

# The 'Bird' in Chinese Culture

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## *'Vták' v čínskej kultúre*

*Resumé* Štúdia využíva teóriu konceptuálnej metafory na prienik do čínskej kultúry prostredníctvom extenzie na semiotickej a sémantickej úrovni. Zameriava sa na extenziu použitia 'vtáka' ako konštituenta (*niao* 鳥 a *zhui* 隹) v čínskom znakovom písme ako aj v 'štvorznačkových idiómoch' *chengyu* 成語. Napriek univerzálnosti konceptu 'vtáka', výsledky ukazujú niektoré špecifické čínske črty.

*Abstract* This study uses conceptual metaphor theory to gain insights into Chinese culture by investigating the extensions on semiotic and semantic levels. It focuses on extensions of the use of 'birds' as a constituent (*niao* 鳥 and *zhui* 隹) in Chinese characters, as well as in *chengyu* 成語 ('four-character idioms') with a 'bird' constituent. Despite the generality of the concept 'bird', the results show some specifically Chinese features.

*Key words* China, Culture, Concept of 'Bird' · Chinese, Figures of Speech, Conceptual Metaphor, Conceptual Metonymy · Chinese, Language, Characters, *chengyu* 成語

## I *Introduction*

The field of cognitive linguistics shows that thought is inherently metaphorical, and, since language is a mirror of the mind, the metaphors that appear in language constitute a rich source of information when exploring a certain culture. All experience is cultural, and we experience the world in such a way that our culture

is already present in the very experience itself.<sup>1</sup> With the tools of cognitive linguistics it is possible to investigate how people in a certain culture make sense of their experiences, and conceptual metaphor theory thus seems very promising when trying to gain insights into Chinese culture through the characteristics of the Chinese writing system. Chinese is one of the oldest written languages,<sup>2</sup> and the characters and the ideas behind their development reveal the way Chinese-speakers think and make sense of the world, and serve as a basis for other levels of language.

Just as the metaphorical way of thinking developed slowly, from simple to more complex forms, research in cognitive linguistics has shown that there is a hierarchy among metaphors, from the most basic primary ones to the most complex conceptual ones. This study is based on the idea that the Chinese language has this same pattern and that it is possible to follow the development of this metaphor hierarchy at different levels of the language. Since the Chinese writing system is the product of human thought, and since thought is metaphorical, it is therefore expected that metaphors are at work even at the level of characters. It should thus be possible to obtain insights into the creative process of inventing new characters, from the simple pictographs to the complex writing system still in use. This study first focuses on the semiotic level—the structure of Chinese characters and the prototype effects of the meaning constituents in them. This study also extends to the semantic level for comparison purposes by examining one of the most stable and unchangeable chunks of the Chinese language—*chengyu* 成語 ‘four-character idioms’. Idioms are essentially metaphorical or metonymic, and thus have come to exceed the borders of

1 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, IL; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 57.

2 The origins of the Chinese writing system date back to the Shang dynasty in the second millennium BC. The first writings were what is now known as *jiaguwen* 甲骨文 (‘tortoise script’ or ‘oracle bone script’) and *qingtongqi mingwen* 青銅器銘文, also *jinwen* 金文 (‘bronze ware script’). See Ye Changyuan 葉昌元, *Zi li—Hanzi bujian tongjie* 字理—漢字部件通解 [The Inner Essence of Chinese Characters—An Explanation of Components in Chinese Characters] (Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe, 2008), 1.

language, becoming instead more a part of the related culture. Conventional metaphors represent more complex and structured experiences and knowledge about certain phenomena. It is expected that a comparison between the semiotic and semantic levels of a specific concept should help to reveal the development of metaphorical thought.

The focal concept chosen for this study is that of the bird. One of the most basic and primal experiences for people was (and remains) the experience of nature, and thus the need to comprehend the natural world. As seen in prehistoric cave drawings, where people are represented as animals, the conceptual metaphor PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS is one of the primary metaphors revealing the importance of totemism in the human mind. Closely related to this is the reversed metaphor ANIMALS ARE PEOPLE, which underlies the notion of anthropomorphism. Another metaphor that links animals and people is ANIMALS/PEOPLE ARE STRUCTURED OBJECTS, underlying the process of objectification. Much the same can be said with regard to plants in relation to people.<sup>3</sup> This poses a question: can conceptual patterns like this be found in Chinese characters?

In Chinese, characters for animals, including those for birds, are pictographic in nature (*niu* 牛 'cow', *yang* 羊 'sheep', *ma* 馬 'horse', *xiang* 象 'elephant', *lu* 鹿 'deer', *chong* 虫 'insect, worm', *yu* 魚 'fish' and *gui* 龜 'tortoise'). A bird is one of the most universal prototypical animals and seems to be rather special in Chinese because it has two characters representing it (*niao* 鳥 and *zhui* 隹) rather than one; over time both of these have become constituents for other characters.<sup>4</sup> The two characters have slightly different meanings: *niao* 鳥 represents a long-tailed bird, while *zhui* 隹 represents a short-tailed bird. This study examines characters with a bird-meaning constituent and idioms that include the character for a bird. Most of the characters featuring either *niao* 鳥 or *zhui* 隹 as a semantic constituent represent a kind (species) of bird, but there are a few examples of other meanings; these are characters in which a metaphor or metonymy is expected.

3 Zoltan Kövecses, *Metaphor in Culture: Universality and Variation* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 25.

