

An Anatomy of Reform: The Cognitive Role of the Organism Metaphor in China's Higher Education Policy

Jiang Weibin

Minnan University of Science and Technology, Quanzhou, Fujian, China

Abstract: "Structural reform" represents a core policy direction for Chinese higher education during the 15th Five-Year Plan period. The frequent occurrence of terms such as "impeded blood flow" and "mechanism blockages" in official discourse constitutes a systematic "organism metaphor". Framed within conceptual metaphor theory from cognitive linguistics and employing critical discourse analysis, this paper examines relevant policy texts. The research finds that by conceptualising the higher education system as a living organism, the organism metaphor successfully reconstructs complex institutional issues into intuitive physiological problems of "health and disease". This cognitive framework not only endows "structural reform" with an unquestionable natural legitimacy and a sense of urgency for action, effectively simplifying public understanding and driving consensus formation for reform, but it also obscures deeper social complexities within the system, such as power struggles, cultural conflicts, and value choices. This paper reveals the powerful cognitive-constructive and driving effects of metaphor in policy discourse, provides a novel analytical perspective for understanding higher education reform in China, and offers critical reflection on the cognitive limitations that may arise from over-reliance on a single metaphorical framework.

Keywords: Organism Metaphor; Policy Reform; Cognitive Linguistics; Conceptual Metaphor Theory

1. Introduction

In recent years, "structural reform" has become a core and frequently mentioned topic in Chinese higher education, particularly within the vision of the 15th Five-Year Plan. Vivid expressions such as "impeded blood flow," "mechanism blockages," "strengthening the

physique," and "metabolism" abound in this policy discourse. These linguistic choices are not merely arbitrary rhetoric but manifestations of deep-seated cognitive models—they collectively point to a core metaphor: conceptualising the higher education system as a living organism.

The pervasive use of this "organism metaphor" prompts profound academic inquiry: What cognitive motivations does it reflect? In other words, why is the source domain of "organism," rather than others, widely recruited to understand and construct the agenda for higher education reform? Furthermore, how does this metaphorical cognitive framework shape our diagnosis of problems within the higher education system, our choices of reform paths, and even the justification for the legitimacy of reform?

To address these questions, this paper is grounded in conceptual metaphor theory from cognitive linguistics, combined with perspectives from critical discourse analysis. It systematically identifies and analyses metaphors in key texts, including the "The 2024-2035 master plan on building China into a leading country in education", the proposals for the 15th Five-Year Plan, and related authoritative policy interpretations. This paper aims to reveal how the organism metaphor, through a comprehensive "health-disease" cognitive schema, transforms complex and abstract institutional issues in higher education into intuitive, urgent, and seemingly "natural" physiological problems, thereby providing powerful cognitive legitimacy and impetus for "structural reform". Simultaneously, this paper adheres to critical reflection, exploring the potential cognitive shielding effects—such as the neglect of power relations, cultural conflicts, and value disputes within the system—that this metaphorical framework may bring while simplifying cognition.

2. Theoretical Framework: Conceptual

Metaphor, Organism Metaphor, and Social Construction

2.1 The Cognitive Nature and Framing Function of Conceptual Metaphor

According to the seminal theory of Lakoff & Johnson, metaphor is far from merely a linguistic "ornament"; it is a core cognitive mechanism upon which we rely for thinking and acting ^[1]. Its essence lies in using concrete, easily understandable "source domain" experiences to comprehend and construct abstract, complex "target domain" experiences.

2.2 The Intellectual Tradition and Cognitive Basis of the Organism Metaphor

Comparing macro-systems like society or the state to a "body" or "organism" has a long history in both Eastern and Western intellectual thought. The cognitive appeal of this metaphor lies in its basis in life experiences most familiar to us, such as holism, growth, hierarchy, and self-regulation. In the field of higher education, Abraham Flexner characterised the true university as an "organism," emphasising the unity of its spirit and purpose ^[2]. Eric Ashby further elaborated that a university, "like an organism, is a product of heredity and environment," its evolution shaped by both internal and external forces ^[3]. These classical discussions provide profound theoretical underpinnings for the organism metaphor in contemporary policy discourse

2.3 From Cognition to Social Construction: The Legitimising Function of Metaphor

When conceptual metaphor theory is combined with critical discourse analysis, it can reveal that metaphor is not only a cognitive tool but also a vehicle for social construction and the operation of power. Specific metaphorical frameworks can "legitimise" certain definitions of social issues and their solutions, while "marginalising" other potential cognitive perspectives. This is the core theoretical perspective from which this paper examines the "structural reform" discourse in higher education.

