

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The cognitive and psychological mechanism of Chinese oxymoron “tough women”

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### ABSTRACT

Oxymoron refers to juxtaposing two words that are semantically contradictory to each other in language communication, which makes them have rhetorical connection, and achieves the modification effect of binary opposition through the antonym relationship in semantic components, and which makes the expression profound and more tense. Based on the theory of cognitive linguistics, this study analyzes the formation mechanism of the oxymoron “tough women” from the perspective of “reality-cognition-language” and discusses the cognitive and psychological mechanism of its formation. Conceptual blending theory is used to form the oxymoron conceptual integration prominent model of “tough women”. It is found that the formation of the word “tough women” has a long historical reasons. From ancient times to modern times, because women’s social status changes with the changes of objective social forms, based on physical experience and psychological perception of different times, people form their concepts about the “tough women”. Dynamic cognitive processing of “female” is carried out to form an abstract image schema of modern “tough women”, which integrates the traditional weak characteristic domain of women and the strong male characteristic domain in psychological space, and a theoretical model of conceptual integration of oxymoron is put forward.

**Keywords:** oxymoron; “tough women”; cognitive linguistics; conceptual integration

## 1. Introduction

The term oxymoron comes from the ancient Greek words “oxus” (sharp) and “moros” (stupid), which means “sharply stupid” (keen stupidity). Obviously, the word Oxymoron itself is an oxymoron, with contradictory semantic combination elements. It refers to juxtaposing two words that are semantically contradictory to each other in language communication, rather than comparing the usual meanings, so that the two contradictory words coexist, make them have rhetorical connections, and make the characteristics of two irreconcilable things penetrate and blend into each other. Through the synthesis of the two, and with the joint efforts of the two, we can create a brand-new realm, turn the opposites into unity, express the unity of opposites of things, and achieve the modification effect of binary opposites through the antonym relationship in semantic components, making the expression more profound and tense. The contradictory sides in oxymoron are indispensable and their relationship is a kind of coupling interaction, and the key is the

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question of “degree”. Oxymoron makes it possible to express what cannot be expressed. As a method of thinking, it leads the conscious activity to the depths that common sense cannot reach. As a creative means, it opens up a unified world full of paradoxes. Oxymoron deviates from the normal norms and logic of language, and its abnormal and abrupt collocation of words is not only an adventure at the language level, but also an adventure in thoughts, feelings and spirit. For instance, the oxymoron of “silent cry” is a pair of contradictory unity. According to common sense, since it is silent, there is no shouting, and since it is shouting, there is no silence. The two are opposite to each other, but they are in the same whole and form a dialectical relationship. Although they are semantically opposite, they coexist and rely on each other in this Oxymoron, and may go to the opposite of each other, which may be a silent shouting. Therefore, the study of Oxymoron shows that the application of an ordinary rhetorical device is not only to pursue peculiar aesthetic effects, but also to reveal the concepts of people’s mind.

## **2. Research of oxymoron at home and abroad, and their deficiencies**

### **2.1. Research status of oxymoron at home and abroad**

There has been a long history of research on English oxymoron abroad. According to the keyword oxymoron in Social Science Citation Index database, the research mainly focuses on Shakespeare’s literary works such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*. Oxymoron research in China mainly focus on its structural form, rhetorical features or pragmatic functions, such as Zhao<sup>[1]</sup> and Wang<sup>[2]</sup>. Li<sup>[3]</sup> discussed the pragmatic functions and translation methods of Chinese-English oxymoron. Its pragmatic functions include reasoning, narrative description and lyricism, and its translation methods include transplantation, disassembly and dissolution. Sun and Wang<sup>[4]</sup> made a microscopic comparison between Chinese and English on contradictory figures of speech, and found that they have three similarities: subjectivity, integrity and artistic conception, but there are also differences in distance, pronunciation and part of speech. Based on seeking common ground while reserving differences, this study further explores the philosophical motivation of oxymoron rooted in it-experience philosophy. Some researchers have analyzed oxymoron from the perspective of cognitive mechanism. Zhang<sup>[5]</sup> and Wang<sup>[2]</sup> explored Oxymoron by cognitive investigation, which was discussed based on conceptual blending theory or dialectical thinking. Zhang<sup>[5]</sup> borrowed the concept synthesis theory put forward by Fauconnier to interpret oxymoron from a cognitive perspective, arguing that this theory can explain the meaning construction in the process of understanding oxymoron, and contextual information plays an active role in the process of understanding. The interpretation of any language form, as long as it is the interpretation of language units composed of more than two words, will actually involve the concept synthesis. Without conceptual synthesis, it is difficult to connect semantics and language communication. Wang<sup>[6]</sup> explained oxymoron from the perspectives of tension, causes and cognitive resolution, and thought that the core of understanding oxymoron lies in a deep understanding of its inherent tension, which is also its essence; The tension of oxymoron originates from the tension of things and is a mixture of ontological unity of opposites and cognitive unity of opposites. The cognitive resolution mechanism of oxymoron is different from the cognitive interpretation mechanism of other language expressions. It is precisely because of the inherent unity of opposites that contradictory parties have cohesion, which leads to the coupling effect between contradictory parties in oxymoron. The researchers also expounded oxymoron from the perspective of psychology and logic. Nie<sup>[7]</sup> studied oxymoron from a logical point of view, holding that oxymoron is illogical and logical, and it is the unity of opposites of superficial logical contradiction and deep complementary contradiction. Shao<sup>[8]</sup> explained oxymoron through the paradigm theory of “pragmatic reasoning based on mental model” and the explicit and implicit working framework of autonomous-dependent components. Some researchers have also investigated

