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Warm Heart in Chinese and English

Abstract

This study explores the conceptualization of the term “warm heart” in Chinese and English, focusing on metaphorical expressions related to the heart and the concept of “warm” temperature (hot, warm, mild). Using Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), the research analyzes data from the Center for Chinese Linguistics (CCL) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) to identify both shared and culture-specific mappings. The findings reveal that while universal bodily experiences lead to similar metaphorical understandings of “warm heart” in both languages, such as kindness and emotional movement evoked by others’ assistance or touching stories, cultural differences could also shape distinct conceptualizations. By comparing “warm heart” expressions, the study underscores the interplay between universal bodily experiences and cultural specificity in shaping metaphorical meaning.

Keywords: Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), warm heart, body metaphor, Chinese, comparative study

1 Introduction

The heart, 心 (*xīn*) in Chinese, functions as a pump in the circulatory system, distributing blood throughout the body via blood vessels. As both a vital organ and a cultural symbol, the heart plays a significant role in metaphorical expressions across languages. “The heart takes the central position of the body both in the physical and metaphorical senses” (Yu 2007: 35). In Chinese and English, expressions like 热心 (*rè-xīn*, hot-heart) and *warm-hearted* illustrate how bodily experiences involving the heart and warmth are used to convey abstract concepts such as kindness, care, and emotion. As demonstrated in the following sections, although these expressions share a basis in universal bodily experiences, they may also reflect cultural differences in the conceptual metaphors associated with the idea of a “warm heart.”

Many researchers compare heart-related metaphors across languages to identify similarities and variations across different cultures (see, e.g., Al-Saleh et al. 2020; Gutiérrez Pérez 2008). Although expressions related to a “warm heart” in Chinese and English are frequently cited in previous studies, there has been a lack of systematic investigation into how these expressions differ across temperature scales (see Section 2.3). Notably, distinctions between the temperatures implied by *warm-hearted* in English and 热心 (*rè-xīn*, hot heart) in Chinese are rarely examined, including their differing target domains. This tendency to overgeneralize high-temperature metaphors in “warm heart” research risks overlooking the nuanced conceptual differences between the two languages (see Section 2.3).



The objectives of this research are threefold: based on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) (Lakoff & Johnson 1980), (1) to identify the shared metaphorical mappings of “warm heart” in Chinese and English, rooted in universal bodily experiences; (2) to explore the cultural factors that lead to variations in these mappings; and (3) to provide a deeper understanding of how cultural contexts shape metaphorical language. By addressing these objectives, this study not only advances the field of cognitive linguistics but also offers practical insights for cross-cultural communication.

In summary, this study examines both the commonalities and divergences in “warm heart” metaphors in Chinese and English, which arise from universal bodily experiences yet are shaped by culturally specific interpretations. By combining quantitative and qualitative methods, the research investigates how shared human physiology interacts with culturally distinct world-views, offering deeper insights into the metaphorical expressions that influence perceptions of kindness, care, and emotion.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT)

Metaphor has traditionally been regarded as a rhetorical device used in poetry and literary works, distinct from everyday language. However, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 3) point out, the conceptual system that underlies our everyday thoughts and actions is fundamentally metaphorical. According to Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), “[t]he essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 5). Based on the principle of unidirectionality, we tend to use source domains composed of easily comprehensible concepts to understand target domains, which are typically abstract and less clearly defined (Kövecses 2010: 7). This mapping process is guided by the Invariance Principle (Lakoff 1990), which posits that only those elements of the source domain that are compatible with the target domain are preserved, ensuring that the correspondences between domains remain coherent and logically consistent. Metaphor plays a crucial role in this process by enabling the projection of bodily experiences onto abstract concepts (Gibbs 2006: 11).

2.2 Embodiment and Culture in Body Metaphors

The body and mind are intertwined, a concept known as embodiment (Sharifian et al. 2008: 7). Meaning is intricately associated with embodiment “in terms of our collective biological capacities and our physical and social experiences as beings functioning in our environment” (Lakoff 1987: 267). Investigating metaphors is not merely a linguistic study but also reveals how people think.

Highly similar biological structures of humans may not necessarily be projected onto the same target domains across cultures. This is because bodily experience is inherently cultural, as conceptual systems arising from the interaction between the body and the environment are deeply rooted in cultural contexts. All facets of embodied experiences are influenced by cultural dynamics (Gibbs 1999: 153; 2006: 13). Culture acts as a filter, allowing specific salient aspects of sensorimotor experiences to pass through and become entwined in metaphorical mappings under the influence of culturally specific judgments (Yu 2008: 247).

2.3 *Warm Heart in Metaphorical Usage*

The term “warm heart” is composed of “warmth” and “heart.” In metaphorical expressions, warmth, as a high temperature, is often associated with softness, derived from the bodily experience of heat (WARM IS SOFT). Warmth is frequently projected onto an affectionate personality, indicating sympathy. Specifically, when an object is heated, it becomes soft to the touch, and humans generally prefer soft surfaces over hard ones (Melnick 2000). This bodily experience is metaphorically mapped to the nonphysical domain as structured by CMT, such as the metaphor WARMTH/PROXIMITY/SOFTNESS IS GOOD (Wilkos 2023). Zhong and Leonardelli (2008) demonstrated through experimental studies that participants associated increases in physical warmth with feelings of social inclusion and friendship. Building on this idea, the comfortable and gentle qualities of “warm” are metaphorically projected onto a kind and caring personality that is welcomed. In contrast, “cold” is often associated with emotional distance, indifference, or social exclusion (Deignan 2005: 87; Melnick 2000: 227–228, 232).

In metaphorical usage, the heart is ascribed a variety of physical attributes. As Baranyiné Kóczy and Sipőcz (2023: 19) note, “[t]he most important physical attributes assigned to the heart are size, color, taste, temperature, solidity, and weight/density.” Among these, warmth is frequently attributed to the heart in certain languages. In such constructions, the heart is conceptualized as a physical object (THE HEART IS AN OBJECT), allowing its concrete properties to be mapped onto abstract qualities. This enables characteristics like temperature to convey emotional and interpersonal meanings, such as kindness, affection, and empathy.

