

Figurative Uses of *Finger* and *Palm* in Chinese and English

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This article studies 2 Chinese body-part terms *zhi* ‘finger’ and *zhang* ‘palm’ as they are used in compounds and idioms to express abstract concepts. Primarily, *zhi* ‘finger’ is used to express intention, aim, guidance, and direction, whereas *zhang* ‘palm’ is used to refer to power and control. The metaphoric and metonymic expressions involved are based on 2 common acts with hands: pointing with the index finger and holding in the palm of the hand. A comparison between Chinese and English data reveals 2 differences. First, the conceptual metaphor “*CONTROL IS HOLDING IN THE PALM OF THE HAND*” is not richly manifested in English, although it is in Chinese. Second, the conceptual metaphor “*THE FINGER IS THE DOER*” is well manifested in English, but it is not realized in Chinese. These differences consist in the choice of a subpart (palm or finger) over the part (hand) as a result of cultural preferences. They reside, however, in a larger context of common grounding of meaning in bodily experiences.

Metaphoric and metonymic uses of body-part terminology have attracted considerable attention from scholars concerned with human language. For instance, it has been widely documented that body-part terms are used to describe or characterize object parts and locative relations across languages (e.g., Allan, 1995; Brugman, 1983; Brugman & Macaulay, 1986; Heine, 1995; Levinson, 1994; MacLaury, 1989; Matsumoto, 1999; Svorou, 1994; Walsh, 1994). Body-part terms are also found to denote temporal and logical relations (e.g., Hollenbach, 1995) and linguistic actions (e.g., Goossens, 1995; Pauwels & Simon-Vandenberg, 1995). Lakoff and Johnson

(e.g., 1980, 1999) stressed the role of the body in linguistic expressions and contend these expressions reflect and influence our thought in many ways.

This study is part of a larger project on metaphoric and metonymic use of Chinese body-part terminology (see also Yu, 1995, 1998b). In particular, it is a follow-up of my earlier study of the Chinese body-part term *shou* ‘hand’ (Yu, 1998a) and focuses on *zhi* ‘finger’ and *zhang* ‘palm.’ When we do things with our hands, we generally do them with our fingers and palms. When we hold things, we generally hold them in our palm, with the help of our fingers. Table 1 offers Chinese and English terms for these parts and shows the order of the modifiers. Surely reflecting the relative salience of the parts, there is no special term in Chinese or English for the back of the hand. The word *bei* ‘back’ in Chinese and *back* in English primarily refer to the rear surface of the body between shoulders and hips. When they refer to the subpart, the “outer surface,” of the hand, they have to be modified to make it clear.

There is more linguistic evidence showing that the finger and the palm occupy a more central position in our bodily experiences than the back of the hand. In Chinese, *zhi* ‘finger’ and *zhang* ‘palm’ have derived through metonymy and metaphor a number of abstract meanings. The former can mean “point at/to”; “point out, indicate, demonstrate, show”; “refer to, direct at”; “depend, rely, or count on”; and so forth. The latter, in its more abstract senses, means “control” and “be in charge of.” Although the Chinese compounds and idioms containing finger or palm cover a broad range of abstract meanings, they are likely grounded in two common acts: pointing with one’s (index) finger and holding in the palm of one’s hand.

THE FINGER THAT POINTS

In this section, I provide examples that suggest the majority of the Chinese compounds and idioms involving *zhi* ‘finger’ are likely consonant with the following two pairs of metonymy and metaphor.