oxymoron in literary works and online buzzwords. Liu<sup>[9]</sup> studied Baudelaire's works, and found that he was good at using oxymoron to make nouns and adjectives that modify it construct a contradictory state, giving people a new and different feeling, infiltrating the poet's complex psychology, enhancing the appeal of the poem, and making readers feel infinite meaning in it while being surprised. Li<sup>[10]</sup> analyzed the contradictory motivation in the online buzzwords of "contradictory expression", and on this basis, made cultural interpretation and analysis, and respected the "youth contradiction" that recognized "contradictory youth", providing strategies for guiding the development of youth culture. Liao and Kong<sup>[11]</sup> probed into the generation mechanism of oxymoron by proposing the non-locality connection model based on the principle of non-locality and other relative principles of quantum mechanism. Liu<sup>[12]</sup> investigated the embodied-cognitive mechanism of the formation of oxymoron construction and its general constraints based on the embodied-cognitive reference point and the principle of perspectivization.

## **2.2. Oxymoron research's deficiencies**

Although the research results of oxymoron involve semantics, syntax, pragmatics, psychology, cognition and translation, the overall research situation at this stage still presents the following limitations: (1) The research object is not systematic enough, and often only studies a certain phenomenon of oxymoron, without deeply exploring the cognitive mechanism and hidden cultural connotation of this phenomenon, resulting in the overall appearance of the oxymoron system, or the generality of oxymoron is not clear enough. (2) The research perspective is not comprehensive enough, and most of them pay attention to the internal system of oxymoron, lacking a comprehensive grasp and systematic understanding of multi-dimensional factors, such as semantic perspective and pragmatic perspective, which only analyze the components and expressions of oxymoron. Although some studies include a multi-level investigation of language meaning, they do not involve the innovation and supplement of the current macro cognitive linguistics and rhetoric theory, and still lack a comprehensive grasp and systematic understanding of multi-dimensional factors such as semantics, syntax, pragmatics and cognition. In addition, it also cuts off the link between auxiliary words and other disciplines such as philosophy and psychology, so the oxymoron studied has little contribution to language theory and rhetoric theory. Because there is little research on oxymoron itself and its theoretical construction, the cognitive neural mechanism of oxymoron is not involved. There is not much research on Chinese oxymoron in China. This study will examine the formation mechanism of Chinese oxymoron "tough woman" from the perspectives of cognitive linguistics, psychology and Rhetorics, and build a conceptual integration model of oxymoron.

## **3. Historical research on the formation of "tough women"**

### **3.1. Cognitive and psychological concepts of "female" in ancient times in China**

In ancient times, social productivity was low, and people were unable to cope with natural disasters such as floods and earthquakes. Imaginers had supernatural power to help them resist disasters. Myth came into being, which is the source of ancient culture and has unique cultural value. "Nu Wa" is the god created by people in ancient times to save the world. In ancient books, the word "Nu Wa" has the meaning of women. The pattern of "human head and snake body" in silk painting unearthed from Mawangdui in Han Tomb can determine the female identity of Nu Wa. The protagonist of the myth of "The goddess patching the sky" is a woman. Nu Wa collected five-colored stones from Kunlun Mountain to mend the hole in the sky. The task of refining stones to mend the sky is very arduous. However, in face of such an arduous task, Nu Wa persevered in fulfilling the set goals regardless of her own safety, which not only showed that women had a high position in the primitive society and endowed them with lofty divine rights, but also reflected their tenacity, hard work, courage and wisdom. Xu<sup>[13]</sup> put forward that this myth praises the goddess patching