3. Research Design and Methods

This paper adopts a qualitative-dominant, quantitatively-assisted research design to systematically investigate the manifestations and functions of the organism metaphor within the "structural reform" discourse of Chinese

higher education. The methodological approach is explicitly interdisciplinary, integrating the analytical precision of cognitive linguistics with the critical, contextual sensitivity of discourse analysis. This synergy allows the research to not only catalog linguistic patterns but also to interrogate their ideological implications and their role in constructing a specific policy reality. By anchoring the investigation in this dual framework, the paper moves beyond descriptive metaphor identification towards an explanatory account of how metaphorical language actively shapes the perception and legitimisation of reform agendas.

Corpus Composition and Rationale: The analysis is based on a purpose-built, closed corpus designed to capture the authoritative core of national higher education policy discourse. Its primary components are: 1) The official "The Recommendations of the 20th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China for Formulating the 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-2035) for National Economic and Social Development," focusing on sections related to education, science, technology, and talent; 2) Publicly available excerpts and official interpretations of the strategic "The 2024-2035 master plan on building China into a leading country in education"; and 3) A curated selection of key speeches, press conferences, and signed articles by senior officials of the Ministry of Education concerning higher education reform, published between 2023 and 2025. This triangulation of foundational planning documents (the 15th Five-Year Plan), a dedicated strategic blueprint, and contemporary authoritative commentary ensures the corpus captures both the overarching policy direction and its immediate discursive enactment. The selected timespan is strategically chosen to cover the immediate prelude and initial period of the 15th Five-Year Plan, a phase where the conceptual framing of "structural reform" is most actively articulated and solidified.

Analytical Procedure: The primary analytical framework is the established Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) developed by the Pragglejaz Group ^[4]. This procedure was rigorously applied to ensure a systematic and replicable analysis. The process involved several stages: first, each text was read in its entirety to establish general understanding and context. Second, lexical units (individual words

or phrases) with potential metaphorical use were identified. Finally, the contextual meaning of each unit within the policy discourse was determined.

From Identification to Interpretation: Following the MIP protocol, all identified metaphorical expressions were extracted, logged, and preliminarily categorised based on their source domain (e.g., circulatory system, skeletal-muscular system). This initial coding allowed for a quantitative overview of the frequency and distribution of organism-related metaphors. Subsequently, a qualitative, interpretive phase commenced. This two-stage process—systematic identification followed by critical interpretation—ensured the findings are both empirically grounded in the text and analytically insightful regarding the metaphor's cognitive and rhetorical functions.

4. Findings and Analysis: The Cognitive Framing of the Organism Metaphor in Higher Education

Through systematic analysis of the corpus, this paper finds that the organism metaphor systematically constructs the cognitive narrative of "structural reform" primarily through the following interconnected framing modes:

4.1 The Binary Frame of "Health" and "Disease"

This is the overarching cognitive framework of the organism metaphor. In policy discourse, an ideal higher education system is implicitly assumed to be "healthy," "vigorous," and "physically strong". Conversely, any deviation from this state is diagnosed as "disease". For instance, being "large but not strong" is identified as the "Achilles' heel" of Chinese higher education. This metaphor concretises systemic issues into a "congenital vulnerability" of a body part, thereby establishing the cognitive foundation for the necessity of reform to "strengthen the body".

4.2 The "Impeded Blood Flow" and "Circulatory System" Metaphor

This frame is primarily used to diagnose issues related to fluidity and efficiency in areas such as knowledge and technology transfer, industry-academia integration, and social service.

Mapping Logic: Equates the flow of knowledge, technology, talent, and funds to the "blood

circulation" of an organism.

Discursive Manifestations: Expressions such as "removing institutional mechanism blockages," "dredging the 'intestinal obstruction' in the innovation chain," and "promoting smooth arterial blood flow in knowledge and technology transfer".

Cognitive Effect: It simplifies the complex issues of institutional coordination and incentive compatibility into an engineering problem requiring "dredging blood vessels," implying that the solution lies in removing "blockages" (outdated regulations) rather than addressing deeper value conflicts or interest distributions.

4.3 The "Structural Imbalance" and "Skeletal-Muscular" Metaphor

This frame focuses on systemic structural issues like disciplinary setup, talent cultivation structure, and faculty composition.

Mapping Logic: Compares the macro-structure of the higher education system to the "skeleton and muscles" of an organism.

Discursive Manifestations: Criticising some disciplines for being "obese," describing the misalignment between talent cultivation and social needs as "skeletal dislocation," and advocating to "optimise the structure," "consolidate the foundation," and "develop the muscle mass of applied disciplines".

Cognitive Effect: It guides policymakers to focus reform efforts on resource "addition and subtraction" (e.g., adding emerging disciplines, phasing out obsolete ones), as if performing "sculpting surgery" on the organism, potentially obscuring the internal logic of knowledge production and the long-term, complex nature of talent cultivation.