4 These characters are two of the approximately two hundred radicals found in a standard dictionary.

Since a bird is more or less a universal concept, it is therefore expected that a study of Chinese would reveal some general points that could be applied to other languages. This study adopts an ideal cognitive model of birds and compares it with the information found in these characters. The research material for the first part of the study is collected from the *Shuo wen jie zi* 說文解字 (Interpreting Words and Analyzing Characters),<sup>5</sup> the first etymological dictionary from the Eastern Han Period (25–220), which was collected and categorized by Xu Shen 許慎 (58?–147?). In addition, this study investigates the meaning of the bird character in various idioms. Since there are no idioms with the *zhui* 隹 character, this study investigates the metaphorical and metonymic extensions of the concept of the bird in idioms with the character *niao* 鳥. Since Chinese culture seems to be mysterious and difficult to comprehend for outsiders, this study raises the question of whether research on a single and general concept can reveal any specific features of this culture and contribute to a better understanding of it.

## 2 Chinese Characters and Their Structure

Chinese characters today are generally considered to be logographs with phonetic and semantic constituents; only about 10 percent can be considered to be pictographs, although each constituent has the potential to be explained graphically.<sup>6</sup> People used pictures to express how they perceived the world and themselves before the development of writing systems, and a glimpse of this earlier time can still be seen in pictographs. The earliest pictographic signs

5 Xu Shen 許慎, *Shuo wen jie zi zhu* 說文解字注 [Annotations of Interpreting Words and Analyzing Characters], ed. by Duan Yuzai 段玉裁 (Taipei: Tiangong shuju, 1977).

6 Hiraga Masako, *Metaphor and Iconicity: A Cognitive Approach to Analysing Texts* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 198. As Xu Shen explains in his collection of characters, the difference between *wen* 文 and *zi* 字 is that *wen* represents pictographic characters, which are the building blocks for constructing the other five structured groups of characters. See Ye Changyuan, *Zi li—Hanzi bujian tongjie*, 17.

referred to concrete things, but through the processes of expansion and combination more complex concepts could then be named. At first, the creation of every character had the specific goal of naming a single concept, but over time these characters became polysemous.<sup>7</sup> In addition, it was not possible to make pictographs for every concept, and thus people created new non-pictographic characters from combinations of pictographs. Both characters denoting a bird, *niao* 鳥 and *zhui* 隹, are pictographs as both originate from a concrete picture of birds and look very similar in the *jiaguwen* 甲骨文 'bone oracle script' and *dazhuan* 大篆 'big seal script'. The image of a bird is still seen in both characters in the *xiaozhuan* 小篆 'small seal script', but over time these became more abstract and turned into two different characters (from *zhuanti* 篆體 'seal script' to *kaiti* 楷體 'regular script').<sup>8</sup> Both *niao* 鳥 and *zhui* 隹 then became semantic constituents, mostly used for structuring characters that represent different kinds of birds.<sup>9</sup>

When preparing the *Shuo wen jie zi* collection of characters, Xu Shen carefully studied each character's structure and followed the already accepted *liushu* 六書 'six scripts' categorization.<sup>10</sup> It has been agreed that 'mutually explanatory

7 Ye Changyuan, *Zi li—Hanzi bujian tongjie*, 2.

8 All the scripts prior to *xiaozhuan* 小篆 ('small seal script') are considered to be characters in development because they did not have a stable form and there were many different ways of writing one character. In the Qin dynasty (221–206 BC) the writing system was reformed and stabilized.

9 Both characters are also used as phonetic constituents in characters.

10 The six structural categories of Chinese characters first appeared in *Zhouli* 周禮 [Rites of Zhou], a book that supposedly dates back to the pre-Qin period (before 3rd c. BC). Characters belong to one of the six groups based on their structures: 1. *xiangxing* 象形 'pictographic characters' (*niao* 鳥 and *zhui* 隹); 2. *buiyi* 會意, 'associative compound characters' (for example, *lin* 林 'a forest' is structured by repeating the character *mu* 木, meaning a tree or wood); 3. *zhuanzhu* 轉註 'mutually explanatory characters' (for example, *lao* 老 'old' and *kao* 考 'long life' have similar meanings, as shown by the similarity in their pronunciation and characters); 4. *chushi* 指事 'self-explanatory characters' (*shang* 上 'up' or 'on' and *xia* 下 'down' or 'under'); 5. *jiajie* 假借 'phonetic loan characters' (for example, *qiu* 求 has two meanings: 'for' and 'entreat', where the second meaning is borrowed from the first one); and 6. *xingsheng* 形聲 'picto-phonetic characters' (for example, two characters for 'a river' *jiang* 江 and *he* 河 have the first part bringing the meaning of water and

characters' were derived from the carving of signs on tortoise shells and other materials, 'associate compound characters' helped understand the original meaning of some characters, 'mutually explanatory characters' revealed the creation of synonyms, 'phonetic loan characters' showed the creation of one character from another, and that 'picto-phonetic characters' formed a small part at the very beginning (20 percent in bone oracle script) but became widely used in forming new words (around 80 percent of currently used Chinese characters). The pictographic character forms the basis of the other five categories.<sup>11</sup> While the creation of pictographs soon ended, and it is now impossible to create new ones, the structures of associative compound characters continue to be developed.<sup>12</sup> Xu Shen did not take into consideration the oracle bone script or bronzeware script since the sources of these earliest writing systems were lost until the 19th century. While this has attracted the criticism of modern researchers, for the purposes of the current study Xu Shen's work, which over the centuries has been appreciated as a valuable source of cultural, historical, social, political, philosophical, economic, and religious knowledge, remains a legitimate source.