- (1) a. “*THE POINTING FINGER STANDS FOR INTENTION OR TARGET.*”
b. “*INTENTION OR TARGET IS WHAT THE FINGER POINTS TO.*”
- (2) a. “*THE POINTING FINGER STANDS FOR GUIDANCE OR DIRECTION.*”
b. “*TO GUIDE OR DIRECT IS TO POINT WITH THE FINGER.*”

TABLE 1
Body-Part Terms for Subparts of the Hand in Chinese and English

Chinese	(<i>shou</i>) <i>zhi</i> (hand) finger	(<i>shou</i>) <i>zhang</i> (hand) palm	<i>shou bei</i> hand back
English	finger (of the hand)	palm (of the hand)	back of the hand

As is obvious, the two pairs are rooted in the act of pointing. We point for various purposes—identifying a target or giving directions, for instance. I first illustrate with examples realizing (1a) and (1b). But before I proceed, a word about data collection and presentation. In collecting the Chinese data, I used the following popular dictionaries in China: Lü and Ding (1980, 1989, 1996), Wang (1992), Wei (1995), G. Wu (1993), and J. Wu (1981). In the lexical examples, the parentheses contain glosses. In the glosses of sentential examples, PRT is particle and MOD is modifier marker. A character version of the Chinese examples is provided in the Appendix.

In (3a) the aim or intention is “the goal or destination to which the finger points.” In (3b) the main idea or gist is “the main or important point at which the finger points.” It is the intention of a speaker or writer who tries to “*reach an aim*” or “*hit a target*” in a discourse or text. But before anything else, he or she first points to it and identifies it.

- (3) a. *zhi-gui* (pointing finger–goal/destination) ‘aim; intention’
 b. *zhi-yao* (pointing finger–main/important point) ‘main idea; gist’

The metaphorical connection of finger pointing and the meaning of intention is also found in the idioms in (4), where the person says something but means something else. The real intended target of the remarks is what the finger is pointing to.

- (4) a. *zhi-ji ma-gou* (finger pointing–chicken curse–dog) ‘point at the chicken and curse the dog; abuse one over the shoulder of another; scold a person indirectly’
 b. *zhi-sang ma-huai* (finger pointing–mulberry curse–locust) ‘point at the mulberry and abuse the locust; point at one but abuse another’
 c. *zhi-dong shuo-xi* (finger pointing–east talk–west) ‘point to the east and talk west; make a concealed/roundabout reference to something; make insinuations’
 d. *zhi-hei dao-bai* (finger pointing–black talk–white) ‘point to black and say it’s white’

The examples in (5) illustrate the connection between finger pointing and (identification of) a target. Example (5a), the compound meaning “accuse” or “charge,” shows that when one accuses another, the accuser’s finger also points at the accused. Example (5b) evokes the image that the witness points at the defendant when testifying against him or her. The compound can also mean “confess,” especially also identifying other suspects. Identification is what (5c) is about, again rooted in the image of finger pointing. Examples (5d–5f) all refer to verbal attacks, with which fingers pointed at the target are associated. Example (5’) gives two sentential examples.

- (4) a. *zhi-kong* (finger pointing–accuse) ‘accuse; charge’
 b. *zhi-gong* (finger pointing–testify/confess) ‘testify; confess’
 c. *zhi-ren* (finger pointing–recognize/confirm) ‘point out and confirm; identify’
 d. *zhi-chi* (finger pointing–scold) ‘reprove; reprimand; denounce’
 e. *zhi-ze* (finger pointing–reproach) ‘charge; censure; criticize; find fault with’
 f. *zhi-zhai* (finger pointing–blame) ‘pick faults and criticize; censure; blame’
- (5’) a. *Youren zhi-kong ta na-hui.*
 someone finger pointing–accuse him accept–bribes
 ‘Someone accused him of taking bribes.’
 b. *Dajia zhi-ze ta wanhu zhishou.*
 everybody finger pointing–reproach him neglect duty
 ‘Everybody criticized him for neglect of duty.’

The idioms in (6) provide further exemplification. When a thousand people (i.e., everybody) point fingers at one, then the person is the target of universal condemnation, as in (6a). In (6b and 6c) finger pointing is again connected with censure and criticism.

- (6) a. *qian-fu suo-zhi* (one thousand–people PRT–finger pointing) ‘face a thousand accusing fingers; be universally condemned; be condemned by the public’
 b. *zhi-zhi chuo-chuo* ([finger] point–point jab–jab) ‘comment unfavorably; censure’
 c. *zhi-shou hua-jiao* ([finger] point–hand throw–foot) ‘make indiscreet remarks or criticisms; find/pick fault with’

Although finger pointing identifies the target of criticism, its function is not limited to this. The compounds in (7) exemplify a different kind of target identification, (7’) illustrating how they are used in sentences. These examples show that you point to people or things—that is, to identify them—on whom or which you count, rely, or depend for whatever reasons.

