He considers that the semantics of *guanyongyu* compounds consists of two aspects, the prototype, and the metaphorical meaning. The original meaning of the word is added with rich cultural colors to generate new conceptions. There are both direct and associated relationships between the prototype and the metaphorical meanings. Metaphorical meanings are extended and transferred out of the prototype. In this section, I propose two formation principles to examine the relationship between the prototype and its metaphorical meanings, and to analyze the manners in which compounds convey culturally specific connotations.

The first principle is metonymy: to use a well-understood and easily perceived compound (A) to stand for a category of referents (B). Although A and B do not belong to the same category. They are related to each other as we perceive them and mentally organize them. For example, Compound 26, 白大褂 “white gown”, is used for two referents. One is the physical referent, a white gown. Another is the metaphorical referent, a doctor. The compound “white gown” is used to stand for all kinds of doctors, family practitioners or heart surgeons. Furthermore, the usage is culture and language specific. It is limited to doctors only, not nurses or lab workers who also typically wear a white gown at work in China. Compound 27 is another example. The prototype of the compound 红领巾 “red scarf” has a physical referent of “red scarf”. The metaphorical referent, children at the age of elementary school, is related to the

prototype since the school-age-children wear a red scarf as a part of their school uniform. The concepts of “red scarf” and “elementary school age children” belong to two different categories, but are closely associated with each other in Chinese culture. It is language specific. The metaphor only stands for children at the age of elementary school, not everyone who wears a red scarf. In addition, the compound is used in a commendatory sense. The red scarf is a symbol of honor, i.e. only good students may wear it. Not all the students are granted the “red scarf” at one time, but in a gradual fashion. All the students receive it before their graduation from elementary school.

26. 白大褂 White gown – doctors.

27. 红领巾 Red scarf - children at elementary school age.

28. 白帽子 white hat – those who are politically backward and focus on scholarly work rather than revolution (Used by the Chinese Communist Party in the late 1950’s and 1960’s).

29. 红帽子 red hat – communists (Used by the Chinese Nationalist government in the late 1940’s).

Compounds 26-29 show that apparel compounds can stand for a particular category of people. The metaphors are language and culture specific. They are derived under a certain socio-historical condition. Compounds 28-29 are the products of political conditions and the metonymy stands for much more complex ideas and concepts. The “red hat” refers to communists and revolutionaries. They were conceptualized as the “red” (e.g. 赤匪 red bandits/communists, 红军 red army) in the 1940’s before communists took over China. The “white hat” refers to Nationalists and anti-revolutionaries. They were conceptualized as the “white” (e.g. 白区 white area – nationalist-controlled area, 白军 white army-- the nationalist army) by the Communist Party. Compounds 28-29 stand for a particular category of people with political connotations. Different from the 白大褂 “white gown” and the 红领巾 “red scarf” who practically wear a white gown at work and a red scarf at school, the 白帽子 “red hat” and the 红帽子 “white hat” rarely wear any hat at any time. Quite opposite, people who literally wear a white or red hat cannot be referenced as 白帽子 “red hat” or 红帽子 “white hat”.

In addition to apparel, individual names from classic stories may also stand for a particular category of people. Many story characters are well known

to Chinese people. For example, there were eight stories presented in various media, film, opera, ballet, and symphony during the Cultural Revolution. People knew all the stories and characters by heart. The individual name of a character is stereotyped for a category. The name of 杨白劳 (last name Yang plain work) stands for poor and exploited peasants, 洪常青 (last name Hong ever green) stands for brilliant communist leaders, 南霸天 (last name Nan tyranny sky) stands for evil landlords, 座山雕 (last name Zuo mountain vulture) stands for local bandits. Names of well-known characters from classical novels also stand for certain categories in either a commendatory or derogatory sense. For example, 诸葛亮 (last name Zhu vine bright) stands for wise and clever people. 王熙凤 (last name Wang bright phoenix) refers to the category of women, capable and vicious.