### 2.1 *The Ideal Cognitive Model for Birds*

A bird has rich symbolic meanings in religion and mythology, and is one of the basic archetypes that seems to be more or less universal in all cultures.<sup>13</sup> It is assumed that in categorizing the experience of birds, the aspects that people have

the second part expressing the related sound). See Hu Zhuanglin, »The Image Iconicity in the Chinese Language«, in *Semblance and Signification*, ed. by Pascal Michelucci, Olga Fischer and Christina Ljungberg (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2011), 86.

11 Hu Zhuanglin, »The Image Iconicity in the Chinese Language«, 86.

12 Ye Changyuan, *Zi li—Hanzi bujian tongjie*, 6.

13 The most common idea is that birds connect Earth and Heaven, being messengers that bring heavenly messages down to Earth. Their ability to fly also gives them the symbolic meaning of souls. Flying itself has a symbolic meaning, representing the desire for sublimation. See Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 86–91 and 396–397.

most often focused on are those that they believe to be most important.<sup>14</sup> As tests show, people notice very different features in the same object or event, and substantial flexibility exists even in how the same person conceptualizes the same category on different occasions.<sup>15</sup> This presents a key question: which aspects of birds are highlighted in Chinese culture, and are they different from the general aspects?

In an attempt to organize knowledge, humans tend to rely on prototypical cultural or folk models, ideal cognitive models (ICMs) and category structures. The by-products of such an organization are known as prototype effects.<sup>16</sup> A cognitive model is idealized and does not fit actual situations in a one-to-one correspondence; instead it joins many concepts that are inferentially connected to one another in a single conceptual structure that is experientially meaningful as a whole.<sup>17</sup> An ICM has a cognitive structure that can be taken as a *gestalt*, a prototypical example which covers representative examples and uses four structuring principles: propositional and image-schematic structures, and metonymic and metaphoric mappings.<sup>18</sup> In the process of creating new Chinese characters, in this case using *niao* 鳥 and *zhui* 隹 as constituents to produce the names of things, people relied on the ICM for birds. Definitional specifics that can be attributed to the prototypical bird, as opposed to other animals, include being able to fly, having feathers, being S-shaped, having wings, not being domesticated, being born from eggs, and having a beak or bill.<sup>19</sup>

14 Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 83.

15 Raymond Gibbs, *The Poetics of Mind: Figurative Thought, Language and Understanding* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 53.

16 George Lakoff, *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 68.

17 Gibbs, *The Poetics of Mind*, 58.

18 Lakoff, *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*, 68.

19 Dirk Geeraerts, »Prototype Theory: Prospects and Problems of Prototype Theory«, in *Cognitive Linguistics: Basic Readings*, ed. by Dirk Geeraerts (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2006), 152. These attributes help define a bird in English. The Chinese definition in contemporary dictionaries is very similar, pointing out that a bird is a vertebrate born from eggs which has a constant temperature, a keel on its chest (giving it the S-shape), front legs that have become

## ICM of a bird

↙	↙	↙	↓	↘	↘
CM	CM	CM	CM	CM	CM
an animal	habits (wild)	body parts (wings, beak/bill)	appearance (S-shaped, feathers)	reproduction (eggs)	moving (flying)

Each of these cognitive models is based on image schemas, such as moving (flying), identity (colour of feathers), existence (body parts and habits), and so on. These image schemas can further be bases for metaphors and metonymies. There are, of course, »non-representative« examples of birds: for example, not all birds can fly (e.g. a penguin or ostrich), and not all of them sing.<sup>20</sup> The proto-typical birds vary from culture to culture, and their specifics are not universal.<sup>21</sup> Which pieces of knowledge appear in Chinese characters and to what extent? Are there metaphors and metonymies already encrypted at the level of characters?

wings and back legs that can walk, and which is toothless and covered with feathers. In addition, most birds can fly, but there are some birds with degenerated wings that are unable to do so, for example in the *Xiandai Hanyu Ciba* 现代汉语辞海. See *Xiandai Hanyu Ciba* 现代汉语辞海, ed. by Ni Wenjie 倪文杰, Zhang Weiguo 张卫国 and Ji Xiaojun 冀小军 (Beijing: Renmin Zhongguo chubanshe, 1994).

20 It is interesting to note that, at least in English dictionaries, while the ability to fly is a definitional specific, the ability to sing is not.

21 In her prototype theory, Rosch noted that the existence of prototypical effects in clearly bounded concepts such as 'bird' implies that a strict distinction has to be made between a degree of membership and a degree of representativity. Membership in the bird category is discrete: something either is or is not a bird. But some birds may be »birdier« than others: the swallow is a more typical bird than the ostrich. See Lakoff, *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*, 150. This study, however, is focused on the basic-level concept of the bird regardless of species.

## 2.2 Chinese Characters with *niao* 鳥- and *zbui* 隹-Meaning Constituents

Interpreting Words and Analyzing Characters categorizes characters into 540 groups.<sup>22</sup> This study considers characters with *niao* 鳥- and *zbui* 隹-meaning constituents, and some related characters that form independent groups in Xu Shen's work, although he does not explain clearly why he separated them from the root character. These characters also have *niao* 鳥 or *zbui* 隹 elements in their bases, such as *wu* 烏, *sui* 隹, *huan* 隹, *ju* 隹, *chou* 隹 and *za* 隹. The great majority of characters with the meaning constituent of *niao* 鳥 or *zbui* 隹<sup>23</sup> have a picto-phonetic structure and represent a kind of bird, and thus they have no extended meaning.<sup>24</sup> Xu Shen uses three different explanations for these characters: he starts the explanation with the meaning of the character as 'a bird' (鳥也)<sup>25</sup>, 'belongs to' (屬於)<sup>26</sup> or 'proper name' (專名).<sup>27</sup> The focus of this study is characters

22 There is a numerological reason for this:  $6 \times 9 \times 10 = 540$ , which is the product formed from the symbolic numerals attributed to Yin and Yang, respectively, and the number of the Heavenly Stems.