the sky's greatness and affirms the role and position of women in the process of social construction. Rong<sup>[14]</sup> holds that people's psychology has a kind of modeling ability, which will spontaneously produce similar fantasy forms in different times and in areas where they communicate with each other. It can even be said that even if all the cultures in the world are destroyed, the whole myth system and the whole religious history can still be embodied in the next generation. Myth is the most traditional part of literature. Its intention, symbol, theme, characters, structural units and semantic associations are deeply rooted in a nation's cultural system, forming a kind of social psychology and a kind of "collective unconsciousness". And this unconscious or "racial memory" lurks in the depths of everyone's heart. It is the sum of all the psychological activities and contents that can be turned into consciousness, and it is indeed often turned into consciousness. It is suppressed because it is incompatible with consciousness and is in a potential state. In ancient times, the abstract image schema of "women" was produced because of the low level of productivity, but women had a high social status. Because people's ideas and consciousness are initially directly intertwined with people's social activities, with people's contacts, and with the real life. Ideas, thinking and people's spiritual communication are also the direct products of people's material relations here. The concept of psychological formation is formed on the basis of objective reality, and people have formed their cognition of the concept of "women" through interaction with the objective world, thus expressing the reality in language. The image schema of "female" in this period has high praise.

### **3.2. Cognitive and psychological concepts of "female" in feudal dynasties of variety in China**

In 221 BC, after more than 2000 years of slavery, the first unified and centralized feudal king Chaoqin was born in China history. China has several thousand years of feudal times, including Qin, Han, Three Kingdoms, Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, Sui and Tang Dynasties, Northern and Southern Song Dynasties, Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties. The concepts of women and men in China are independent of each other, but according to historical changes, their status has changed. Historically, the status of women in China has changed with different historical periods. In matriarchal clan society, women played an important role in social production and led the development direction of the whole society. With the improvement of productivity and the weakness of matriarchal system in primitive society, the status of men in social life had gradually been increased, and the opportunities for women to participate in important social public life had been decreased. In feudal society, due to the influence of the mainstream social consciousness that men were superior to women, women's responsibility was mainly to teach their children, and the frequency of participating in social activities was greatly reduced, thus affecting their education level. In order to maintain the authority of patriarchy and husband power, the society required women to abide by the moral code of "three obediences and four virtues". The restrictions on women's status in rites, mourning were shown in biographies of "Zi Xia" and "Zhou Li", "Tian Guan Jiu Ai". "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" was considered as a moral code for women, which required women to obey men absolutely, and unmarried women should obey their fathers as well as their brothers. Married women should obey their husbands and became their personal property. A husband can divorce his wife, but a wife can't divorce her husband. A wife should be faithful to her husband, and even be martyred to show her loyalty to her husband after his death. After the death of her husband, the wife should obey her son, and women's obedience to her son was a negative extension of patriarchy. This "enslaved" gender norm creates inequality between men and sex. According to Meng and Zhang<sup>[15]</sup>, Men have absolute rights to women, but they have no obligations and are in a dominant position. In ancient times, the main purpose of marriage between men and women was to breed offspring, and women were responsible for breeding offspring, which were often considered as fertility machines, and at the same time they had to manage a large amount of housework and support the elderly. These family divisions made their position in society unrecognized. Men had absolute rights in society and family, while women were in a low position and have no right to speak. They were almost deprived of their