- (7) a. *zhi-wang* (finger pointing–expect) ‘look to; count on; prospect; hope’
 b. *zhi-kao* (finger pointing–rely on) ‘depend on (for ones’ livelihood); look to (for help); count on’
 c. *zhi-zhang* (finger pointing–depend on) ‘(dial) count on; rely on’
- (7’) a. *Wo bu zhi-wang ta bangmang.*
 I not finger pointing–expect him help
 ‘I don’t count on him for help.’
 b. *Zhejian shi women jiu zhi-kao ni le.*
 this matter we then finger pointing–rely on you PRT
 ‘We’ll count on you for this.’

- c. *Zheli nongmin de yi-nian shengji jiu zhi-zhang*
 here peasants MOD one-year livelihood all finger pointing–depend on
di li de shoucheng.
 field in MOD crop
 ‘The whole year’s livelihood of the peasants here all depends on the crop
 in the field.’

Example (8) demonstrates still another kind of target identification, as illustrated by (8’). They show that appointment, assignment, designation, and instigation also involve finger pointing. As in (8’a) and (8’b), you point at people when you appoint them to a certain position or assign them to a certain task. Example (8’c) shows that instigators point their fingers when instigating.

- (8) a. *zhi-ding* (finger pointing–decide) ‘appoint; assign; designate’
 b. *zhi-pai* (finger pointing–dispatch) ‘appoint; name; designate’
 c. *zhi-shi* (finger pointing–send) ‘instigate; incite; put someone up to something’
- (8’) a. *Zhengfu jiang zhi-ding tanpan daibiao.*
 government will finger pointing–decide negotiations representatives
 ‘The government will appoint representatives to the negotiations.’
 b. *Gai guo yi zhi-pai daibiao chuxi huiyi.*
 this nation already finger pointing–dispatch delegates attend conference
 ‘This nation already named its delegates to the conference.’
 c. *Yiding you ren mu-hou zhi-shi ta*
 definitely there–is someone scene–behind finger pointing–send him
zuo huai-shi.
 do bad–things
 ‘There must be someone behind the scene who instigates him to do evil.’

Now, I turn to examples that contribute to (2a) and (2b), namely “*THE POINTING FINGER STANDS FOR GUIDANCE OR DIRECTION*” and “*TO GUIDE OR DIRECT IS TO POINT WITH A FINGER.*” These examples are in effect related to the previous ones in that finger pointing here also helps to identify something, broadly understood as a target. The overall image is that a superior is guiding or directing an inferior by means of finger pointing.

The compounds in (9) are both verbs and nouns. Example (9a) refers to certain actions and people who perform those actions. Examples (9b) and (9c) refer to some linguistic actions and contents of those actions. The abstract senses here have their bodily roots.

- (9) a. *zhi-hui* (finger pointing–wave) ‘command; direct; conduct; commander; director; conductor’

- b. *zhi-ling* (finger pointing–order) ‘instruct; order; direct; directive; command’
 c. *zhi-shi* (finger pointing–show) ‘indicate; point out; instruct; directive; instruction; indication’

The compounds in (10) all have senses related to guiding, directing, supervising, or advising, exemplified by (10′). In (10a) finger pointing is associated with advice giving or demonstration. As in (10b), people “*point out*” things with their finger. When things are “*out*,” they are easier to “*see*,” or rather, to understand, since “*UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING*” according to the “*MIND IS BODY*” metaphor (Sweetser, 1990). Things are easier to “*see*” when they are “*brought out to light*” rather than “*hidden in the dark*.” The literal meaning of (10c) is “to point something out to light” so that it is easier to “*see*.” In (10d) and (10e) when people lead or guide others, they point to the direction in which they are heading. As in (10f), people poke or pluck things with their fingers to “*turn them right*.” In (10g) people point out where things are not straight to “*straighten them up*.” Examples (10h) and (10i) show that teaching and instructing also involve finger pointing: Teachers or instructors point to direct students’ attention.