In a study focusing on body-related temperature expressions in English, Ibibio, Japanese, Kannada, Mandarin Chinese, Ojibwe, and Swedish, Vejdemo and Vandewinkel (2016: 263) identified two cross-linguistically recurring conceptual metaphors: LACK OF EMOTIONAL CONTROL IS HOT/EMOTIONAL CONTROL IS COLD and FRIENDLY IS WARM/UNFRIENDLY IS COLD. Their study explored “warmth” across different temperature scales, but the investigation of “lukewarm” in Chinese is absent (Vejdemo & Vandewinkel 2016: 261):

English: 1. hot 2. warm 3. lukewarm

Chinese: 1. 热 (*rè*, ‘hot’) 2. 温暖 (*wēn-nuǎn*, ‘warm’) or 暖和 (*nuǎn-huo*, ‘warm’)

In comparing Chinese and English metaphorical expressions related to “warm heart,” it is shown that the English “warm heart” means “caring, kind,” while “hot heart” related expressions are absent. In Mandarin Chinese data, by contrast, there are no metaphorical expressions derived from “warm heart,” whereas “hot heart” in Chinese conveys the meaning of “generous” (Vejdemo & Vandewinkel 2016: 268). Their research contributes to the study of temperature-related body metaphors by offering a more detailed and nuanced division of temperature scales (Vejdemo & Vandewinkel 2016). However, their conclusion that “warm heart” is absent in Chinese is unconvincing, as conventionalized lexical units and Chinese corpus data presented in this study suggest otherwise. Additionally, although the researchers acknowledge the temperature distinction between “hot” and “warm,” as well as the semantic differences between the English expression *warm heart* (‘friendly, caring’) and the Chinese 热心 *rè-xīn* (hot-heart, ‘generous, helping’), they conclude that the metaphorical usage is fundamentally similar in both Chinese and English (Vejdemo & Vandewinkel 2016: 270). This overgeneralization results in a lack of in-depth exploration of the different temperature scales of “warm heart” in Chinese and English and their nuances in target domains.

In comparing “warm heart” in Chinese and English, most works overlook the different levels of warmth in the expressions, without mentioning the different levels of warmth attached to 热 (*rè*, ‘hot’) in Chinese and *warm* in English. Y. J. Hu and Wang (2008: 110–111) stated that both Chinese and English project “personality” onto “heart,” considering “warm heart” and 热心 (*rè-xīn*, hot-heart) the same, which ignores the difference in temperature. Similarly, Zhou and Jiang (2020) investigated “heart” metaphors in Chinese and English using corpora. They (2020: 106) provided examples of “warm heart” in both languages to demonstrate the similarity in the conceptualization of “warm heart” as “being friendly and affectionate” in Chinese and English, but their analysis lacked examination of two aspects: the differing temperatures of “heart” in the source domain (热心 *rè-xīn*, hot-heart, is not equivalent to “warm heart”) and the subtle differences in the target domains of “warm heart” in Chinese and English.

2.4 Research Gaps

The extant studies lack a systematic comparative analysis of “warm heart” related expressions in Chinese and English, taking different temperature scales into consideration. To avoid the simple conflation of warmth-related words into a broad and rough category without distinctions in the analysis, the author divides warmth into three levels (Table 1) based on the basic terms themselves reflecting the temperature rather than expressions derived from verbs or nouns (e.g., *boiling*, *burning*, *scorching*, *thermal*). Different from the incomplete coverage of warm temperature-related words in Chinese “warm heart” from Vejdemo and Vandewinkel (2016: 261), Table 1 provides a trichotomy of high temperature in Chinese and English, including the temperature “lukewarm,” which is referred to as *mild* in this study.¹

| | | | |
|----------------|-------------|---------------|--------------|
| Chinese | 热 <i>rè</i> | 暖 <i>nuǎn</i> | 温 <i>wēn</i> |
| English | hot | warm | mild |

Table 1. Hierarchy of high temperatures in descending order

The trichotomy of warmth in this comparative analysis facilitates the systematic exploration of target domains of different levels of “warm heart” in Chinese and English, rather than conflating “warm heart” and “hot heart.” Additionally, a detailed study focusing on “warm heart” in Chinese and English has yet to be completed, leaving the underlying cultural motivations for variations in Chinese and English “warm heart” related metaphors unknown. This study makes an initial attempt to offer insights into Chinese and Western cultural differences that influence the perception of “warm heart,” rooted in potentially universal bodily experiences.

¹ After comparing the meanings of 温 (*wēn*) in the *Modern Chinese Dictionary* (2016) with the potential translation pairs *lukewarm*, *tepid*, and *mild* in the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE)* (n.d.), it was found that *mild* had the most convergence with 温 (*wēn*) and was therefore selected.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Questions

1. What are the similarities in the metaphorical expressions of “warm heart” between Chinese and English?
2. What are the differences in the metaphorical expressions of “warm heart” between Chinese and English?
3. What are the underlying motivations for these similarities and differences?

3.2 Data Source

The data gathered for the subsequent analysis originates from two extensive corpora, the Center for Chinese Linguistics (CCL) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). CCL is an inclusive online corpus designed by Peking University to cater to theoretical and applied linguists. It comprises three main sections: a modern Chinese corpus, a classical Chinese corpus, and a Chinese-English sentence-aligned parallel texts corpus, totaling 6 billion Chinese characters. Only data from the Modern Chinese Corpus (from 1949 to the present) has been consulted for this research. This corpus offers diverse data from various genres, including newspapers, translations, literature, films, television programs, academic publications, and more (Zhan et al. 2019: 71–73).

Similarly, COCA covers various sources, including blogs, TV/movies, fiction, and paper media. It encompasses over one billion words of data. COCA is arguably the most extensively utilized English corpus (*The COCA corpus overview* 2020). Both corpora share similarities in their contemporary collections, broad range, and monolingual nature, ensuring the comparability and credibility of the collected data in this paper, so they have been selected as the data source.

3.3 Data Collection

In this paper, concordance lines are gathered by searching for *heart*-related lexical units with the modifiers *hot*, *warm*, and *mild* before or after *heart* in the CCL and COCA. There are no restrictions on the genres of data.

In Chinese, “warm heart” includes 热心 (*rè-xīn*, hot-heart), 心热 (*xīn-rè*, heart-hot), 暖心 (*nuǎn-xīn*, warm-heart), 心暖 (*xīn-nuǎn*, heart-warm), 温心 (*wēn-xīn*, mild-heart), and 心温 (*xīn-wēn*, heart-mild). Since Chinese is an isolating language, different parts of speech can potentially be detected by searching its default form. In English, “hot heart,” “warm heart,” and “mild heart” are searched with different parts of speech and potentially different forms of the same word, with or without hyphens and spaces. The inclusion of various parts of speech and potential forms of the same word further enhances the comprehensiveness of the data. In English, “warm heart” includes:

hot heart/hot-heart/hotheart/heart hot/heart-hot/hearthot

hot hearted/hot-hearted/hothearted/heart hotting/heart-hotting/hearthotting

hot heartedly/hot-heartedly/hotheartedly/heart hottingly/heart-hottingly/hearthottingly

hot heartedness/hot-heartedness/hotheartedness

warm heart/warm-heart/warmheart/heart warm/heart-warm/heartwarm,
warm hearted/warm-hearted/warmhearted/heart warming/heart-warming/heartwarming,
warm heartedly/warm-heartedly/warmheartedly/heart warmingly/ heart-warmingly/heartwarmingly,
warm heartedness/warm-heartedness/warmheartedness
mild heart/mild-heart/mildheart/heart mild/heart-mild/heartmild
mild hearted/mild-hearted/mildhearted/heart milding/heart-milding/heartmilding
mild heartedly/mild-heartedly/mildheartedly/heart mildingly/heart-mildingly/heartmildingly
mild heartedness/mild-heartedness/mildheartedness

To visually and concisely represent the data in the table, each subcategory under different parts of speech is listed as one entry. This means that *warm hearted* in Table 4 comprises the variations listed under it. Considering objectivity, paper length, and the size of the associated data, for the “warm heart”-related words with over 300 concordance lines, PyCharm (version 2022.2.3 Community Edition), was used to randomly extract 300 concordance lines from the search results. All selected data underwent manual scrutiny to identify metaphors. The “warm heart”-related lexical units used literally, to denote a heart with a high temperature, without metaphorical implications, were filtered out from the collected data.