23 These two constituents can also serve as phonetic constituents, such as in *dao* 曷, *niao* 隹, *wei* 隹, *wei* 隹, *wei* 隹, *sbui* 隹, *tui* 隹, *huai* 隹, *wei* 隹, *hui* 隹 and so on.

24 There are a few examples of characters where the constituent that represents a bird is interchangeable through time, for example *ju* 隹 and *ju* 鳥, or *ji* 隹 and *ji* 鳥.

25 There are eleven characters with the *zbui* 隹 constituent (*zfang* 隹, *que* 隹, *ya* 隹, *yan* 隹, *ying* 隹, *qian* 隹, *bu* 隹, *zbi* 隹, *ji* 隹 and *chu* 隹); a character *ji* 隹 is explained as *zbi shi chu ye* 知時畜也 'a domestic animal that knows the time' and *chu* 隹 explained as *ji zi* 隹子也 'a child of a cock'. There are 19 characters with the *niao* 鳥 constituent (*niao* 鳥, *feng* 鳳, *jie* 鷓, *xu* 鷓, *qi* 鷓, *ao* 鷓, *ju* 鷓, *nan* 鷓, *chuan* 鷓, *yue* 鷓, *tou* 鷓, *min* 鷓, *yan* 鷓, *bao* 鷓, *bo* 鷓, *yong* 鷓, *yi* 鷓, *ying* 鷓 and *kou* 鷓).

26 There are three characters with the *zbui* 隹 constituent (*zbi* 隹, *chun* 隹 and *an* 隹), the independent constituent 隹 itself and three characters with the *niao* 鳥 constituent (*ge* 鷓, *yi* 鷓 and *di* 鷓).

27 There are 13 characters with the *zbui* 隹 constituent (*ya* 隹, *luo* 隹, *lin* 隹, *gui* 隹, *han* 隹, *li* 隹, *diao* 隹, *sbui* 隹, *qian* 隹, *yong* 隹, *ru* 隹, *bu* 隹 and *chi* 隹), two characters with the 隹 constituent (*guan* 隹 and *jiu* 隹), 85 characters with the 鳥 constituent (*luan* 鷓, *yue* 鷓, *zhuo* 鷓, *su* 鷓, *shuang* 鷓, *jiu* 鷓, *jue* 鷓, *zhu* 鷓, *gu* 鷓, *zhou* 鷓, *ju* 鷓, *dan* 鷓, *ju* 鷓, *liu* 鷓, *yu* 鷓, *xue* 鷓, *jiu* 鷓, *xiao* 鷓, *jue* 鷓, *fang* 鷓, *kun* 鷓, *jiao* 鷓, *miao* 鷓, *liu* 鷓, *liao* 鷓, *zbi* 鷓, *luo* 鷓, *bu* 鷓, *he* 鷓, *lu* 鷓, *bu* 鷓, *bong* 鷓, *qiu*

that do not fit into these groups and produce metaphoric or metonymic meaning extensions.

Table 1: *Characters With a Bird Constituent and Meaning Extensions*

Constituent	Number of characters with this constituent	Number of characters with meaning extension
<i>niao</i> 鳥	鳥+115	8
<i>zhui</i> 隹	隹+38	11
<i>wu</i> 烏	烏+2	1
<i>sui</i> 隹	隹+2	3
<i>ju</i> 隹	隹+1	2
<i>chou</i> 隹	隹+2	3
<i>za</i> 隹	隹+2	3
<i>huan</i> 隹	隹+3	1
	173	32

鳩, *yuan* 鴛, *yang* 鴛, *duo* 鴛, *lu* 鷓, *ge* 駟, *e* 駝, *yan* 鴈, *wu* 鴛, *jie* 鷓, *jia* 鷓, *meng* 鷓, *yu* 鷓, *pi* 鷓, *ti* 鷓, *lu* 鷓, *ci* 鷓, *yi* 鷓, *fu* 鷓, *bi* 鷓, *qu* 鷓, *ou* 鷓, *ti* 鷓, *li* 鷓, *cang* 鷓, *gua* 鷓, *jiao* 鷓, *jing* 鷓, *jian* 鷓, *zhen* 鷓, *ci* 鷓, *tuan* 鷓, *yuan* 鷓, *xian* 鷓, *yao* 鷓, *jue* 鷓, *ju* 鷓, *buan* 鷓, *zhan* 鷓, *chen* 鷓, *qu* 鷓, *yu* 鷓, *bie* 鷓, *jun* 鷓, *yi* 鷓, *he* 鷓, *jie* 鷓, *ying* 鷓, *wu* 鷓, *jiao* 鷓, *lei* 鷓, *yan* 鷓 and *zhen* 鷓), another four in the *xin fu zi* 新附字 'new appendix' added in the Song dynasty (960–1279) (*zhe* 鷓, *gu* 鷓, *ya* 鷓 and *sbi* 鷓) and two characters with the *wu* 烏 constituent (*wu* 烏 and *que* 烏).