right to education and employment, and almost became accessories of men. Only a few rich women can receive a small amount of education. Their social activities were few, almost confined to its own family that their comprehensive development can not be realized. Men can be educated in private schools since childhood, and when they grew up, and they can choose careers in politics or business. By integrating into social production and division of labor, men gained higher social recognition and can also get labor remuneration from their work, thus becoming the pillar of the family and contributing to social and economic development. Therefore, men had higher rights and status than women in both society and family. In contrast, men's economic functions outside the home were often regarded as the most important contribution to the family, so men naturally gained a higher status than women. In the long feudal society, patriotic and capable women emerged. However, under the influence of the national consciousness of martial arts in feudal countries, more concepts related to the attribute of martial arts had been absorbed as vehicle resources for women, such as "Mulan" and "Mu Guiying", with which people are very familiar in cultural experience. Although Mulan pretended to be a man to join the army for their fathers and Mu Guiying was in command and they have the same strength and leadership as men, women's natural status defects cannot be achieved. However, during thousands of years of feudal dynasties, the status of women in some dynasties was greatly improved, such as the Tang Dynasty. The Tang Dynasty was a bright pearl in the political and economic development of China's ancient feudal society. China in the Tang Dynasty was the most developed country in the world politically and economically, and many countries in the world rushed to China to learn advanced science, technology and culture. In this period, women got rid of the shackles of the propriety of marrying a husband, and were allowed to divorce and remarry. Divorce from the ideological aspect was no longer a shame for women's families. Wu Zetian, the first female emperor in China's history, built numerous schools during her reign, encouraging women from all walks of life to enter the schools to learn poetry, music, dance, and to acquire scientific and technological knowledge. Due to the improvement of women's education, numerous female officials had been employed, women were respected and appreciated by people, and their personalities were well developed. In the era of political clarity, cultural prosperity and economic prosperity in the Tang Dynasty, people's minds were more open and easy to accept new things and ideas. Women can actively participated in social economic and political activities, and they were no longer subservient to men, and their social status are significantly improved. However, the cultivation and respect of women in other feudal dynasties after the Tang Dynasty began to decline, and the status of women was much lower than that of men, including the last feudal dynasty, the Qing Dynasty. After the overthrow of the Qing government, China experienced the period of the Republic of China, the period of War of Resistance against Japan and the period of cooperation between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party. Due to the social turmoil, the attention paid to women also decreased. People's cognition of "women" changed with the vassal relationship before the Tang Dynasty and the social status in the declining period of China, but generally speaking, people formed the concept and image schema that women were "weak".

### **3.3. Cognitive and psychological concept of "female" in the new China period**

Influenced by bourgeois democratic thoughts and democratic revolution, women in China were constantly pursuing liberation, realizing their social values and actively participating in political and economic activities. With the development of the national liberation movement, women were also fighting for their own liberation and rights. The establishment of New China turned a new page for the improvement of women's status. With the prosperity of the country, the will of the state led the change of people's thoughts from top to bottom in the promotion of "equality between men and women", and the women in New China are in a state of "liberation". The task of expressing concepts in words is mainly undertaken by authoritative words expressing the thinking of the country. With the development of society, the promotion of women's status has attracted more and more attention. Only when women truly participate in the social division of labor can a society achieve real development and progress. In today's China society, women and

men are equally integrated into social work and life in all fields. Statistics show that the employment rate of women in China ranks first in the world. More and more women participate in the political life of the country, and women enjoy equal right to vote and stand for election. In the National People's Congress and local people's congresses at all levels, women representatives occupy a considerable proportion. More and more women hold important positions in government departments. Economically, some elite women have achieved a series of social recognition in their work, and their social status and family status have greatly improved, especially when women's achievements and economic contributions to their families are greater than those of men. In the field of scientific research and innovation, since the implementation of the strategy of rejuvenating the country through science and education, the number of female scientific and technological workers in the country has been growing fast, and some women have entered cutting-edge scientific and technological fields such as high-energy physics, genetic engineering, microelectronics and satellite launch. By 2023, the number of female scientific and technological workers has exceeded 40 million, and the proportion of women in professional technology has exceeded 50%. The achievements of women educators, doctors, writers and artists have been widely recognized by the society. For example, Tu Youyou, a woman in the medical field, graduated from Beijing Medical College (now Peking University Medical College) and won the "Republic Medal" and won the Nobel Prize in science. Women now play an active role in social moral construction because of their affinity. Today, with the emphasis on a harmonious society, women actively join in social construction, give full play to their own abilities and functions, realize their own values in social practice, and thus improve their status in a real sense. It is precisely because of the objective promotion of women's status that people have gradually formed a stronger psychological schema of women through long-term social exchanges and contacts.