The selection of 300 concordance lines, when the results exceed this number, is primarily driven by the constraints of my analytical capacity. This limitation ensures a manageable and focused analysis within the scope of this study.

3.4 Identification of Metaphor

The Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) is employed to identify the metaphorical use of “warm heart”-related words in the collected examples, as shown in example (1) below. According to the Pragglejaz Group (2007: 3), the process of identifying metaphors consists of four stages: 1) Read the full text to understand the main idea. 2) Identify the lexical units present in the text. 3) Compare the meaning of each lexical unit in the given context with its basic meaning. 4) Designate the lexical unit as metaphorical if the contextual meaning diverges from the basic meaning but remains comprehensible in relation to it.

Mandarin (Chinese, Sino-Tibetan) (CCL)

(1) 王伟, 你是个诚实善良的**热心人**

Wang Wei, ni shi ge chengshi shanliangde re-xin ren

Wang Wei, you are CLF honest kind **hot-heart** person

‘Wang Wei, you are an honest, kind, and **warm-hearted** person.’

The lexical units in this sentence are: *Wang, Wei, you, are, ge, honest, kind, de, hot, heart, and person*. Regarding the contextual meanings of these words, *Wang* is a surname; *Wei* is a common male name in Chinese; *you* refer to Wang Wei, a male person; *are* indicates the discussed quality attached to the mentioned person; *ge* is a classifier for the person; *honest* depicts the personality of always telling the truth; *kind* expresses the quality of being good to others and offering assistance; *hot* indicates being friendly and willing to offer help; *heart* represents the disposition,

that is, the volition of a human; *person* indicates human beings. By contrasting these contextual meanings with basic ones, 热心 (*rè-xīn*, hot-heart) is used metaphorically.

4 Results

4.1 “Warm Heart” in Chinese

| Rank | “warm heart” related lexical units | WARM HEART - metaphor sentences | | Percentage | |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----|------------|--------|
| 1. 暖 <i>nuǎn</i> (warm) | 暖心 (warm-heart) | 265 | 331 | 35.96% | 44.91% |
| | 心暖 (heart-warm) | 66 | | 8.95% | |
| 2. 热 <i>rè</i> (hot) | 热心 (hot-heart) | 288 | 330 | 39.08% | 44.78% |
| | 心热 (heart-hot) | 42 | | 5.70% | |
| 3. 温 <i>wēn</i> (mild) | 温心 (mild-heart) | 74 | 76 | 10.04% | 10.31% |
| | 心温 (heart-mild) | 2 | | 0.27% | |
| Total | | 737 | | 100% | |

Table 2. The distribution of “warm heart”-related metaphorical terms in the CCL

4.1.1 Warm Heart

This study indicates that the terms 暖 (*nuǎn*, ‘warm’) and 热 (*rè*, ‘hot’) are frequently used in Chinese metaphorical expressions related to the concept of “warm heart,” collectively accounting for nearly 90% of such lexical units in the CCL. Among these, 暖 (*nuǎn*, ‘warm’) appears slightly more often than 热 (*rè*, ‘hot’). The term 暖心 (*nuǎn-xīn*, warm-heart) is lexicalized as an adjective in the *Modern Chinese Dictionary* (2016, p. 965), defined as “to make someone’s heart warm.” Based on examples from the dictionary and the CCL, 暖心 (*nuǎn-xīn*, warm-heart) and 心暖 (*xīn-nuǎn*, heart-warm) are used to describe cheerful and enjoyable feelings resulting from the kind behaviors, attitudes, or words of others, often accompanied by gratitude or a sense of being moved. Notably, 暖心 (*nuǎn-xīn*, warm-heart) can also function as a verb, describing kind, caring, and loving actions or words that evoke pleasant and comfortable feelings in others.

Modern Chinese Dictionary (2016, p. 965)

(2) 便民措施特别暖心

Bianmin *cuoshi* *tebie* *nuan-xin*
 Convenient measure particularly warm-heart
 ‘Convenient measures are particularly heartwarming.’

CCL

(3) a. 百余家温泉**暖心**低价30元起!

| | | | | | | |
|------------|-------------|------------|-----------------|-------------------|-----------|------------|
| <i>Bai</i> | <i>yu</i> | <i>jia</i> | <i>wen-quan</i> | <i>nuan-xin</i> | <i>di</i> | <i>jia</i> |
| Hundred | over | CLF | warm-spring | warm-heart | low | price |
| 30 | <i>yuan</i> | <i>qi</i> | ! | | | |
| 30 | yuan | start | ! | | | |

‘Over a hundred hot springs, **heartwarming** low prices starting from 30 yuan!’

b. 我们在微信也讲了部分发生的**暖心**小故事

| | | | | | | |
|-------------------|-------------|---------------|-----------|-----------------|--------------|------------------|
| <i>Women</i> | <i>zai</i> | <i>Weixin</i> | <i>ye</i> | <i>jiang-le</i> | <i>bufen</i> | <i>fashengde</i> |
| We | LOC | WeChat | also | tell-PFV | some | happened |
| <i>nuan-xin</i> | <i>xiao</i> | <i>gushi</i> | | | | |
| warm-heart | small | story | | | | |

‘On WeChat, we also shared some **heartwarming** short stories that happened.’

c. 不仅要解困，更要**暖心**

| | | | | | | | |
|-----------|------------|------------|------------|-------------|-------------|------------|-------------------|
| <i>Bu</i> | <i>jin</i> | <i>yao</i> | <i>jie</i> | <i>kun,</i> | <i>geng</i> | <i>yao</i> | <i>nuan-xin</i> |
| Not | only | need | solve | difficulty, | more | need | warm-heart |

‘Not only (should we) solve problems, but (we should) also **(make them) heartwarming.**’

(4) 亲情让人心**暖**

| | | | |
|------------------|-------------|------------|-------------------|
| <i>Qin-qing</i> | <i>rang</i> | <i>ren</i> | <i>xin-nuan</i> |
| Family-affection | make | people | heart-warm |

‘Family affection makes people’s **hearts warm.**’

From examples (2) to (4), “warm heart” expressions in Chinese are structured by two conceptual frameworks:

Metaphor: PLEASANT/CARING IS WARM

Metonymy: THE HEART FOR FEELINGS

When used as an adjective (examples 2, 3a, 3b, 4), “warm heart” describes the positive emotional state of individuals who experience kindness, care, or thoughtful actions from others. In this context, the individual experiencing the “warm heart” feeling is the patient—the recipient of the caring behavior or words. This feeling often arises as a response to acts of kindness, whether from individuals, organizations (e.g., governments, travel agencies), or even through indirect exposure to heartwarming stories or scenes.