- (10) a. *zhi-dian* (finger pointing–point) ‘give pointers, advice, directions; show how; gossip about someone’s faults; find fault with’
 b. *zhi-chu* (finger pointing–out) ‘point out; lay/put one’s finger on; state briefly; show clearly; advise; indicate; pinpoint’
 c. *zhi-ming* (finger pointing–light/bright) ‘show clearly; demonstrate; point out’
 d. *zhi-yin* (finger pointing–lead) ‘point the way; guide; show’
 e. *zhi-dao* (finger pointing–guide) ‘guide; direct; supervise; advise; coach’
 f. *zhi-bo* (finger pointing–pluck/poke) ‘give pointers, advice; show how; coach’
 g. *zhi-zheng* (finger pointing–straight/right) ‘point out mistakes so that they can be corrected; make a comment or criticism’
 h. *zhi-jiao* (finger pointing–teach) ‘give advice or comments’
 i. *zhi-shou* (finger pointing–instruct) ‘instruct’
- (10′) a. *Jing ta yi zhi-dian, wo jiu quan mingbai le.*
 after he once finger pointing–point I then completely understand PRT
 ‘A few pointers from him made it all clear to me.’
 b. *Ta guozhen zhi-chu le wode ruo-dian.*
 he indeed finger pointing–out PRT my weak-point
 ‘He indeed laid his fingers on my weak spot.’
 c. *Ta zhi-ming le liangzhe zhijian de chabie.*
 she finger pointing–light PRT two between MOD difference
 ‘She showed clearly the difference between the two.’
 d. *Jiaoshi zhengzai zhi-dao xuesheng zuo shiyan.*
 teacher PRT finger pointing–guide students do experiment
 ‘The teacher was supervising his students in doing the experiment.’

Clearly, Chinese compounds and idioms containing *zhi* ‘finger’ are often rooted in the act of pointing. Another act is counting on our fingers. We often bend our fingers when doing so. Therefore, *qu-zhi* (bend–fingers) can mean “count” in a metonymic or metaphoric sense. If a number can be counted on one’s fingers, it should not be a very large one.

- (11) a. *qu-zhi* (bend–finger) ‘count on one’s fingers’
 b. *qu-zhi ke-shu* (bend–finger can–count) ‘can be counted on one’s fingers; very few’
 c. *mo-ke zhi-shu* (not–can finger–count) ‘beyond counting on one’s fingers; innumerable’
 d. *zhi bu sheng qu* (finger not able bend) ‘too many to be counted on the fingers; a great many; countless; innumerable’

Some other Chinese compounds and idioms containing *zhi* ‘finger’ refer to snapping one’s fingers. They usually denote brief times (12a and 12b), time passing quickly (12c and 12d), or easy tasks that take little time (12e and 12f).

- (12) a. *tan-zhi* (snap–fingers) ‘snap of fingers; (of time) quickly pass; a short moment’
 b. *tan-zhi zhi-jian* (snap–fingers during–time) ‘during the snapping of the fingers; in a flash; in a twinkling of an eye; in an instant’
 c. *tan-zhi guangyin* (snap–fingers time) ‘time zipping by’
 d. *tan-zhi shu-zai* (snap–fingers several–years) ‘several years passed as rapidly as the snap of a finger; time passes swiftly as an arrow’
 e. *tan-zhi ke-dai* (snap–fingers can–expect) ‘can be accomplished during the snapping of the fingers; can be accomplished in a very brief space of time’
 f. *tan-zhi ke-de* (snap–fingers can–get) ‘can get it with a flick of the fingers’

In short, a study of the Chinese compounds and idioms containing *zhi* ‘finger’ reveals that many make reference to pointing. However, bending the fingers to count and snapping the fingers also play a role in the formation of some compounds and idioms.

