

Entrepreneurship in the Metaphors of Chinese University Students, Teachers, and Practitioners: An Elicited Metaphor Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the attitudes and perceptions towards “entrepreneurship” from stakeholders’ perspectives. Based on the questionnaires collected from 56 university students, 10 teachers, and 11 practitioners, the socio-demographic information suggest the importance of considering cultural and societal factors in students’ entrepreneurial endeavours, such as family economic status and parental education. Metaphor analysis highlights the perceptual differences in goal orientations (i.e., “either win or lose” for students, “specific goals to achieve” for teachers, “multiple and dynamic goals” for practitioners) and entrepreneurial considerations (e.g., “uncertainty” for students, “creativity” for teachers, and “virtues” for practitioners), suggesting the needs to bridge the gaps to facilitate entrepreneurial education in China.

Keywords: Cultural model, elicited metaphor analysis, entrepreneurship, higher education

INTRODUCTION

Innovation and entrepreneurship education, as outlined in No. 35 [2021] of the General Office of the State Council in China (State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2021), takes on increasing significance amidst a challenging job market. By 2024, an estimated 11.79 million university graduates will enter a labour market already burdened with 60 million unemployed individuals. Younger university graduates, therefore, have a more significant role in

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 30 December 2025

Published: 06 March 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47836/pp.2.1.001>

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launching startups and addressing market gaps, with their professional knowledge and potential. Such an endeavour is also expected by Chinese teachings on the Principles of Pursuing the Greater Good and Shared Interests. However, despite these favourable conditions, the reality is that only around 5% of university students choose to embark on entrepreneurial ventures each year, with a success rate hovering at 2-3%. This paper, therefore, focusses on the perceptions towards “entrepreneurship” among Chinese university students, teachers, and practitioners, with implications to inspire innovative approaches to entrepreneurship education in China.

RELATED LITERATURE

The diverse definitions and constructs of entrepreneurship highlight the complexity and multidimensional nature of this concept. Adeel et al. (2023) broadly define entrepreneurship as an individual’s ability to turn ideas into viable new ventures. This concept encapsulates various constructs such as entrepreneurial fear of failure (Cacciotti et al., 2020), entrepreneurial effort (Bowen & Clercq, 2008; Edelman, 2010), career calling (Palma et al., 2018; Tian et al., 2018), prior knowledge (Ozgen, 2003) and opportunity identification (Linan & Chen, 2009). In the context of Chinese university students, entrepreneurship has been found to be intertwined with factors such as economic, cultural and social capital, and career planning (Guo et al., 2024), showcasing the socio-cultural influences inherent to students’ entrepreneurial aspirations and behaviours. Given this, the present study aims to uncover a Chinese cultural model of entrepreneurship from the perspectives of key stakeholders: university students, teachers, and practitioners.

Metaphor analysis emerges as an effective tool to gain insights into complex and abstract psychological concepts such as attitudes, motivations, and culturally specific perceptions of teachers and students. Rooted in cognitive linguistics, this method draws on Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) argument that “our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” (p. 3). Compared to more conventional interviewing techniques, figurative language has been shown to offer greater vividness and concreteness (Ortony & Fainsilber, 1987). Another important advantage is that metaphor-producing activities appear to be a more creative task, which encourages more active participation from respondents. Notably, here, while participants in most cases can provide metaphors in the form of “A is B”, the reasoning behind such comparisons is crucial, and it is often more appropriate for participants themselves, rather than the researcher, to explain the underlying comparisons. In this regard, the Elicited Metaphor Analysis (EMA) developed by Jin and Cortazzi (2011) is particularly useful, as it employs a prompt “A is B, because ...” that requires participants to give their responses in a structured way with a “because” clause to indicate their reasons.

In the field of entrepreneurship studies, Lundmark et al. (2019), based on a corpus of 108 highly cited entrepreneurship articles, identified eight root metaphors for entrepreneurship—parenthood, mutagen, conduit of knowledge, method, mindset, networking, exploration, and politics. Alternatively, metaphors can be used to investigate participants' views. Dodd (2002), through analysing metaphors in entrepreneurial life stories, accounted for a grounded culture model of US entrepreneurship. Inspired by these metaphor studies, this study aims to understand the following questions by combining questionnaire and elicited metaphor analysis:

What are the levels of important dimensions of entrepreneurship among Chinese university students?

What are the perceptual differences towards “entrepreneurship” in the metaphors produced by Chinese university students, teachers, and practitioners?

METHODS

This pilot study collected socio-demographic and metaphor data from 56 university students majoring in Business English, 10 university teachers who have taught courses related to entrepreneurial education, and 11 practitioners who had experience starting up a business. The metaphor elicitation task uses the prompt:

Entrepreneurship is _____, because _____.