#### **4. The formation mechanism of the concept of "tough woman" in oxymoron**

Johnson and Lakoff<sup>[16]</sup> hold that from the perspective of cognitive theory, the philosophical basis of cognitive linguistics is empiricism, and the center of language is meaning, but "meaning comes not only from the inside of the organism, but also from the external input, but from the recurring pattern of interaction between the organism and the environment. In the process of cognition, human beings always build up psychological space, which is a symbol of people's understanding of the components in a specific scene of imaginary memory and the relationship between components, and a small concept package established by people in order to achieve the purpose of local understanding and action when thinking and talking. Mental space is a combination of a series of small concept packages, and its establishment is restricted by context and culture. People have dynamically extracted the characteristics of "women" from ancient times to modern times, which is consistent with the ups and downs of the social environment. They have constantly understood the concept of "women" and established corresponding psychological space. Different dynasties have different understandings of women, but the relatively stable characteristics of women are diligence, kindness and gentleness. The overall social cognition of "male" is that he has a high social status, plays an important role in social politics and economy, and is capable of manual labor and hard work. The conceptual integration theory of Fauconnier and Turner<sup>[17]</sup> provides cognitive motivation for the online construction of discourse meaning, and explains the connection relationship between corresponding components in input spaces and the dynamic cognitive process of how to derive new concepts through projection and integration. **Figure 1** mainly involves four spaces: two input spaces, a generic space and a blend space. The cognitive subject selectively extracts the main information from the two input spaces, but it also leaves some conceptual elements, that is, the selectivity of the mental space.

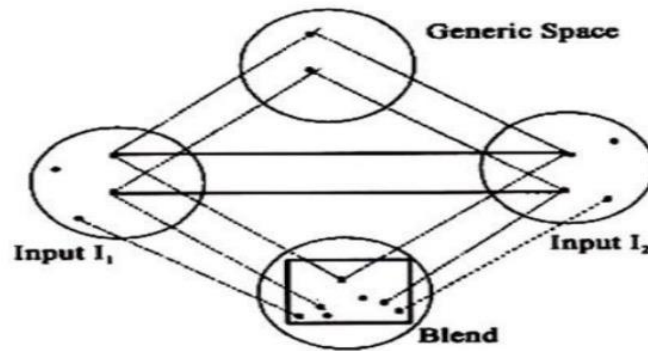


Figure 1. Conceptual blending theory (Fauconnier and Turner<sup>[17]</sup>).

According to the theory of **Figure 1** and the characteristics of oxymoron, this paper puts forward **Figure 2**. Now take “tough woman” as an example to explain by the following diagram.

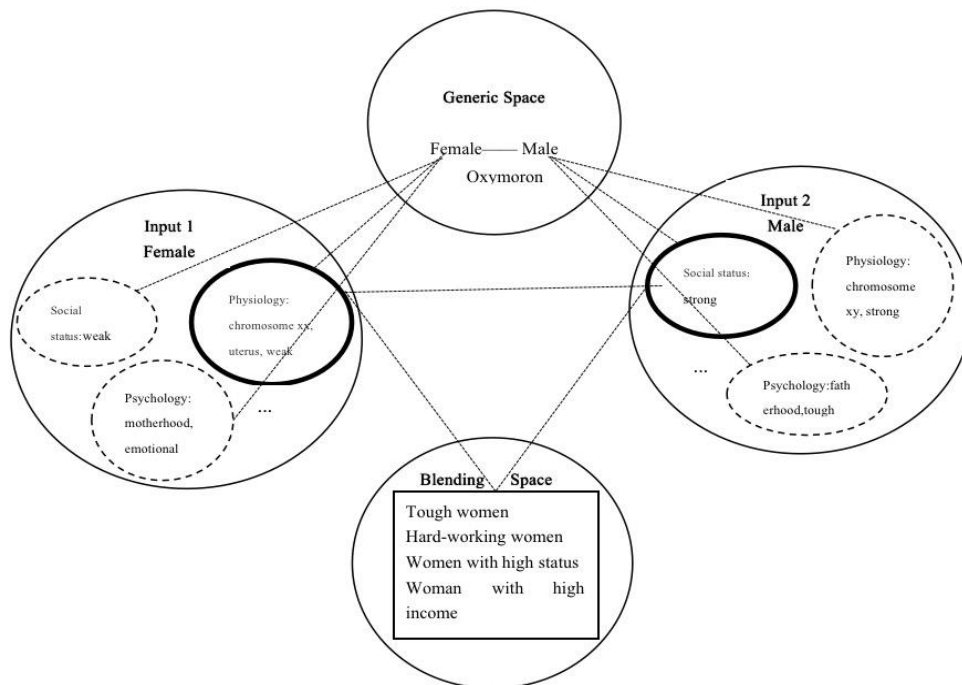


Figure 2. Oxymoron conceptual integration prominent model, OCIP.