5. Discussion: The Driving Function and Cognitive Blind Spots of the Organism Metaphor

The dominance of the organism metaphor in the reform discourse stems from its potent cognitive and rhetorical utility, yet a critical examination reveals inherent and significant limitations that warrant careful scrutiny.

5.1 Cognitive Driving Functions

The organism metaphor serves as a powerful cognitive heuristic. It reduces an immensely complex social system—encompassing millions of actors and institutions—into an intuitive, manageable model of a living body, thereby

significantly lowering the cognitive cost for both policymakers and the public to comprehend and engage with the agenda of “structural reform”. By invoking the naturalness and imperative of “life,” this metaphor frames reform not as a contingent political choice but as an inexorable biological necessity. Just as a diseased body requires intervention, a “sick” higher education system demands “treatment,” rendering hesitation seemingly synonymous with neglect. Furthermore, the inherent urgency and alarm associated with “disease” within this metaphorical frame effectively mobilises consensus, transforming complex policy debates into a straightforward narrative of preserving “health” and overcoming crisis.

5.2 Critical Reflection: Cognitive Blind Spots

However, the very clarity provided by this metaphor casts profound shadows, obscuring critical dimensions of the social reality it seeks to describe. Firstly, it obscures power relations. The metaphor presupposes an internal harmony within the organism, effectively masking the ongoing struggles and conflicts of interest among different constituencies within higher education (e.g., between administrative and academic authority, across disciplines, or between tenured and contingent faculty). Reform is thus presented as a neutral, technical exercise in “therapy,” rather than a process inevitably entangled with the redistribution of power and resources.

Secondly, it obscures cultural and value conflicts. The metaphor translates profound, value-laden questions about the fundamental purpose of a university—such as tensions between efficiency and equity, or between instrumental and intrinsic values—into depoliticised, technical problems of “effective treatment.” This framing sidesteps essential public deliberation about the desired ends of higher education, focusing debate narrowly on the means of optimisation.

Thirdly, it risks oversimplifying complex adaptability. Higher education systems are better understood as complex, adaptive ecosystems characterised by necessary tensions, competition, and diversity. The organism metaphor’s implicit ideal of “overall harmony” may inadvertently justify policies that suppress this vital diversity and creative friction, promoting homogenisation under a single standard of “health” in a manner akin to

indiscriminate “pruning.”

5.3 The Metaphor as a Framework for Public Reception and Legitimation

Beyond its cognitive function for elites, the organism metaphor plays a crucial role in structuring public reception and legitimising policy. By drawing upon a universally accessible source domain (the human body), it creates a shared discursive platform that facilitates the communication of complex policy goals to a broad audience. This accessibility enhances the perceived common sense of the reforms, making them appear transparent and logically inevitable. Consequently, the metaphor acts as a potent tool of legitimation, weaving technical policy language into a relatable narrative of collective survival and well-being. It channels public sentiment by evoking a communal responsibility to “heal” and “strengthen” the educational system, thereby building a foundational social consent that might be more difficult to achieve through abstract institutional analysis alone.

6. Conclusion

This paper demonstrates through systematic metaphorical analysis that the organism metaphor is by no means an insignificant rhetorical embellishment in the “structural reform” discourse of Chinese higher education; rather, it constitutes a mechanism of deep cognitive framing. Through a series of cognitive schemas derived from living entities—“health-disease,”

“circulation-blockage,” “structure-function”—it successfully “naturalises” complex institutional and social issues into physiological ones, thereby providing powerful cognitive motivation and legitimacy sources for the necessity, urgency, and action paths of reform. This aligns with broader discussions on how metaphors function in educational policy making ^[5] and the evolution of university metaphors ^[6].

This paper lies in its robust demonstration that integrating cognitive linguistics with critical policy research offers unique explanatory power for revealing the ideological operations and power structures behind policy discourse. Language is not merely a tool for transmitting information but an active force in constructing social reality and driving institutional change.

On a practical level, this paper provides a

"cognitive mirror" for policymakers and higher education researchers. It reminds us that while effectively utilising the organism metaphor for social mobilisation, we must maintain full vigilance against its cognitive blind spots. The future reform of Chinese higher education, while leveraging the power of metaphor to overcome challenges, needs to seek a more reflective, composite discursive framework that can better accommodate complexity, diverse values, and public debate. Future research could extend to empirical investigations of how grassroots levels in universities receive, transform, or resist this top-level metaphor, or conduct cross-cultural comparisons exploring the similarities, differences, and deeper motivations in metaphorical choices within higher education reform discourses of different countries.

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