Table 2: *Characters With Meaning Extensions*

	sound	shape	movement	measure	nature, characteristic	action related to birds
<i>die</i> 馱	x					
<i>ming</i> 鳴	x					
<i>yao</i> 鸚	x					
<i>han</i> 鸛		x				
<i>yu</i> 馱		x				
<i>zhi</i> 鸞			x			
<i>xian</i> 鸞			x <sup>28</sup>			
<i>fen</i> 鴛			x <sup>29</sup>	x		
<i>li</i> 鸛		x				
<i>hong</i> 雉		x				
<i>juan</i> 雉		x				
<i>gou</i> 雌			x			
<i>wei</i> 隴			x			
<i>zhi</i> 隻				x		
<i>xiong</i> 雄					x	
<i>ci</i> 雌					x	
<i>san</i> 散						x
<i>yi</i> 雉						x
<i>zhao</i> 翟						x
<i>yan</i> 焉 (鳥)		x				
<i>sui</i> 奮 (奮)			x			
<i>fen</i> 奮 (奮)			x			
<i>duo</i> 奪 (奮)						x
<i>ju</i> 瞿 (瞿)					x <sup>30</sup>	
<i>jue</i> 矚 (矚)			x			
<i>chou</i> 雌 (雌)				x		

28 The character represents the image of a bird flying high.

29 The character represents the image of a bird flying low.

30 The meaning of 'eagle eyes'.

<i>shuang</i> 雙 (雥)				x		
<i>huo</i> 隹 (雥)	x					
<i>za</i> 隹 (隹)				x		
<i>yuan</i> 隹 (隹)				x		
<i>ji</i> 隹 (隹)				x		
<i>huo</i> 萑 (萑)			x <sup>31</sup>	x		
	4	6	9	8	3	6

As seen in the results above, of the 173 characters with a bird constituent, almost one fifth (32) have meaning extensions, with two (鶯 and 萑) even having two different extensions. About a half of these characters are picto-phonetics, while others are characters where every element in the structure is explained as a meaning constituent (鳴, 翟, 奮, 奮, 雥, 隹, 奪 and 隹), characters where the other component supports the bird meaning (隻, 雙, 雙 and 萑), a pictograph (焉), or as an element in which the phonetic constituent still carries a meaning (雥 and 翟).<sup>32</sup> Most of the characters are based on a PART-WHOLE scheme and have a metonymic extension. Metonymy is about referring; it is a method of naming or identifying something by mentioning something else which is a component part or closely or symbolically linked to it.<sup>33</sup> It is a conceptual phenomenon based on

31 According to Duan Yuzai's 段玉裁 (1735–1815) explanation of Xu Shen's work in *Shuo wen jie zi zhu* 說文解字註 [Annotations to Interpreting Words and Analyzing Characters], in addition to measure, the character is a synonym for 雙, representing the image of a flying bird. These two characters had a similar pronunciation and a close meaning.

32 The theoretical basis for Xu Shen's category *yisheng* 亦聲 'also sound', according to *Shuo wen jie zi zhu*, can be summarized as »sound comes from meaning, meaning is realized in sound, and sound leads to the form/graph«. If one wants to recognize characters, one should observe the form so as to know its sound and observe the sound so as to get its meaning. See Hu Zhuanglin, »The Image Iconicity in the Chinese Language«, 87.

33 Murray Knowles and Rosamund Moon, *Introducing Metaphor* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 54.

direct physical or causal associations, and operates within an ICM.<sup>34</sup> Most of the metonymies in this study belong to THE PART FOR THE WHOLE category, and this can help reveal which bird characteristics are considered important in Chinese culture. These include the ICM for birds as well as sounds and measures. The different sounds made by different kinds of birds are obviously important in Chinese culture. The aspect of measure is related to the fact that the Chinese uses different measure words for nouns and verbs, and these can be seen as the MEASURE FOR THE THING MEASURED metonymy; in this case, the choice of a bird might have to do with the fact that birds tend to move in flocks. It seems that when constructing new characters people not only rely on sight, which is used for naming the shape of the body and its characteristics (size, length, shape and body parts), colour, movement, habits and so on (as is still seen in definitional aspects), but also on hearing, which is used to comprehend all kinds of sounds.

Metonymy is often the link between bodily experience and metaphor in the process of moving from concrete experience to more abstract concepts. There is the character 隼, with the meaning of a specific bird's appearance (*yingsun* 鷹隼 'hawk' or 'falcon'), but this implies the act of observation by a person (or another animal), and this metonymy is the basis for a further metaphorical extension, the ANIMALS ARE PEOPLE personification. In contrast to metonymy, metaphor is about understanding and interpretation; it is a way to comprehend or explain one phenomenon by describing it in terms of another, and personification is a basic method that people use to explain the natural world, as it is a kind of ontological metaphor in which physical objects or nonhuman entities are understood in terms of human beings.