THE PALM THAT HOLDS

In this section, I show that the term for palm in Chinese, *zhang*, has developed the meanings of “hold in one’s hand,” “control,” and “be in charge of.” Most of the Chinese compounds and idioms containing *zhang* ‘palm’ seem to be consonant with the following pair of metonymy and metaphor:

- (13) a. “*THE PALM STANDS FOR CONTROL.*”
 b. “*CONTROL IS HOLDING IN THE PALM OF ONE’S HAND.*”

Consider the following four compounds:

- (14) a. *zhang-xin* (palm–center) ‘the center/hollow of the palm; control; influence’
 b. *zhang-kong* (palm–control) ‘control’
 c. *mo-zhang* (devil–palm) ‘(*derogatory*) devil’s clutches; evil hands’
 d. *zhang-wo* (palm–hold) ‘have in hand; take in one’s control; grasp; master; know well’

Examples (14a–14c) are nominal compounds meaning “control.” Example (14d) is a commonly used verbal compound. In (15) are some of the collocations with its objects. As can be seen, nothing expressed by the objects of the verb *zhang-wo*, “techniques,” “foreign language,” “new developments,” “military power,” “situation,” and “the sense of propriety” is something you can really hold physically. But the abstraction is rooted in holding in the palm of the hand.

- (15) a. *zhang-wo jishu* (palm–hold techniques) ‘master techniques’
 b. *zhang-wo yimen wai-yu* (palm–hold a foreign–language) ‘have a good command of a foreign language’
 c. *zhang-wo xin qingkuang* (palm–hold new state of affairs) ‘keep abreast of new developments’
 d. *zhang-wo jun-quan* (palm–hold military–power) ‘hold the military power’
 e. *zhang-wo jushi* (palm–hold the situation) ‘have the situation well in hand; have the situation under control’
 f. *zhang-wo fencun* (palm–hold sense-of-propriety) ‘handle appropriately; act or speak properly; exercise sound judgment’

In the following compounds, *zhang* ‘palm’ is used as a verb, followed by an object. It means “hold something in hand” or, rather, “be in charge of.”

- (16) a. *zhang-shaor* (palm holding–ladle) ‘be the chef’
 b. *zhang-guo* (palm holding–wok) ‘be the chef’
 c. *zhang-zao* (palm holding–kitchen range) ‘be the chef’
 d. *zhang-gui* (palm holding–counter) ‘manager (of a shop); shopkeeper’
 e. *zhang-duo* (palm holding–helm) ‘be at the helm; operate the rudder’

Examples (16a–16c) all refer to the chef. The chef in a Chinese restaurant is the person who holds a ladle and a wok when doing the cooking. The sense of “hold in hand,” however, has extended to mean “be in charge of.” This is apparent in (16c), because the chef does not hold the kitchen range in hand at all. Instead, he is just in charge of cooking done over the range. Example (16d) refers to the person in charge over the counter in a shop. Example (16e) denotes the function of a helmsman who

steers a ship. Metaphorically, it can refer to what the leader of a nation does to lead the country in a particular direction of development.

The fact that in Chinese the palm of the hand is closely associated with the abstract concepts of power and control is better illustrated by (17). The seal is the symbol of power. People who hold the seal in hand are in power, as in (17a). By the same token, people who hold power are in power, as in (17b). The verb in (17c) suggests that people who hold affairs are in charge of these affairs. The verbs in (17d–17f) all carry similar conceptions, as illustrated by (17').

- (17) a. *zhang-yin* (palm holding–seal) ‘keep the seal; be in power’
 b. *zhang-quan* (palm holding–power) ‘be in power; wield power; exercise control’
 c. *zhang-shi* (palm holding–affair) ‘be in charge of; administer’
 d. *zhang-guan* (palm holding–administer) ‘be in charge of; administer’
 e. *zhu-zhang* (manage–palm holding) ‘be in charge of; manage’
 f. *zhi-zhang* (direct–palm holding) ‘be in charge of; direct’
- (17') a. *Ta zhang-guan yixiang gongcheng.*
 he palm holding–administer a project
 ‘He takes charge of a project.’
 b. *Ta zhu-zhang cai-wu.*
 she manage–palm holding financial affairs
 ‘She is in charge of financial affairs.’