For example, in (3b), the “warm heart” feeling is experienced by the reader or teller of stories shared on WeChat. Even though they are not direct participants in the events described, they are still the patients in this scenario, as they are the recipients of the emotional impact caused by the kind actions depicted in the story. The metaphorical mapping here is: FEELING PLEASANT CAUSED BY OTHER PEOPLE’S CARE IS WARM HEART.

When used as a verb (example 3c), *warm heart* refers to the act of performing kind, caring, or considerate actions that evoke this pleasant emotional state in others. In this case, the agent (the one performing the action) aims to make the patient (the recipient) feel cared for and

emotionally warmed. Thus, the prerequisite for experiencing a “warm heart” feeling is the presence of a kind act directed toward the individual, positioning them as the patient in the interaction.

Additionally, both 暖心 (*nuǎn-xīn*, warm-heart) and 心暖 (*xīn-nuǎn*, heart-warm) are polysemous, a feature not explicitly noted in the *Modern Chinese Dictionary* (2016), likely due to the dominance of their emotional connotations. However, in certain contexts, “warm heart” can also refer to the physical act of warming the core parts of the body, as illustrated in example (5):

(5) 暖身先暖心, 心暖则身温

Nuan-shen xian nuan-xīn, xīn-nuan ze shen wen
 Warm-body first warm-heart, heart-warm then body warm
 ‘Warm the heart first to warm the body; if the heart is warm, the body will be warm.’

This usage is supported by the conceptual metaphor from ancient Chinese philosophy: THE HEART IS THE RULER OF THE BODY (Yu 2007: 27). In traditional Chinese culture, the heart is viewed not only as the essential organ but also as the ruler of the human body, controlling the brain and senses (W. Y. Wang 2009: 214). Thus, warming the heart is believed to warm the entire body, as the heart governs both the body and sensory perception. The metaphorical mapping here is: WARM (THE CORE PARTS OF) THE BODY IS WARM HEART based on the metonymy THE HEART FOR (THE CORE PARTS OF) THE BODY. This dual usage of “warm heart” reflects its rich semantic and cultural significance in Chinese, encompassing both emotional and physical dimensions.

4.1.2 Hot Heart

The term 热 (*rè*, ‘hot’) is frequently used in Chinese expressions associated with “warm heart.” Among these, 热心 (*rè-xīn*, hot-heart) is the most prominent metaphorical term, accounting for nearly 40% of the collected concordance lines in the CCL. According to the *Modern Chinese Dictionary* (2016: 1095), 热心 (*rè-xīn*, hot-heart) is lexically defined as an adjective meaning “being passionate, interested, and willing to make efforts.” This term conveys an enthusiastic interest in a specific area or activity, as well as a proactive willingness to engage in it.

The metaphorical meaning of 热心 (*rè-xīn*, hot-heart) is constructed through the following conceptual mappings:

Metaphors: ACTIVE IS HOT; INTENSITY IS HEAT

Metonymy: THE HEART FOR MIND

These mappings give rise to the overarching metaphor (example 6a): ENTHUSIASTIC IS HOT HEART. Additionally, under the same metonymic framework, 热心 (*rè-xīn*, hot-heart) can also reflect a kind and caring attitude, characterized by an eagerness to offer help voluntarily, as illustrated in examples (1) and (6b). Although this metaphorical usage is not explicitly recorded in the *Modern Chinese Dictionary* (2016), it is widely applied in everyday language and contributes to the polysemy of 热心 (*rè-xīn*, hot-heart). Specifically, this usage is motivated by the conceptual metaphor INTENSITY IS HEAT, which underlies the mapping INTENSE PROACTIVE CARING IS HOT HEART.

Modern Chinese Dictionary (2006: 1095)

(6) a. 他对工会工作很**热心**

Ta dui gong-hui gongzuo hen re-xin
 He PREP labor-union work very **hot-heart**
 He is very **enthusiastic** about labor union work.'

CCL

b. 那些司机们十分**热心**，帮着他们一起寻找

Naxie siji-men shifen re-xin, bang-zhe tamen yiqi xunzhao
 Those driver-PL very **hot-heart** help-PROG they together search
 'Those drivers were very **warm-hearted** and were helping them search together.'

The term 心热 (*xīn-rè*, heart-hot) is also polysemous, though it accounts for a smaller share (5.7%) of the collected data in the CCL corpus. In example (7), 心热 (*xīn-rè*, heart-hot) describes a desperate eagerness to obtain something intensely desired. This metaphorical expression is structured by the conceptual metaphor HANKERING IMPATIENTLY IS HOT and the metonymy THE HEART FOR MIND, resulting in the mapping: IMPATIENTLY HANKERING MIND IS HOT HEART.

(7) 让农民**心热**起来，行动起来

Rang nongmin xin-re qilai, xingdong qilai
 Make farmer **heart-hot** arise, act arise
 'Inspire farmers to become **passionate** and take action.'

Another interpretation of 心热 (*xīn-rè*, heart-hot) is rooted in the same metonymy as 暖心 (*nuǎn-xīn*, warm-heart) and 心暖 (*xīn-nuǎn*, heart-warm) in example (5): THE HEART FOR (THE CORE PARTS OF) THE BODY. In traditional Chinese medicine, as shown in example (8), 心热 (*xīn-rè*, heart-hot) is a noun used to describe symptoms related to overactive bodily organs. Typical "hot"-related symptoms include fever, heat (hot), diaphoresis, flushed face, burning pain, red eyes, thirst, and a rapid pulse (Li et al. 2007: 52). According to traditional Chinese medical theory, the metaphor THE HEART IS THE RULER OF THE BODY (Yu 2007: 27) suggests that certain symptoms are attributed to the influence of the heart's heat (CAUSE FOR EFFECT). This results in the conceptualization of 心热 (*xīn-rè*, heart-hot) as the sickly overactive heart, under the metaphor OVERACTIVE IS HOT.

(8) 茯苓、远志**泄心热**而宁心神

Fuling Yuanzhi xie xin-re er ning xinshen
 Poria, Polygala relieve **heart-hot** and calm mind
 'Poria and polygala relieve **heart heat** and calm the mind.'