The literal meaning of the compound is rarely used. For example, compound 30 笔杆子 “pen stick” stands for persons who write effectively. Only the metaphorical meaning is used. The literal meaning, “pen”, has never been in use. Compound 31, 大手笔 “big hand pen” stands for well-established or famous writers. Originally 大手笔 referred to documents from the imperial court before 1911. The original meaning ceased; only the metaphorical meaning is in use now. Another interesting example is the compound 大团结 “great union” that stands for the monetary bill of 10 Yuan because the Chinese bill of 10 Yuan has a pattern of “the great union of people of all countries”. Table 4 presents semantic and cultural features of Compounds 26-32.

30. 笔杆子 pen stick – pen – the person who writes effectively.
31. 大手笔 big hand pen—well-established or famous writers.
32. 大团结 great union -- the monetary bill of 10 Yuan.

Table 4 Metonymy: semantic and cultural features of Compounds 26-32

Compound	Physical referent	Literal meaning being used	Metaphorical referent	Social effects	Political effects	Commendatory	Derogatory
白大褂 White gown	+	-	+	+	-	-	-
红领巾 Red scarf	+	-	+	+	-	+	-
白帽子 White hat	+	-	+	-	+	-	+
红帽子 Red hat	+	-	+	-	+	-	+
洪常青 Name	+	+	+	-	+	+	-
座山雕 Name	+	+	+	-	+	-	+
诸葛亮 Name	+	+	+	+	-	+	-
王熙凤 Name	+	+	+	+	-	-	+
笔杆子 Pen	+	-	+	+	-	+	-
大手笔 Big hand pen	-	-	+	+	-	+	-
大团结 Great Union	-?	-	+	+	-	-	-

The second principle is extension, i.e. to extend the conception from the original meaning of the compound. In this process, human perceptions and

conceptualizations are reorganized and reflected. The metaphors manifest the traditional Chinese values, social, political, and historical effects through the language. For example, the original meaning of compound 33 唱高调 “to sing high pitch” refers to the job of tenor singers. The meaning has been extended to refer to the behavior of the people who use high-flown words, i.e. to talk a lot and do little. The extended meaning activates the conceptual associations such as “boasting” and “untrustworthy”. It is used in a derogative sense because it is much against the Chinese value that “(a gentleman) is earnest in action but cautious in speech” (p. 9) by Confucius. To work quietly and speak little is a virtue (Compound 25).

Compounds 34 and 35 represent the political movements under Mao. Both metaphors ridicule Mao’s political policies. The compound, 掺沙子 “mix sand” was most frequently used during the Cultural Revolution when Mao proposed that it was politically dangerous for education and research institutions to be dominated by intellectuals. Workers, peasants, and soldiers were sent to these institutions as 沙子 “sand” to loosen the “clay”, i.e. the domination of intellectuals. The meaning has been extended from “mix sand” to “decrease the intellectual control by sending workers, peasants, and soldiers to the institutions”. Compound 25 is another example. The prototype of “pulling white flags” is in military use, i.e. to take over the surrenders who display the surrendering symbol of a white flag. The meaning was extended in 1958 when the Big Leap Forward Movement criticized those who did not claim super achievements to the Party. These persons were considered as “white flags”. The meaning was further extended in the sixties. Scholars who focused on research and neglected political studies were considered “white flags” and needed to be crashed down.

33. 唱高调 to sing high pitch – to sing in a high pitch tone – to use high-flown words-- to talk a lot but do nothing.

34. 掺沙子 to mix sand – to decrease the intellectual control by sending workers, peasants and soldiers to the research and education institutions

35. 拔白旗 to pull white flags (military use) -- to take over surrenders – to criticize those who did not claim super achievements in a political movement in the 1950’s – to criticize those who focused on scholarship and neglected political studies in the 1960’s.