All the examples containing *zhang* ‘palm’ discussed so far involve holding in the palm of the hand. Other acts are reflected in the following idioms.

- (18) a. *mo-quan ca-zhang* (rub–fist wipe–palm) ‘rub one’s fists and wipe one’s palms; to be eager to start on a task; be itching for a fight’
 b. *yi ru fan-zhang* (easy as flipping over–palm) ‘can be done as easily as flipping over one’s palm’
 c. *fan-zhang ke-de* (flip over–palm can–get) ‘can get as easily as turning one’s hand over’
 d. *zhang-shang guan-wen* (palm–on see–lines) ‘as easy and convenient as looking at the lines of the palm of one’s own hand; effortless’
 e. *gu-zhang nan-ming* (single–palm difficult–make a sound) ‘a single palm cannot clap; one can hardly do much single-handed; it’s hard to succeed without support; alone and helpless’

As in (18a), when people are eager to do something, they tend to rub their fists and palms due to the itch they feel in their hands. The idiom based on this act expresses anxiety to start on a task. We know that it is easy and effortless to flip over our hand.

In (18b) and (18c) this act becomes a metaphor for something easy to do or to get. In (18d) doing something easy is said to be the same as looking at the lines on the palm of one's hand. We know that it takes two palms to clap. Example (18e) makes use of this knowledge to express the helpless situation of getting no support when needed.

FINGER AND PALM IN ENGLISH

The previous two sections show that Chinese compounds and idioms with *zhi* 'finger' and *zhang* 'palm' are primarily grounded in the acts of pointing and holding. English may differ from Chinese in two respects at least, one to do with the palm, the other with the finger.

First, metaphors consonant with "*CONTROL IS HOLDING IN THE PALM OF ONE'S HAND*" are not as common in English as in Chinese. For instance, one can find in English dictionaries the following idioms containing *palm*:

- (19) a. "*cross somebody's palm*" ('bribe somebody')
 b. "*grease/oil the palm of somebody*" ('bribe somebody')
 c. "*have an itching/itchy palm*" ('want money so greatly that one is willing to take it as a payment for doing unjust favors')
 d. "*hold/have ... in the palm of one's hand*" ('have complete control over ...')

Of these only (19d) represents "*CONTROL IS HOLDING IN THE PALM OF ONE'S HAND*," whereas the remaining ones have to do with "giving or accepting bribes." On the other hand, as already seen in section 3, the Chinese compounds consonant with the same metaphor are numerous.

The second difference between Chinese and English pertains to the finger. Again, instances consonant with "*INTENTION OR TARGET IS WHAT THE FINGER POINTS TO*" and "*TO GUIDE OR DIRECT IS TO POINT WITH A FINGER*" are not as common in English as in Chinese. Particularly, it seems that in English only "*TARGET IS WHAT THE FINGER POINTS TO*" is realized linguistically. For instance,

- (20) a. "*put the finger on*" ('tell the police about [a criminal]; inform against; identify as victim')
 b. "*put one's finger on*" ('point with precision to [cause of trouble]; find; show [cause of trouble]')
 c. "*point a/the/one's finger at*" ('criticize; censure; scold')
 d. "*shake/wag a/one's finger at*" ('censure; scold; point out')
 e. "*give somebody the finger*" ('insult; mistreat')

On the other hand, a group of English idioms containing "finger" contributes to different meanings from what *zhi* 'finger' does in Chinese. In Chinese, as demon-

strated in section 2, *zhi* ‘finger’ occurs in the compounds mainly expressing these meanings: “point at/to”; “point out, indicate, demonstrate, show”; “refer to, direct at”; “depend/rely/count on,” and so forth. In contrast, the finger in English is frequently conceptualized as the actual “doer” of things. The examples in English include those in (21). If one is doing something or participates in something, one’s fingers must be “IN” the matter, as in (21a–21d), or one’s fingers should function and make contact with the matter, as in (21e–21l).