Unlike 暖心 (*nuǎn-xīn*, warm-heart) and 心暖 (*xīn-nuǎn*, heart-warm), which are rooted in the patient's perspective (i.e., the recipient of kindness or care), 热心 (*rè-xīn*, hot-heart) and 心热 (*xīn-rè*, heart-hot) emphasize an agent's perspective. These terms depict an active mindset characterized by strong volition, enthusiasm, and a proactive desire to engage in activities, help others, or pursue goals. For instance, in example (6a), the individual is actively enthusiastic

about labor union work, while in example (6b), the drivers are eager to assist others. Similarly, example (7) describes the aim to make farmers become “hot-hearted,” igniting a desperate eagerness in them to obtain something they covet intensely and to take active steps towards it. This distinction underscores the dynamic and intentional nature of “hot heart” metaphors, contrasting with the more passive, recipient-focused nature of “warm heart” expressions.

In summary, “hot heart” metaphors in Chinese reflect an agent-oriented perspective, emphasizing enthusiasm, proactive behavior, and intense emotional or physical states, whether in the context of helping others, pursuing goals, or describing medical symptoms.

4.1.3 Mild Heart

The term 温 (*wēn*, ‘mild’) is less prominent in the context of “warm heart” metaphors, comprising slightly over 10% of the collected concordance lines in the CCL. Despite its lower frequency, 温心 (*wēn-xīn*, mild-heart) shares some conceptual similarities with 暖心 (*nuǎn-xīn*, warm-heart) and 心暖 (*xīn-nuǎn*, heart-warm), while also exhibiting differences in intensity and usage.

The metaphorical interpretation of 温心 (*wēn-xīn*, mild-heart) is motivated by the similar conceptual frameworks as 暖心 (*nuǎn-xīn*, warm-heart) and 心暖 (*xīn-nuǎn*, heart-warm):

Metaphor: PLEASANT/CARING IS MILD

Metonymy: THE HEART FOR FEELINGS

This results in the mapping: FEELING PLEASANT CAUSED BY OTHER PEOPLE’S CARE IS MILD HEART. As shown in example (9), 温心 (*wēn-xīn*, mild-heart) conveys consideration for the needs of economically disadvantaged senior citizens and efforts to assist them, reflecting how the gift package brings care and a pleasant emotional state to the elderly.

(9) 为贫困老人提供价值200元温心礼包

| | | | | | | |
|-------------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|---------------|-----|-------------|
| <i>Wei</i> | <i>pinkun</i> | <i>lao-ren</i> | <i>tigong</i> | <i>jiazhi</i> | 200 | <i>yuan</i> |
| For | impoverished | old-people | provide | worth | 200 | yuan |
| wen-xin | <i>li-bao</i> | | | | | |
| mild-heart | gift-package | | | | | |

‘Provide **caring** gift packages worth 200 yuan to impoverished elderly individuals.’

Additionally, like 暖心 (*nuǎn-xīn*, warm-heart), 温心 (*wēn-xīn*, mild-heart) is polysemous. Besides its emotional connotations, it can also refer to the physical act of warming the body. While 温心 (*wēn-xīn*, mild-heart) and 暖心 (*nuǎn-xīn*, warm-heart) are conceptually similar, they differ in the intensity of “heat” they convey. The caring associated with 暖心 (*nuǎn-xīn*, warm-heart) is slightly more intense and emotionally impactful than that of 温心 (*wēn-xīn*, mild-heart). Similarly, 暖心 (*nuǎn-xīn*, warm-heart) exerts a slightly stronger warming effect on the body compared to 温心 (*wēn-xīn*, mild-heart). This difference reflects the scalar nature of temperature in the source domain, which is projected onto the target domains of emotional and physical warmth.

The expression 心温 (*xīn-wēn*, heart-mild) has the lowest percentage (0.27%) in the CCL dataset and is therefore not elaborated on in detail due to its lack of representativeness.

4.2 “Warm Heart” in English

| Rank | “warm heart” related lexical units | WARM HEART - metaphor sentences | | Percentage | |
|----------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-----|------------|--------|
| 1. warm heart | warm heart | 85 | 848 | 9.96% | 99.41% |
| | warm hearted | 738 | | 86.52% | |
| | warm heartedly | 8 | | 0.94% | |
| | warm heartedness | 17 | | 1.99% | |
| 2. hot heart | hot heart | 3 | 5 | 0.35% | 0.58% |
| | hot hearted | 2 | | 0.23% | |
| | hot heartedly | 0 | | 0% | |
| | hot heartedness | 0 | | 0% | |
| 3. mild heart | mild heart | 0 | 0 | 0% | 0% |
| | mild hearted | 0 | | 0% | |
| | mild heartedly | 0 | | 0% | |
| | mild heartedness | 0 | | 0% | |
| Total | | 853 | | 100% | |

Table 3. The distribution of “warm heart”-related metaphorical terms in the COCA

4.2.1 Warm Heart

“Warm heart”-related lexical units in English exhibit a one-sided trend, relying primarily on “warm,” with over 99.4% of the examples collected from COCA. Within this temperature range, the lexicalized terms *heartwarming* and *warm-hearted*, including variations in written forms with or without hyphens and spaces, comprise almost 87% of the collected data from COCA.

4.2.1.1 Heartwarming

The term *heartwarming* is a patient-oriented expression, similar to the Chinese terms 暖心 (*nuǎn-xīn*, warm-heart) and 心暖 (*xīn-nuǎn*, heart-warm). Unlike terms that describe personality traits, *heartwarming* is rarely used to characterize individuals. Instead, it focuses on the emotional response of the patient—the person who experiences warmth or pleasure as a result of witnessing or encountering something positive.

According to the *LDOCE* (n.d.) and the *Cambridge English Dictionary* (n.d.), the definition of *heartwarming* often includes causative verbs such as *make* or *cause*. These verbs highlight that the feeling of warmth or happiness is triggered by an external source. For example, something “heartwarming” makes or causes someone to feel pleasure or happiness. The primary trigger for experiencing “heartwarming” feelings is observing the happiness of others or witnessing acts of kindness between people. As shown in examples (10a) and (10b), individuals feel “heartwarming” when they empathetically connect with positive experiences, even if they are not directly involved in the events. These experiences can include stories, news, movies, or fictional narratives that depict benevolent and compassionate actions. The patient-oriented nature of *heartwarming* is reflected in its frequent collocations with nouns such as “story,” “tale,” “moment,” “scene,” “film,” and “movie” in the COCA.

(10)

- a. Read up on **heartwarming** happenings at goodnewsblog.com, a website devoted to positive events.
- b. It's really **heartwarming** to see so many people wanting to be part of the solution.

The metaphorical mapping underlying *heartwarming* is: FEELING PLEASANT CAUSED BY OTHER PEOPLE'S CARE IS WARM HEART. This mapping is structured by two key conceptual frameworks:

Metaphor: PLEASANT/CARING IS WARM

Metonymy: THE HEART FOR FEELINGS

This framework explains why *heartwarming* evokes a sense of warmth and pleasantness when individuals encounter acts of care or kindness, even indirectly. Additionally, related parts of speech, such as *heartwarmingly*, align with this metaphorical mapping.