The last group in the table above is »actions related to birds«: this exceeds the level of the PART-WHOLE image schema and reveals a prototypical case of direct causality, and manipulation with objects and their possession, which emerges from our direct experience. The manipulation of objects by force is the most fundamental case of causality, the volitional use of bodily force to change something physically by making direct contact with it. Indeed, it is the conscious

34 Günter Radden and Zoltan Kövecses, »Towards a Theory of Metonymy«, in *Metonymy in Language and Thought*, ed. by Klaus-Uwe Panther and Günter Radden (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1999), 17.

use of physical force that is at the centre of our concept of causality.<sup>35</sup> These characters actually represent actions related to birds that are carried out by people (agents). These four verbs all have the meaning of hunting for birds: 勸 and 雉 (both are picto-phonetics) for shooting birds, 罾 for catching birds with a net (all parts in the character are meaning constituents) and the even more complex character 奪 (all parts in the character are meaning constituents), which represents an unsuccessful attempt to catch a bird with one's hand based on the idea that a bird is a wild animal that is easily scared and therefore hard to catch. People hunt birds for food, for sport and achievement (a target), or maybe just to have as a pet; a bird thus holds the metaphorical meaning of a desired object worth obtaining. These characters are based on the EVENTS ARE ACTIONS metaphor, which implies a chain of causality that structures the event, with a causal relationship between what the agent does and the results of the action.<sup>36</sup> All four characters are sources for the ACQUIRING A DESIRED OBJECT IS ACHIEVING A PURPOSE and TRYING TO ACHIEVE A PURPOSE IS HUNTING object event–structure metaphors.

From these results, it is possible to conclude that a more simplistic metonymy is somehow more primal, and thus precedes metaphor, and that a more complex way of thinking is required when creating characters that can represent verbs. Besides covering general metonymic extensions of the ICM for birds, Chinese culture adds two more, sound and measure, with the fundamental process of metaphoric extension showing the objectification of birds.

35 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: the Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 177.

36 George Lakoff and Mark Turner, *More Than a Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 77.

### 3 Chinese Four-Character Idioms With *niao* 鳥

In addition, this study also investigates the further development of metaphors and metonymies of birds in chunks of language with a more or less stable form and meaning, namely idioms. Idioms on their own have conventional metaphoric or metonymic meanings. The meaning of an idiom cannot be obtained from the sum of the meanings of each part, and thus it is necessary to apply conventional knowledge or to have cultural knowledge to understand it. It is not the individual words that participate in the process of creating idioms; instead it is the conceptual domain.<sup>37</sup> Idioms thus arise from our general knowledge of the world, as embodied in our conceptual system, and the meaning of an idiom should therefore be accessible by relying on general knowledge.

The Chinese idioms explored in this study, so-called *chengyu* 成語, mostly consist of four characters. A *chengyu* represents a whole form on its own with structural stability, and it cannot be simply considered as a word compound; instead it is a complex segment with a complete rich meaning, regardless of the language environment it occurs in. *Chengyu* have their origins in history; they come from myths, legends, and fables, as well as classical literary, philosophical, and historical works or folks literature, and the stories behind the idioms, explaining how the expression came about, are still known today.

Idioms featuring animals can be found cross-culturally, and bird idioms are no exception to this. However, *zhui* 隹 does not occur as an independent character in any Chinese *chengyu*. Thus, this study considers 58 *chengyu* with the character *niao* 鳥, which can occur in any of the four positions of the idiom. There are also some variants of the same idiom with the same meaning but a different word order.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Zoltan Kövecses, *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 201.

<sup>38</sup> *Chengyu* and their explanations were collected from three online dictionaries: <dict.idioms.moe.edu.tw/sort\_pho.htm> (last retrieval 17 July 2014), <http://www.zdic.net> (last retrieval 17 July 2014) and <chengyu.itlearner.com/> (last retrieval 17 July 2014). Only one version of the same *chengyu* with a different word order was considered.

Table 3: *Conceptual Metaphors and Metonymies Behind Chengyu*

Conceptual metaphors	
a bird represents a person ANIMALS ARE PEOPLE	烏鳥私情, 小鳥依人, 倦鳥知返, 倦鳥歸巢, 笨鳥先飛, 鳥為食亡, 鳥面鵠形, 鳥能擇木, 鳥裡鳥氣, 鳳鳥不至, 鷲匿鳥形, 鷲鳥不群, 籠中之鳥, 如鳥翔空, 池魚籠鳥, 鳥入樊籠, 鳥聲獸心, 寒蟬僵鳥, 籠鳥檻猿, 木幹鳥棲, 百鳥朝鳳, 鳥雀哀鳴, 越鳥南棲, 鳥窮則啄, 象耕鳥耘,* 禽息鳥視,* 窮鳥入懷,* 鳥伏獸窮,* 鳥覆危巢*
a bird represents an emotion A BODY IS A CONTAINER OF EMOTIONS	fear: 如鳥獸散, 鳥驚曲木, 驚弓之鳥, 鳥驚魚潰, 鳥散魚潰, 如鳥獸散, 傷弓之鳥, 鳥驚魚駭, 鳥驚鼠竄, 長頸鳥喙, 雲屯鳥散 homesickness: 越鳥南棲
a bird represents a desired object (goal) ACQUIRING A DESIRED OBJECT IS A PURPOSE	一石二鳥, <sup>39</sup> 鳥盡弓藏, 鳥跡蟲絲, 卵覆鳥飛, 青鳥殷勤, 鳥槍換炮.
Conceptual metonymy bird flocks (»plenty«) and scattering PART-WHOLE	獸聚鳥散, 鳥集鱗萃.
a bird is a part of difficult circumstances PART-WHOLE	鳥啼花落, 鳥啼花怨, 窮鳥入懷,* 鳥焚魚爛, 鳥哭猿啼, 羊腸鳥道, 鳥棲烈火, 蠶叢鳥道, 鳥伏獸窮,* 鳥覆危巢*

39 Variants of this idiom include also: 一石兩鳥, 一箭雙雕 and 一箭雙鷗.

a bird is a part of a beautiful environment, circumstances PART-WHOLE	鳥語花香, 鳥革翬飛, 象耕鳥耘,* 禽息鳥視*
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\**Chengyu* has a metonymic and a metaphoric meaning.