The socio-demographic data is analysed using Welch T-test and ANOVA in SPSS version 29, and the qualitative data is analysed thematically following the procedures suggested by Geng and Jin (2023).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overall, the socio-demographic information indicates that the investigated university students appear slightly negative towards entrepreneurship and demonstrate higher levels of fear of failure. Families appear to exert a more significant impact on students, which aligns with the argument that key learning and experiential processes play a role in career choice, development, and adjustment (for a review of theories related to career development aspects, see Lent et al., 1994). Consistent with the findings of Guo et al. (2024), students from families with higher economic status are more likely to perceive entrepreneurship as a viable career option and may be more willing to invest the necessary effort to achieve success. A less frequently observed finding from this study is that participants

whose mothers have higher educational attainment tend to exhibit less fear of failure in entrepreneurship. This suggests the need for further research into how well-educated mothers can create a more supportive and encouraging environment for Chinese students pursuing entrepreneurial endeavours.

The metaphor data provides a rich and nuanced understanding of how different groups perceive and conceptualise entrepreneurship. Going beyond the traditional frequency list, Figure 1 presents a diagrammatic metaphor network of metaphor analysis of “entrepreneurship” after Jin and Cortazzi (2019). The various comparisons made to adventuring, involving something dangerous, animal and plant, caregiving, sports, and riding a rollercoaster highlight the lonely, uncertain, challenging, and dynamic nature of entrepreneurship. However, perceptual differences exist: Chinese students tend to see the outcome as either winning or losing and view entrepreneurship as something tempting or appealing; teachers see entrepreneurship as being associated with a set of specific goals that need to be adjusted over time and emphasise innovation as a crucial element of entrepreneurship; practitioners view entrepreneurship, partly aligns with the notion of “experimentation” proposed by Lundmark et al. (2019), as having diverse and dynamic goals subject to change over time and emphasise the entrepreneurial virtues such as determination, persistence, and adaptation.

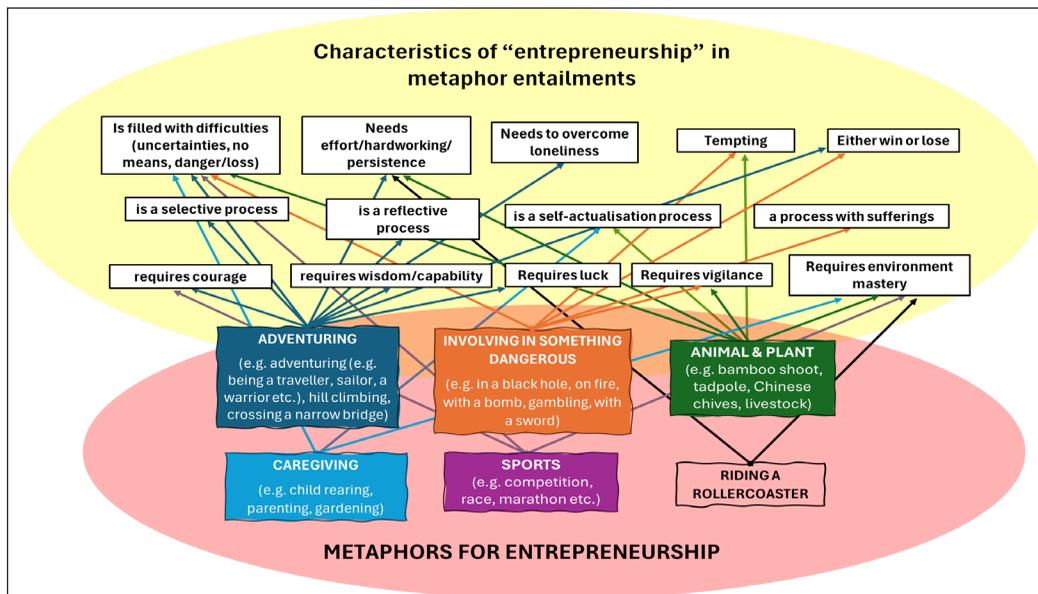


Figure 1. Characteristics of “entrepreneurship” from metaphors produced by university students, adapted from Jin & Cortazzi (2019)

The metaphor-producing activity employed in this study can also have pedagogical implications, which reaffirm a few important arguments made by Cortazzi and Jin (1999). Firstly, metaphors can be a useful instrument for students to reflect on their understanding of entrepreneurship, encouraging them to articulate and refine their perceptions of the concept. Secondly, it offers teachers a tangible means of assessing students' knowledge of entrepreneurship, as the metaphors generated can reveal nuanced insights into their comprehension. Additionally, classroom sessions dedicated to sharing and discussing both popular metaphors and participants' own constructed metaphors are likely to encourage creativity and critical thinking, as students engage with diverse perspectives and challenge their own assumptions.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study suggest the importance of considering social and cultural factors when studying the diverse and multifaceted nature of entrepreneurship in context. The perceptual differences that exist among university students, teachers, and practitioners may inspire educators and policymakers to devise targeted and tailored support for entrepreneurial education in China.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of K. C. Wong Education, Hong Kong, the China Association of Higher Education under Grant [23XXK0409] and the Ningbo Institute of Education Sciences China under Grant [2023YZD006].

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