- (21) a. “*get one’s fingers into something*” (‘participate in something’)
 b. “*have a finger in something*” (‘take part in something; play a role in something’)
 c. “*have one’s finger in the pie*” (‘concern oneself with or be connected with the matter, especially officiously’)
 d. “*have/stick a finger in every pie*” (‘have a part in everything that is going on; concern oneself with or be connected with many matters, especially in an unwelcome way’)
 e. “*keep fingers on something*” (‘take care of or handle something’)
 f. “*get one’s fingers burnt*” (‘suffer after a foolish act or mistake; suffer for meddling or rashness’)
 g. “*one’s fingers itch to do something*” (‘one is longing or anxious to do something’)
 h. “*do something without lifting one’s finger*” (‘do something with least effort’)
 i. “*do something with a wet finger*” (‘do something with little effort’)
 j. “*get/pull/take one’s fingers out*” (‘begin work in earnest; hurry up’)
 k. “*work one’s fingers to the bone*” (‘work very hard’)
 l. “*one’s fingers are (all) thumbs*” (‘one is clumsy’)

These two differences between Chinese and English, as outlined earlier, should perhaps be viewed from a broader perspective. We may need to take into account the hand, of which the finger and the palm are subparts. In English, although the metaphor “*CONTROL IS HOLDING IN THE PALM OF ONE’S HAND*” is likely not as richly expressed at the linguistic level as in Chinese, “*CONTROL IS HOLDING IN THE HAND*” is expressed richly in the form of idioms (see Kövecses & Szabó, 1996; Yu, 1998a). The examples include the following sentences.

- (22) a. “*He’s got the matter in hand.*”
 b. “*We have the situation well in hand.*”
 c. “*His life was in my hand.*”
 d. “*The meeting is getting out of hand.*”
 e. “*We fell into enemy hands.*”
 f. “*I suffered at his hands.*”
 g. “*I’ll soon have him eating out of my hand!*”

- h. “*You shouldn’t force my hand!*”
- i. “*I’ll give you a free hand.*”
- j. “*The cabinet approved last week strengthened his hand for the difficult tasks ahead.*”

Besides, both verbal and nominal uses of such English words as *hold*, *grasp*, and *grip* in the sense of “control/possession” may also imply the use of the hand to hold, to grasp, or to grip, as the following examples demonstrate: “*He tried to hold his temper,*” “*He’s got a good hold of his subject,*” “*Grasp your chances while you can,*” “*He is in the grasp of a wicked man,*” “*The people regained power from the grasp of the dictator,*” “*An anarchic fervor gripped the campus,*” “*He kept a firm grip on his children,*” “*Don’t get into the grip of moneylenders,*” “*Teachers should loosen their grip on the curriculum,*” “*She felt herself in the grip of sadness she could not understand.*” That is, the body part related to the concept of control in English is primarily the hand, rather than its subpart, the palm. In Chinese, on the other hand, the concept of control is associated with both the palm (see section 3) and the hand (Yu, 1998a).

Also, most of the compounds and idioms containing *zhi* ‘finger’ in Chinese involve pointing. In English, however, the same act grounds relatively few expressions of this kind, as exemplified by (20). On the other hand, fingers in English are more “actual doers” of things, as illustrated by (21). This is certainly not the case with Chinese. Comparable examples can be hardly found in the language. If the finger is not conceptualized as the “actual doer” of things in Chinese, then what is? It is interesting to note that the Chinese body-part term *shou* ‘hand’ is doing the same job as “finger” in English. For instance, in English a thief’s “fingers are sticky,” whereas in Chinese a thief’s “hands are sticky.” In English one’s “fingers itch” when anxious to do something, while in Chinese one’s “hands itch” under the same circumstances. In English, if one is said to have done something “without lifting a finger,” that means the person has done it with ease. In Chinese, if something is done with ease, it is done “with one’s hands drooping.” Also, it is “sticking one’s fingers into something” in English, while it is “sticking one’s hands into something” in Chinese. See Yu (1998a) for further examples.