Regarding the distinction between “warm heart” in Chinese (暖心 *nuǎn-xīn*, warm-heart and 心暖 *xīn-nuǎn*, heart-warm) and in English, it is important to note that *heartwarming* in English is not necessarily linked to kind or loving interactions among individuals. The source of *heartwarming* can be something positive, such as success, delicious flavors, or favorable outcomes. In this context, *heartwarming* conveys a similar meaning to “gratified.” For example, in (11a) and (11b), there are no touching scenes of offering assistance. Instead, the pleasure is derived from the enjoyable taste of craft beers or achieving a high ranking. The metaphorical mapping here is FEELING PLEASANT IS WARM HEART (PLEASANT IS WARM, THE HEART FOR FEELINGS). While this metaphorical usage is less common in COCA than the previous mapping, it warrants attention in research.

(11)

- a. Order up peppery seared duck breast at the Mahogany Ridge Brewery &. Grill, and enjoy craft beers like the rich seasonal Alpenglow, a **heartwarming** brew on a cold winter's night.
- b. ...it's **heartwarming** to see The China Study still tops the bestseller lists.

4.2.1.2 Warm-hearted

Unlike *heartwarming*, which is based on a patient perspective, *warm-hearted* is primarily agent-oriented. It describes an active personality inclined to treat others kindly and proactively help those in need. According to the *LDOCE* (n.d.), *warm-hearted* is defined as being “friendly, kind, and always willing to help.” Since it is used to describe personality traits, *warm-hearted* predominantly collocates with words such as “woman,” “girl,” and “person.” Example (12) illustrates a typical use of *warm-hearted* in a sentence to demonstrate a caring disposition:

- (12) I was a generous and **warm-hearted** older brother who had helped him in many ways over the years.

In this way, *warm-hearted* is somewhat comparable to the Chinese term 热心 (*rè-xīn*, hot-heart), as both suggest a friendly attitude toward helping others. However, *warm-hearted* lacks the deeper sense of passion, interest, and willingness to actively put in effort that 热心 (*rè-xīn*,

hot-heart) conveys. The metaphor CARING PERSONALITY IS WARM HEART is structured by the metaphor CARING IS WARM and the metonymy HEART FOR PERSONALITY.

On the other hand, *warm-hearted* is not always associated with personality. As shown in example (13), *warm-hearted* can modify “truths,” “book,” and “story” in a manner similar to *heartwarming*, indicating the emotional response and pleasure elicited by touching events. Such collocations from a patient perspective are less common than instances of *warm-hearted* used in relation to personality in COCA. The metaphorical mapping is FEELING PLEASANT CAUSED BY OTHER PEOPLE’S CARE IS WARM HEART (PLEASANT/CARING IS WARM, THE HEART FOR FEELINGS). In this context, *warm-hearted* is similar to 暖心 (*nuǎn-xīn*, warm-heart).

- (13) There are a whole lot of other **warm-hearted** truths to be discovered that give the phrase “life in cold blood” a completely new meaning.

As for *warm heart*, *warm-heartedness*, and their derivatives, the metaphorical mappings in them are consistent with the dominant interpretation of *warm-hearted* from an agent-oriented perspective as a kind disposition to assist others, as illustrated in examples (14) and (15).

- (14) I stood by him because he was a decent, good man, with a **warm heart**, a loving heart.
 (15) He was famous throughout the district for his hospitality and **warm-heartedness**; neighbors constantly came to him to eat, to drink...

To sum up, in English, expressions related to “warm heart” can be both agent-oriented and patient-oriented. This duality is reflected in the usage of *heartwarming* and *warm-hearted*. *Heartwarming* is a patient-oriented term, meaning it describes the emotional response elicited by witnessing positive actions or events, similar to the Chinese terms 暖心 (*nuǎn-xīn*, warm-heart) and 心暖 (*xīn-nuǎn*, heart-warm). On the other hand, *warm-hearted* is predominantly agent-oriented, describing an individual’s active disposition to be kind and helpful, akin to the Chinese term 热心 (*rè-xīn*, hot-heart).

Unlike English, Chinese does not exhibit this duality. The terms 暖心 (*nuǎn-xīn*, warm-heart) and 心暖 (*xīn-nuǎn*, heart-warm) are patient-oriented, typically describing the emotional response elicited by someone else’s actions. In contrast, 热心 (*rè-xīn*, hot-heart) is agent-oriented, emphasizing a person’s proactive kindness, passion, interest, and enthusiastic willingness to help or make an effort. This distinction is clear and consistent in Chinese, unlike the more flexible usage in English.

4.2.2 Hot Heart

Unlike 热心 (*rè-xīn*, hot-heart) and 心热 (*xīn-rè*, heart-hot), which are prominent expressions representing “warm heart” in Chinese (accounting for 44.78% of related lexical units), expressions involving “hot heart” in English are significantly less common, comprising only 0.58% of the metaphorical examples identified in the COCA (see Table 4). Despite its rarity, “hot heart” in English exhibits a clear and unified metaphorical mapping: INTENSE FEELING IS HOT HEART, which is structured by the metaphor INTENSITY IS HEAT and the metonymy THE HEART FOR FEELINGS.

In English, “hot heart” metaphorically conveys intense emotions or passions. For example, in (16), the phrase suggests that the books on the shelves retain the essence of the strong

emotions and passions that once inspired their creation, even if those feelings have since faded or been forgotten. The *hot heart* here symbolizes the lingering intensity of past emotions, preserved like an ember within the books.

- (16) I glanced up, then, at these shelves of sleeping books and thought how each hid the ember of a **hot heart** that beat after passions now long forgotten.

While “hot heart” in English shares some conceptual similarities with the Chinese term 热心 (*rè-xīn*, hot-heart), there are notable differences. Both expressions reflect intense emotions, but 热心 (*rè-xīn*, hot-heart) in Chinese carries additional connotations of enthusiasm, proactive behavior, and a willingness to help others. In contrast, “hot heart” in English lacks this polysemy and does not imply caring or helping others. Instead, it focuses solely on the intensity of emotions or passions, without extending to acts of kindness or interpersonal care.

4.2.3 *Mild Heart*

As shown in Table 3, there are no concordance lines related to “mild heart” in COCA. This suggests that expressions involving “mild heart” may be absent from English metaphorical usage. Both *mild* and 温 (*wēn*, ‘mild’) occupy the least share of “warm heart”-related metaphorical expressions in English and Chinese data.

5 Findings

5.1 *Motivation for the Similarity*

5.1.1 *PLEASURE/CARING IS WARM*

Inspired by the common bodily experience associated with warmth and the heart, Chinese and English share a similar understanding of kindness, pleasure, and comfort as warm objects (see examples 1–4, 6b, 9, 10–15). According to Niemeier (2003: 202), the warmth of a “warm heart” represents general warmth and goodwill. The warmth emanating from the object is mapped to a compassionate person offering help to others. Specifically, the “warm heart” is perceived as a warm object that emits warmth, inviting others to seek solace. Individuals possessing a “warm heart” are typically seen as sharing and helpful. Thus, providing kind responses or help to others is seen as the object emitting warmth towards them.