In addition to this, two expressions can be found describing the characteristics of Chinese writing: *gui wen niao ji* 龜文鳥跡 'tortoise characters and bird footprints' for pictographic characters and *fei niao ji she* 飛鳥驚蛇 'flying birds and frightened snakes' for the free flow of *caoshu* 草書 'cursive script' in calligraphy. Since birds fly, and flying implies being free of obstacles, *niao fei* 鳥飛 represents something beautiful, a flow or freedom (as in *fei niao ji she* 飛鳥驚蛇 'flying birds and frightened snakes' and *ru niao xiang kong* 如鳥翔空 'as birds glide in the sky'), as opposed to the inability of a bird to spread its wings in a cage (*chengyu* with *long niao* 籠鳥 'a bird in a cage'). Another interesting word compound is *niao dao* 鳥道 'bird's roads', where a bird is connected to a road, which is full of challenges that only a bird can overcome since it can fly. A *chengyu* is a complex metaphorical expression and can consist of more than one conceptual metaphor; therefore, some of the *chengyu* in the table may also fit into other groups. The majority of *chengyu* are based on the ANIMALS ARE PEOPLE personification. In an attempt to understand nature, common events, and inanimate objects, people tend to see these things in human terms. Personification permits us to use our knowledge and insights about ourselves to maximal effect, thus allowing us to better comprehend things. Personification is based on the EVENTS ARE ACTIONS metaphor.<sup>40</sup>

Emotions and qualities of people that are highlighted in *chengyu* with a bird constituent include: filial piety (*wu niao song qing* 烏鳥私情 'crow's personal relationships'), specifically of a crow; the cuteness of women or children (*xiao niao yi ren* 小鳥依人 'a little bird that depends on people'); returning home and the attachment to home (*juan niao zhi fan* 倦鳥知返 'a tired bird knows where to return' and *juan niao gui wo* 倦鳥歸巢 'a tired bird returns to its nest' as well as homesickness *yue niao nan qi* 越鳥南棲 'a bird from the south builds its nest in the southern branches of a tree'); stupidity (*ben niao xian fei* 笨鳥先飛 'a stupid bird

40 Lakoff and Turner, *More Than a Cool Reason*, 72-74.

flies off first'); greed (*niao wei shi wang* 鳥為食亡 'a bird dies for food'); thinness and paleness (*niao mian bu xing* 鳥面鵠形 'a face of a bird and a shape of a goose'); inappropriate behaviour (*niao li niao qi* 鳥裡鳥氣 'the inner side and the spirit of a bird' and *qin xi niao shi* 禽息鳥視 'a breath and a look of a bird'); an honourable person (*feng niao bu zhi* 鳳鳥不至 'a phoenix is not coming', *zhi niao bu qun* 鷺鳥不群 'a hawk does not form a flock' and *bai niao chao feng* 百鳥朝鳳 'hundreds of birds are paying homage to the phoenix'); freedom, or the lack of it (*long zhong zhi niao* 籠中之鳥 'a bird in a cage', *ru niao xiang kong* 如鳥翔空 'as birds glide in the sky', *chi yu long niao* 池魚籠鳥 'fish in a pond and a bird in a cage'), *niao ru fan long* 鳥入樊籠 'a bird entered the cage' and *long niao jian yuan* 籠鳥檻猿 'a bird in a cage and an ape in a cage'); an ability to choose (*niao neng ze mu* 鳥能擇木 'a bird can choose a tree'); a treacherous person (*niao sheng shou xin* 鳥聲獸心 'a sound of a bird and a heart of a beast' and *zhi nuo niao xing* 鷺匿鳥形 'a hawk hidden in a shape of a bird'); a silent person (*han chan jiang niao* 寒蟬僵鳥 'a winter cicada or a still bird'); a person with a strong focus (*mu gan niao qi* 木幹鳥棲 'a bird does not leave its wooden trunk'); dead relatives (*niao que ai ming* 鳥雀哀鳴 'a bird sadly cries'); a person taking a chance when forced to do so by unbearable circumstances (*niao qiong ze zhuo* 鳥窮則啄 'a poor bird follows to the place where it can peck'); simplicity (*xiang geng niao yun* 象耕鳥耘 'an elephant plows and a bird weeds'); and a person in a difficult situation relying on others (*qiong niao ru huai* 窮鳥入懷 'a poor bird enters hearts', *niao fen yu lan* 鳥焚魚爛 'burned birds and rotten fish', *niao fu shou qiong* 鳥伏獸窮 'when birds hide, beasts are poor' and *niao fu wei chao* 鳥覆危巢 'a bird changes a nest when in danger'). These examples show that the concept of the bird can be used to cover many very different aspects of people, both positive and negative.

However, the emotion that is most often connected with birds is fear. The action that occurs after a frightening event that is presented in many bird idioms is scattering due to chaos (*ru niao shou san* 如鳥獸散 'scatter as birds and beasts', *niao jing yu kui* 鳥驚魚潰 'frightened birds and scattered fish', *niao jing yu bai* 鳥驚魚駭 'frightened birds and terrified fish', *niao san yu kui* 鳥散魚潰 'scattered birds and fish', *yun tun niao san* 雲屯鳥散 'gathering of clouds and scattering of birds' and *niao jing shu cuan* 鳥驚鼠竄 'birds are frightened and rats are running away') These idioms imply the concept of 'plenty', since birds tend to form flocks, which brings

in the concept of MEASURE. However, in some of the idioms representing fear the underlying metaphor is ANIMALS ARE PEOPLE: this can be seen in idioms representing cowardice (*jing gong zhi niao* 驚弓之鳥 'a bird that is frightened by a bow' and *shang gong zhi niao* 傷弓之鳥 'a bird hurt by a bow'), which is closely connected to fear; a treacherous person that people are afraid of (*chang jing niao bui* 長頸鳥喙 'a long neck and a beak of a bird'); and intense fear (*niao jing qu mu* 鳥驚曲木 'for a frightened bird every tree is wrong'). A bird is also a container of other emotions that are attributes of people, such as homesickness and hatred.