In Figure 2, “woman” and “man” belong to different categories, that is, a woman can’t be a man. These two categories are absolutely contradictory and conflicting. Input space 1 is female, with typical female characteristics, such as tenderness, weakness, no beard, no Adam’s apple, exquisite dress, etc. Input space 2 is male, with typical male characteristics, such as strong, hard-working, rough voice, Adam’s apple, thick hair and beard, rough personality and so on. The characteristics of the two input spaces are projected into the fusion space, and “tough woman” has both female and male characteristics. Constructing a kind of equality between men and women on the basis of recognizing gender differences is hindered by both physiological and gender cognition. In the long period before the founding of New China, gender roles believed that women were accessories of men, and the jobs women were engaged in were very low-end, and only men could engage in high-level jobs. Therefore, women have been living under the aperture of men. There are two types of role division: one is natural gender division, and the other is social gender division. In modern China, the working pressure becomes more and more greater and the women can undertake the same hard work as men. For example, nu ren neng ding banbiantian (women can support half of the sky). Here, the sky

refers to the hard labor work, physically and psychologically.

Engels and Marx<sup>[18]</sup> pointed out that all human life depends on labor, and labor is an important factor leading to the division of roles. The former is the gender division of labor caused by physiological differences between men and women since birth, which is equal and the physiological differences between the two sexes belong to objective facts. From the physical point of view, men's physical strength is generally better than that of women. Men have the characteristics of strong body, muscular development and strong strength, which are suitable for strength-oriented jobs, while women are sensitive and good at expressing, which are more suitable for weak strength-oriented jobs. Second, the unbalanced social division of labor hinders the role change. Although there are natural differences between the two sexes, the natural gender division of labor cannot be classified as gender inequality. The natural gender division of labor should not be denied because of the nature of work, but should give different jobs the same labor value. The former belongs to the natural attribute of men and women, and the latter comes into being with the real division of labor. Because people are social people, with the development of society, the role orientation of human beings has changed from "natural social division of labor" to "social gender division of labor". According to Zhang and Pan<sup>[19]</sup>, the division of labor is gradually developed with the progress of productive forces, and people will be divided into different grades in the process. Due to the influence of the national will of New China, that is, the theme of "equality between men and women", women are getting closer to men in social division of labor. In addition to their own characteristics, "tough woman" has many characteristics of men. In the contradiction between men and women, the prominent characteristics of the two are combined to form the image schema of "tough woman", which is stored in people's minds, which also caters to the "reality-reality" advocated by cognitive linguistics. Therefore, oxymoron juxtaposes contradictory semantics, which reflects a basic feature of rhetoric described by Aristotle, that is, the rhetorician should be able to prove two opposing views on any dispute, or he must master two opposing arguments and two proofs for each topic at the same time. With this ability, it means that the speaker or author can consider the problem from different angles and grasp the overall situation, so as to take more effective countermeasures. The basic view of cognitive semantics is that language does not directly represent or correspond to the real world, but an intermediate "cognitive construction" level connects language expression with the real world. In this cognitive intermediary layer, people form various concepts and conceptual structures about the real world. The real world is "refracted" to language expression through this cognitive intermediary layer. As Shen<sup>[20]</sup> put forward, Language expression can not completely correspond to the real world.

## **5. Conclusion**

This paper analyzes the concept of "tough woman" and various factors that form the image schema, among which historical factors occupy an important position. In different periods, due to the constraints of social productive forces, women's social divisions of labor are different that their social status and family status are also different. Their status depend on women's economic and political status. Through long-term interaction with the objective real world, people have different understandings of "women" and "men". After the founding of New China, women's political and economic status has been unprecedentedly improved. Women can not only engage in the types of jobs that men can engage in, but even surpass men in many fields, absorbing the common characteristics of "men" and "women", thus forming the concept of "female man", which is finally expressed in the form of language. It embodies the general consensus of women's higher social status in China today. The oxymoron conceptual integration prominent model can best explain the psychological processes of the formation of the two opposite concepts, and the embodied interaction of the subjects with certain cultural background in different periods of time to form different mental schema.



## Author Contributions

Conceptualization, JZ and RL; methodology, RL; formal analysis, JZ; investigation, RL; resources, JZ; writing—original draft preparation, JZ; writing—review and editing, RL; visualization, JZ; project administration, JZ; funding acquisition, JZ. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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