The pleasant and comfortable sensation of warmth, derived from the physical comfort associated with an appropriate temperature, is widely perceived. The metaphor PLEASURE IS COMFORT IS WARM is derived from the bodily experience that softness is more comfortable than hardness. As things become softer when heated, warmth is used to signify comfort (CAUSE FOR EFFECT, COMFORT IS WARM IS SOFT), particularly in a moral or psychological sense. Through systematic mappings in conceptual metaphor, the physical sensations of warmth and softness are further projected onto feelings, personality traits, and interpersonal relationships (Melnick 2000: 227–228).

5.1.2 Limited Role of 温 (*wēn*) and “Mild”

温 (*wēn*, ‘mild’) and *mild* occupy the smallest share of “warm heart”-related expressions in both Chinese (0.58%) and English (0%). This limited metaphorical potential stems from their peripheral salience in the conceptualization of “warmth.” In both languages, 暖 (*nuǎn*, ‘warm’) and *warm* represent general warmth, while 热 (*rè*, ‘hot’) and *hot* denote intense heat, leaving “mild” as a less prominent temperature category.

Furthermore, the heart is perceived as a highly active organ, vital for sustaining life, and is naturally associated with energy and activeness. Both “warm” and “hot” align with this perception, as they reflect acceptable levels of activeness (general or intense) that satisfy the conceptualization of the heart in describing “kindness” (INTENSITY IS HEAT). In contrast, “mild” lacks sufficient heat to meet the threshold of general warmth, making it less fitting for describing the active and voluntary care associated with the heart.

5.2 Motivation for the Variation

5.2.1 Heart and Body

There is one evident culture-specific metaphorical mapping in Chinese “warm heart” expressions (see examples 5, 8), which considers the “heart” as the central and leading organ in controlling the body (THE HEART IS THE RULER OF THE BODY). This perception is absent in the English data collected in this study.

Traditional Chinese medicine, with a documented history spanning thousands of years, represents a blend of folk practices and scientifically informed medical knowledge (Chen 1989). Among its diverse theories, whether philosophical or medical in nature, consistently center on and are unified by the core concept that the heart serves as the central organ of the human body (Yu 2009: 104). The metaphor THE HEART IS THE RULER OF THE BODY (Yu 2007: 27) is rooted in ancient Chinese philosophy and theories of traditional Chinese medicine. In ancient Chinese culture, the heart plays a dominant role in regulating the body’s life activities (W. Y. Wang 2009: 213). In traditional Chinese medicine, the heart, liver, spleen, lungs, and kidneys were collectively called the “five *zang* organs.” The stomach, small intestine, large intestine, gallbladder, bladder, and triple burner (*sanjiao*) are grouped as the “six *fu* organs.” The heart, considered the leader among the “five *zang* and six *fu*,” is the master of the body’s organs (Q. Wang et al. 1997: 5; Wu 2004: 50; Zhou & Jiang 2020: 110).

Additionally, based on the metonymies THE CONTROLLER FOR THE CONTROLLED and CAUSE FOR EFFECT, the heart stands for the core parts of the body. In example (5), lexical units including 暖心 (*nuǎn-xīn*, warm-heart) and 心暖 (*xīn-nuǎn*, heart-warm) do not literally refer to the increased warmth of the heart but imply the warmth of the main parts of the body controlled by the heart. In example (8), the abnormal heat in the heart, the leader of the organs, results in symptoms associated with controlled organs or the whole body. In English, the culture has no such intricate relationship between the physical body and the heart. Hence, the metaphorical mappings between “heart” and “body” are absent in COCA.

5.2.2 Heart and Mind

In Chinese, the heart (心, *xīn*) is often conceptualized as the mind, particularly in expressions like 热心 (*rè-xīn*, hot heart) and 心热 (*xīn-rè*, heart-hot). Here, the heart represents the active

status of thoughts, with high temperature symbolizing engagement and energy (see examples 1, 6a-7). However, in English, there is no clear connection between the “heart” and the “mind.” In the collected data from COCA, the “heart” is predominantly conceptualized as the locus of feelings and emotions (see examples 10–15). This reflects the Western dualism that upholds a strict separation between reason (associated with the head) and emotion (associated with the heart) (Zhou & Jiang 2020: 110).

5.2.2.1 Holism vs Dualism

In Chinese culture, the heart (心, *xīn*) has historically been viewed as the central organ governing both thinking and feeling, a perspective deeply rooted in traditional Chinese medicine and philosophy. According to Yu (2009) and Sharifian et al. (2008: 4–5), traditional Chinese medicine, grounded in *yin-yang* (see S. Wang 2018) and the five elements (see Yu 2009), has long embraced a cardiocentric view, shaping the cultural model of the mind as heart-centered. This cardiocentrism has remained consistent in both Chinese philosophy and medicine, with the brain historically receiving little attention.

“The ‘heart’ and the ‘mind,’ in their Western senses, are conceptualized in ancient Chinese philosophy as being one, the *xīn* ‘heart,’ which houses thoughts and feelings, ideas and emotions” (Yu 2007: 28). The great ancient Chinese philosopher *Mengzi* (Mencius) also stated, “心之官则思” (‘The function of the heart is to think’) (Yang 2000: 249). The heart, as the ruler of the body, covers not only the physical functions of the body but also the psychological activities, thoughts, and subjective feelings.

In contrast, contemporary English exhibits a conceptual dualism between “head/brain” and “heart,” reflecting a cultural model that positions the heart as the locus of emotion and the head as the seat of intellect (Niemeier 2008: 350). Mainstream Western conceptualizations of dichotomy stem from “Descartes’ mathematically based rationalism and his belief in the dualism of mind and body (see e.g., Cottingham 1992; Strathern 1996: 1–8; Synnott 1993: 1–37), inherited from the Judeo-Christian traditions and Greek philosophy” (Niemeier 2008: 366).

The contrasting views on whether the heart or the brain governs the “mind” is a key distinction between Chinese and Western medicine from a Western perspective. This divergence reflects a deeper philosophical and cultural divide between “holism” and “dualism” in understanding the mind-body relationship, which underpins the differing conceptions of body and mind in Chinese and Western traditions (Yu 2009: 138).