Similarly, on a semiotic level, *chengyu*-s also take birds as a desired object, a goal (*yi shi er niao* 一石二鳥 'one stone two birds'), a messenger of good news (*qing niao yin qin* 青鳥殷勤 'a messenger bird brings a present') and as a change for the better (*niao qiang huan pao* 鳥槍換炮 'to exchange a gun for birds for a cannon').

Metonymies fall into the A PART FOR A WHOLE group. Birds tend to group into flocks (MEASURE), but they also scatter and the movements of their flocks is changeable (*niao ji lin cui* 鳥集鱗萃 'gathered birds and dense fish scales' and *shou ju niao san* 獸聚鳥散 'when beasts gather, birds scatter'). A flock that represents »plenty« is considered a good thing, implying the MORE IS GOOD metaphor, while scattering is the opposite, implying a lack of discipline (LESS IS BAD). It is interesting to note that while birds can be a part of beautiful surroundings and circumstances, the concept is often used to express difficult circumstances, mostly related to crying (*niao ti* 鳥啼 'bird's cry' and *niao ku* 鳥哭 'bird's cry') or roads. In *xiang geng niao yun* 象耕鳥耘 'an elephant plows and a bird weeds' and *qin xi niao shi* 禽息鳥視 'a breath and a look of birds' and other examples (*qiong niao ru huai* 窮鳥入懷 'a poor bird enters hearts', *niao fu shou qiong* 鳥伏獸窮 'when birds hide, beasts are poor' and *niao fu wei chao* 鳥覆危巢 'a bird changes a nest when in danger') birds represent people, and metonymies are based on the ANIMALS ARE PEOPLE metaphor.<sup>41</sup>

41 When looking at the bird idioms in English collected from the *McGraw-Hill Dictionary of American Idioms and Phrasal Verbs*, *Cambridge Idioms Dictionary* and *Cambridge Dictionary of American Idioms* <idioms.thefreedictionary.com/bird> (last retrieval 3 Sep 2014), both Chinese and English more or less show the same patterns: the main conceptual metaphor in English is also ANIMALS ARE PEOPLE (as in *birds of a feather flock together*, *birds in their little nests agree*, *early bird*, *fine feathers make fine birds*, *it's an ill bird that fouls its own nest*, *a little bird told me*, *the early bird*

*Chengyu* with a bird constituent show a shift from objectification to personification, but even though they still remain on the basic metaphoric level, they highlight a plurality of aspects of people, both positive and negative. The examples also show some attributes that define birds in the ICM: the ability to fly, which brings in the aspect of freedom; a sound (not singing, but crying) and measure (bird flocks as ‘plenty’, the basis of MORE IS GOOD metaphor and scattering as the opposite).

#### 4 Conclusion

Chinese characters reveal the consistent presence of metaphorical thinking. The case study of birds as a semantic constituent in characters and *chengyu*-s carried out in this work shows the development from metonymic to metaphoric extensions. In creating characters with meaning extensions, people mostly relied on the embodied experiences of birds, experienced by sight and hearing, highlighting two aspects that are specifically Chinese: sound and measure. Four examples of verbs represent human actions connected to birds, where a bird is seen as a desired object. Besides these examples of causality where humans are agents, there is one metonymic example that implies further personification. While at the semiotic level, one of the most basic conceptual metaphors regarding animals, ANIMALS ARE PEOPLE, is not yet clear, this metaphor is the leading one at the semantic level of the Chinese language, as is seen from the *chengyu*-s examined in this work. While a bird is still regarded as an object and even extended to a goal, the examples presented in this article show an even bigger appreciation of this animal, with a move from objectification to personification.

*catches the worm and a bird-brain*), while a few examples fall into the category of ACQUIRING A DESIRED OBJECT IS ACHIEVING A PURPOSE (as in *kill two birds with one stone*, *a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush* and *the bird has flown*). A bird is also connected to freedom (*free as a bird*). Metonymies about birds are also in the category of A PART FOR A WHOLE (as in *a bird's-eye view*, *flip/give somebody the bird*, *the birds and the bees*, and *eat like a bird*). A bird can have negative connotations as well (as in *for the birds*).

The ANIMALS ARE PEOPLE metaphor also serves as a basis for new metonymies and more complex emotional metaphors in which the main central emotion is fear.

While the language patterns examined in this work are based on the more or less universal concept of the bird, they can still tell us something about Chinese culture. While outsiders often feel perplexed by the Chinese writing system, language and culture as a whole, this study has shown one very general notion of human thought with some specific elements—the importance of bird sounds and the concept of measure in language and culture. Due to the blending of birds and people in personification, aspects of birds can be applied to both, for instance, in the sounds in human language, which, due to the homophonous nature of Chinese are an important element to be considered, as well as in the concept of measurement, as expressed with measure words in Chinese. This highlights the importance of collectiveness (MORE IS GOOD) in Chinese culture as seen in the negative meaning of flocks of birds that scatter (LESS IS BAD).

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