One of the explanations for the process of extension may be that the original meaning of compounds ceases because of historical advancement. The original meaning is obsolete while extended meanings have been developed and used metaphorically. For example, Compound 36 抬轿子 “to carry the sedan chair” refers to a common job in the past when a sedan chair was one of the main transportation vehicles for the rich. The literal referent of “carrying the sedan chair” disappeared but the metaphor has been widely used referring to the corrupted behavior of pleasing one’s superiors in inappropriate manners. It vividly and symbolically portrays the action of entertaining one’s superiors. Another example is Compound 37, 拔钉子 “pull nails”. In ancient times, big boards with huge nails were used to block aggression of enemies. The prototype was extended to mean an obstacle. The metaphor of “pulling nails” refers to the action of eliminating political obstacles and getting rid of opponents. Compound 38 半吊子 “a half string of coins” is a monetary measurement in old China. One string is one thousand coins and a half is five hundred. This original meaning was obsolete. The extended meaning refers to tactless and impulsive persons. The meaning has been further extended to stand for dabblers who are not experienced and skillful.

36. 抬轿子 to carry the sedan chair (sedan chair is an old transportation vehicle) – to play up to one’s superior or important people (corrupted behavior).

37. 拔钉子 to pull nails – to clear military obstacles – to solve the problem created by a certain person – to get rid of one’s political rivals.

38. 半吊子 a half string of coins -- tactless and impulsive persons -- dabblers who are not experienced and skillful.

The extended meaning is frequently the only meaning in use. The compounds are created for metaphorical usage. Although the compounds have literal referent, they do not really mean anything. The prototype is used to give a vivid and concrete image of the metaphor. For example, the prototype of compound 油条 is “a deep-fried twisted dough stick”. The extended meaning of 油条 refers to an undisciplined, crafty, and sly person. This is derived from the fact that “a deep-fried twisted dough stick” is soft and crispy when it is freshly cooked but hard and pointy when not fresh. The prefix 老 “senior” is added to form the compound 老油条 “a very crafty and sly person”. The compound 老

油条 does not have physical referent because the prefix 老 “senior” modifies people. Indeed, metaphorically, it refers to very skillful crafty people.

Compound 40, 背黑锅 “to carry a black wok on one’s back” is another example in which only the metaphorical meaning is used. A wok becomes black after being used and abused for a lengthy time. Therefore, the metaphor of 背黑锅 “to carry a black wok on one’s back” refers to a victim and a scapegoat. The extended meaning stands for being unfairly blamed. It was most frequently used during the Cultural Revolution when Mao implemented the policy of blood relationship, i.e. if the father is anti-revolutionary, his children must be politically “bad” and should be deprived. The innocent children would thus be victimized and “carry a black wok on their backs”. It sets a satire on Mao’s policy. Compound 31 吃花圈 “to eat wreaths” is another example. It is obvious that the literal meaning 圈 does not work since nobody eats wreaths. The metaphor stands for finding an excuse to receive reimbursement. The compound can be traced back to the late 1970’s when the Cultural Revolution ended. Many people who died during the revolution were politically re-recognized and rehabilitated. There were many mourning and memorial meetings where wreaths were in great demand. People usually received a reimbursement from the government when buying a wreath for a memorial meeting. Corruption sneaked in. Some people received reimbursements for claims. The metaphor is another satire on the government and the Cultural Revolution. Table 5 shows the extended meanings of semantic and culture features of Compounds 36-42.

39. 老油条 Old oil sticks – deep-fried twisted dough sticks -- very undisciplined and sly persons.

40. 背黑锅 to carry a black wok – easy victim/scapegoat -- being unfairly and unjustly blamed.

41. 吃花圈 to eat wreaths – finding an excuse to receive reimbursement from the Governmental unit.

Table 5 Extended meanings: semantic and culture features of Compounds 26-32

Compound	Physical referent	Literal meaning being used	Metaphorical referent	Social effects	Political effects	Commendatory	Derogatory
唱高调 to sing high pitch	+	-	+	+	-	-	+
掺沙子 mix sand	+	-	+	+	+	-	-
拔白旗 pull white flags	+	-	+	-	+	-	-
抬轿子 Carry the sedan chair	+	-	+	+	-	-	+
拔钉子 pull nails	+	-	+	-	+	-	-
半吊子 a half string of coins	+	-	+	+	-	-	+
老油条 Old oil sticks	-?	-	+	+	-	-	+
背黑锅 to carry a black wok	-?	-	+	+	+	-	+
吃花圈 to eat wreaths	-?	-	+	+	-	-	+

## PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS

One distinctive property of *guanyongyu* compounds are their commendatory and derogatory usages in context. This feature reflects people's attitude and sentiments towards social events and cultural phenomena. It also

indicates the preference of social value and people's identification with it. The nature of *Guanyongyu* compounds is frequently critical, sarcastic, and revealing. Most of the examples presented in this paper are political, social, or cultural satires reflecting this nature. When people are dissatisfied with corruption, despise dishonest behaviors, and are worn out with political movements, they express their attitudes negatively towards these social ills. In term of satirical and critical effects, *Guanyongyu* compounds have functions similar to *Shunkuoliu*, popular satirical sayings (Link and Zhou, 2002).

Among 70 compound examples (41 listed and 29 in the text) presented in this paper, 51 (73%) of the compounds have a derogatory sense that sets satire and irony on injustice, corruption, as well as on the political movements under Mao; 28 (40%) of the compounds are used in a humorous sense to lighten people's heart and spirits. In general, most compounds provoke derogatory associations of the concepts and meanings. For example, compounds 11-14 activate the meaning associations of personal persecution and tight political control. They ring the bell on what could happen under a dictatorship. Table 6 presents the pragmatic characteristics of *Guanyongyu* compounds. Determination of metonymy or extended and transferred meanings is based on the *Dictionary of Chinese Idiomatic Expressions, Hanyu Guosu Cidian, 1990*.

Table 6 Pragmatic characteristics of the compounds in this paper

Compound	Total number	Commendatory	Derogatory	Neutral	Humorous	Satirical irony
Metonymy	20	7 (35%)	8 (40%)	5 (25%)	5 (25%)	2 (10%)
Meaning Extended / transferred	50	4 (8%)	43 (86%)	3 (6%)	23 (46%)	25 (50%)

The function of *Guanyongyu* compounds is based on the specific linguistic context and cultural discourse. Pragmatic properties sometimes go

through fundamental modifications as contexts change. For example, when the compound 老黄牛 “old yellow cow—to serve the people earnestly” was first used in the late 1960’s and 1970’s, it was the motto set by the Communist Party and used in a commendatory sense. Under today’s market economy, however, the value of 老黄牛 becomes ironic. The “motto” today is to maximally make profit from consumers. There are many such examples. When the compound 个体户 “privately-owned business” first appeared, it was used in a somewhat derogatory sense in the late 1970’s. Privately-owned business was not a first choice at that time. Only those who could not have a good job in state-owned units would go for “privately-owned business”. Many privately-owned businesses made much money when the concept of 向钱看 “looking towards money” was promoted and practiced in the 1980’s and 1990’s. The compound 个体户 is not used in the derogatory sense anymore.

Indeed the context and pragmatic function decide the meaning and usage of most *Guanyongyu* compounds. Take the compound 向日葵 “Sunflower” for example and start with its semantic features. The biological referent of compound 向日葵 “Sunflower” is a plant that is annual and has “tall coarse stems and large, yellow-rayed flower heads that produce edible seeds rich in oil” (*The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language*). It is categorized with other annual plants that bloom in summer and yield edible seeds in fall. The compounds 向日葵, 葵花 are its synonymies. The meaning can be a biological one or can refer to a lovely plant in one’s garden. The most important feature, however, is its usage. The compound provokes the conceptual associations of liveliness and simplicity. A “Sunflower” possesses life vitality: it survives easily; it is hardy and heat tolerant. It is simple in appearance, and in its requirements for weather and soil conditions. People all over the world like it, as evidenced by Van Gogh’s classic painting. When it is used in the Chinese context in the 1960’s and 1970’s, however, the meaning and referent will change. It does not mean the biological plant or the popular flower illustrated by Van Gogh. It associates with the concept of loyalty. The flower always turns toward the sun. The sunflower symbolizes Chinese peasants and the sun is Chairman Mao as originally reflected in the lyrics of a popular song, “the Commune is an ever-green vine and peasants are all sunflowers” (公社是棵常青藤, 社员都是向日葵). The meaning can also associate with the people who love the

Communist Party as the sentence of a children's song illustrates "we are all the sunflowers of the Party" (我们都是党的向阳花). The meaning has to fit, not only into the cultural, but also the linguistic context. In the context 听说他把手续已办妥他们就要往城里搬了, 他家那位向阳花立即笑了起来 (Wang, 1990) "At hearing that he had finished all the procedures for them to move to the city, the sunflower of his family immediately smiled", the "sunflower" does not refer to any loyal peasant or the person who loves the Party. It refers to the wife.

#### PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Firstly, understanding the underlying semantic and pragmatic properties is primarily important for the study of *Guanyongyu* compounds. Students will take the words literally unless they understand their cultural connotations. Instructors need to make the implicit linguistic and cultural connotations explicit. Curriculum should address the specific cultural background of the compound. Recent textbooks (e.g. *New Chinese Practical Reader*, 2002; *Chinese the Easy Way*, 1999) provide a section of Cultural Notes in each chapter. While the information provided in Cultural Notes is very helpful, one weakness is that there is no direct relationship between the Culture Notes and linguistic/cultural features of *Guanyongyu* compounds. For example, the Culture Notes may provide information on the policy of one-child per family. It is only in real life situations that students learn compounds such as 小太阳 "small sun", 小皇帝 "little emperor". The processes of understanding the culture and learning the language interact, thus enhance leaning.

Furthermore, the cognitive approach that focuses on the relationship between the prototype and metaphors should be encouraged. The cognitive approach may help students establish both associated and internal relationships between perceptualization and conceptualization of the cultural phenomenon, social events, and the world around us. In the instruction, we should not only teach what the metaphors or metonymies are, but also how they became so, what the related conceptual associations are, and how they are used in context. In this way, a large number of seemingly unrelated meanings and concepts may be organized into systematic associations and extensions. Learning will be based on understanding and personal experience rather than memorization.

Finally, it is important to learn the culture through language because they are frequently inseparable. *Guanyongyu* compounds are a special case where linguistic features and cultural perspectives are closely intertwined. Language mirrors the values of the culture and the attitude of the people in the culture. My analysis of *Guanyongyu* compounds indicates that a close examination of a language reveal its culture, the experience, and the conceptualization of the people in that culture. By understanding *Guanyongyu* compounds, we bridge language and culture to enhance language learning and across-culture understanding.

#### NOTES

1, 2. The subject of the verb may not be the agent of the action. The verb becomes causative as in the examples of Compounds 12 and 14. The agent who “wears small shoes” (Compound 12) is not the person who “makes things hard for someone by abusing one’s power”, but the one who is being persecuted. Similarly, the agent who “wears a degrading hat” (Compound 14) is not the person who “puts a political label on others”, but the one who is being labeled. Native Chinese speakers know that the action of “put a hat” 戴帽子 is not initiated by the person who consequently wears the hat. Learners must know the grammatical and semantic relationship in order to understand and use the causative compounds correctly.

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## 连接语言与文化的桥梁：汉语惯用语的特征分析

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## 提要

本研究探索现代汉语惯用语中的语言文化特点。惯用语的语义与语用反映了中国的历史文化与价值观念，离开其文化背景则难以准确理解惯用语的含义。本文着重考察了惯用语的三个方面，1) 语音节奏与结构形式的关系，2) 语义的借代，转喻，隐喻，及语义在反映概念的基础上所增添引申的社会文化语义，3) 语用的褒贬特征，言语环境与文化背景。研究结果说明惯用语有着强烈的时代烙印与丰富的社会文化色彩，语音节奏与语法结构的关系说明了惯用语琅琅上口，易记易诵的原因；语义和语用在词汇本义的基础上加以文化语义上的引申扩展，表达了人们的认知结构和社会现象的认识、态度与观念。惯用语的语言特征与文化特征表现了语言的独特性及民族文化的鲜明性。两者为一体融汇于惯用语中。

## 关键词

汉语语义，国俗语义，惯用语，中国文化