5.2.2.2 Influence of 禅 (*Chán*, ‘Zen’) Buddhism

The Chinese understanding of the heart is also significantly influenced by 禅 (*Chán*, ‘Zen’) Buddhism. As S. Hu (1953: 3) highlights, “The Ch’an (Zen) movement is an integral part of the history of Chinese Buddhism, and the history of Chinese Buddhism is an integral part of the general history of Chinese thought.” In Chinese Buddhism, the heart is believed to govern the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. This perspective positions the heart as encompassing both the objectivity of sensory cognition and the subjectivity of emotions and thoughts (W. Y. Wang 2009: 213). This philosophical view reinforces the conceptualization of the heart as synonymous with the mind in Chinese culture. Additionally, the heart’s perceived ability to govern sensory functions, including touch, allows it to metaphorically perceive temperature. This sensitivity explains the broader range of lexical units related to the heart and temperature

in Chinese, covering “hot,” “warm,” and “mild,” compared to the limited usage of the heart in English, which is primarily associated with “warm”.

5.2.3 Hot and Warm

The use of *hot* in Chinese (热心 *rè-xīn*, ‘hot heart’) and *warm* in English (as in *warm-hearted*) to describe kindness and care reflects underlying cultural differences. In Chinese, “hot” conveys an intense, proactive willingness to make efforts or to help others (see examples 1, 6, 7), whereas in English, “warm” suggests a more general sense of friendliness and compassion (see examples 12, 14, 15).

Specifically, in Chinese, the distinction between 热 (*rè*, ‘hot’), 暖 (*nuǎn*, ‘warm’), and 温 (*wēn*, ‘mild’) reflects the intensity of care and kindness. 热 (*rè*, ‘hot’) is used to describe an agent-oriented perspective, in which the individual’s active mindset initiates enthusiasm or kindness. In contrast, 暖 (*nuǎn*, ‘warm’) and 温 (*wēn*, ‘mild’) are used to describe the patient-oriented perspective, where kindness is received from others. This distinction highlights the cultural emphasis on the proactive role of the individual in helping others.

In English, however, there is no such differentiation. Both *heartwarming* (patient-oriented) and *warm-hearted* (predominantly agent-oriented) are associated with the same temperature, “warm.” This reflects the lack of emphasis on the individual’s active role in initiating kindness towards others. This distinction arises from divergent cultural values, and certain underlying cultural motivations will be analyzed in the subsequent discussion.

In ancient Chinese philosophy, the concept of the “heart as the locus of moral sense” is predominant. As the organ responsible for thought and reasoning, the heart is endowed with the cognitive capacity to assess behavior rationally, guided by moral principles and values. Consequently, it is regarded as the center of an individual’s moral awareness and ethical character (Yu 2009: 62–63). In Confucian culture 心 (*xīn*, ‘heart’), the mind controlled by each individual, is conceptualized as the core and the method to achieve the highest pursuit in Confucianism.

仁 (*rén*, ‘benevolence, care’), a pivotal concept in Confucianism, is the “highest moral ideal for every Confucian” (Zhang 2016: 46–47). In the philosophical masterpiece 论语 *Lun yu* (*Analects*), Kongzi (Confucius) stated, “我欲仁, 斯仁至矣” (‘As long as I sincerely desire to embody the virtue of *ren*, then *ren* is realized’) (Yang 1980: 74). Mengzi (Mencius) also proposed “仁, 人心也” (‘*Ren*, is the heart of a person’) (Yang 2000: 247). This perspective highlights the subjectivity of the mind as the decisive factor in achieving benevolence. The individual’s volition to care for others must be activated first, followed by kind actions.

When the metaphorical meaning of 热心 (*rè-xīn*, ‘hot heart’) emphasizes a passionate willingness to help others, it closely aligns with the Confucian ideal of 仁 (*rén*, ‘benevolence, care’). In this context, the emphasis is placed on a solid, self-motivated intention to offer assistance (see examples 1, 6b). Based on the conceptual metaphors ACTIVE IS HOT and INTENSITY IS HEAT, 热 (*rè*, ‘hot’), the highest temperature, is chosen to manifest the decisiveness and eagerness of the mind to care for and assist others.

The realization of benevolent behaviors related to 仁 (*rén*, ‘benevolence, care’) is determined by the intensity of the caring mind. Compared to 暖 (*nuǎn*, ‘warm’) and 温 (*wēn*, ‘mild’), 热 (*rè*, ‘hot’) is the highest in temperature. Thus, 热 (*rè*, ‘hot’) is preferred in Chinese to

describe the intense spontaneous mind to care for others and is the only choice to manifest the “agent-oriented” mappings in the collected data from CCL.

However, in Christian culture, such emphasis on an inherent caring disposition is less prominent in conceptualizations of benevolence. Instead of individuals, God is predominantly decisive in controlling the mind. In Genesis 2:7, Adam was considered a “living soul” (in the original Hebrew, “*nephesh*”) not because he had a body made from dust but because he possessed an “immortal soul” from God. According to 2nd-century Church Father Irenæus, this soul represents the rational part of man—thoughts, intentions, and spirit (Roberts et al. 1989). This dualistic interpretation received support from the influential Church Father Augustine, gradually evolving into the most influential Christian doctrine of the relationship between mind and body (Xu 2010: 69). The mind in ancient English culture is not embedded in a salient “agent-oriented” perspective as in Chinese culture. Hence, “warm,” the general description of high temperature, is predominantly combined with “heart” to depict a caring attitude. The intensity of eagerness in the mind is not as decisive as in ancient Chinese culture when initiating benevolent behavior.

6 Conclusion

This study systematically explores the conceptualization of the “warm heart” in Chinese and English, revealing both shared and culture-specific metaphorical mappings rooted in universal bodily experiences and cultural contexts. Both languages conceptualize kindness, care, and offering help in “warm heart”-related expressions, grounded in the common human experience of physical warmth as comforting and nurturing.

However, significant cultural variations emerge in the intensity and conceptualization of warmth. In Chinese, the use of 热 (*rè*, ‘hot’) in 热心 (*rè-xīn*, hot-heart) emphasizes an intense, proactive willingness to help others (see examples 1, 6b), reflecting Confucian philosophy that prioritizes the individual’s active role in cultivating moral virtues such as 仁 (*rén*, ‘benevolence’). In contrast, English predominantly uses “warm” to describe kindness, as in *warm-hearted*, reflecting a more moderate orientation (see examples 12, 14, 15). The study also reveals that Chinese metaphorical expressions of “warm heart” often incorporate traditional Chinese medical views, where the heart is seen as the ruler of the body (see examples 5, 8), controlling both physical and emotional states.

Future research on the concept of the “warm heart” should aim to provide a more comprehensive analysis by utilizing larger datasets and diverse data sources to address the current limitations. Including more languages in the comparison of “warm heart” related expressions could yield more inclusive findings.

Abbreviations

CLF classifier
 LOC locative
 PFV perfective
 PL plural
 PREP preposition
 PROG progressive



Data Availability Statement. The sample Python script for random data extraction, along with the data collected for this study, is available in the Open Science Framework repository. The link to the repository is provided below:
https://osf.io/2y7kg/?view_only=65b1643dcb9045f7a535a874e738bd4b
 (Accessed 10 October 2024)

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