Thus, the two differences between Chinese and English can be summarized as choice of a subpart (finger or palm) over the part (hand). If so, the two cases may simply be the result of cultural preferences (Kövecses & Radden, 1998; Yu, 1995). The following idioms from Chinese and English further illustrate the point.

- (23) a. *liao ru zhi zhang*
know like finger palm
‘know like the fingers and palms of one’s hands; know very well’
- b. “*know like the back of one’s hand*” (‘know very well’)
- c. “*know like the palm of one’s hand*” (‘know very well’)

These idioms all mean “know very well,” but the body parts involved are somewhat different between the two languages: the finger and palm of the hand in Chinese and the back and palm of the hand in English. The difference is one of preference conventionalized in a culture and language. On the other hand, the commonality between these two languages is also obvious; that is, both languages have chosen the body part of hand rather than, say, foot. The choice is not so difficult to account for: Physically, our hands are closer to our eyes than our feet; and experientially, our hands perform far more functions than our feet in daily life. So, there is a common bodily basis for these conventionalized phrases across the languages.

The body-part term *finger* in English also occurs in a few other idioms, as cited here:

- (24) a. “*can be counted on the fingers*” (‘few; not many’)
 b. “*let slip through one’s fingers*” (‘lose hold of; miss opportunity of’)
 c. “*twist/wind somebody around one’s (little) finger*” (‘persuade somebody without difficulty; dominate somebody completely’)
 d. “*cross one’s fingers; keep one’s fingers crossed*” (‘wish for good luck or success’)

Example (24a) is based on a common experience with fingers—people tend to count with the help of their fingers. This idiom has a couple of comparable examples in Chinese as in (11), of which (11b) is a close equivalent. Example (24b) does not have an equivalent idiom in Chinese, but its word-for-word translation in Chinese is still an apt metaphor. In an English–Chinese dictionary (Lu, 1993), for instance, (24b) is given the following Chinese definitions:

- (25) a. *tingren ... cong zhi feng jian liudiao*
 let ... from finger chink between slip
 ‘let slip through chinks between fingers; let slip through one’s fingers’
 b. *cuoguo (jihui deng)*
 miss (opportunity, etc.)

Of these two the first is a literal translation of the original, but it makes good sense in Chinese. Things tend to slip through our fingers if our hand does not hold them tight enough. This experience helps us conceptualize abstract notions of control and possession, which both figure in (24b). The same experience also helps us make sense of the manner of spending money. In Chinese, for instance, there are the following compounds:

- (26) a. *shou-jin* (hand–tight) ‘closefisted; tightfisted’
 b. *shou-song* (hand–loose) ‘open-handed; free-handed; free with one’s money’

Those who are unwilling to spend have their “hands tight” so that money will not slip through their fingers. Those who are happy to spend have their “hands loose,” and money will slip through their fingers fast.

Example (24c) seems to be a less transparent idiom than (24a) and (24b), but still it is apparent that “to twist” physically is a metaphor for “manipulation” in an abstract sense. Example (24d) describes a culture-specific bodily act—cross one’s fingers as one wishes for good luck or success. This practice does not exist in the traditional Chinese culture, and the idiom has no equivalent in the Chinese language either. The Chinese definition for (24d) in the English–Chinese dictionary (Lu, 1993) is an explanatory one to this effect: “crook the middle and index fingers together in wish for good luck or success.” In sum, the degree of universality and relativity of the idioms varies, just as the degree of universality and relativity of the bodily experiences in which the idioms are grounded varies.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have studied the Chinese compounds and idioms that contain the body-part terms of *zhi* ‘finger’ and *zhang* ‘palm.’ It is found that most of such compounds and idioms are rooted respectively in two common acts: pointing with one’s (index) finger and holding in the palm of one’s hand. A comparison of data in Chinese and English reveals two differences between these two languages. First, the metaphor “*CONTROL IS HOLDING IN THE PALM OF THE HAND*” is not richly manifested at the linguistic level in English, although it is in Chinese. Second, the metaphor “*THE FINGER IS THE DOER*” is well manifested in English, but it is not realized in Chinese. Despite these differences, it is shown that they are grounded in the universal bodily experiences with the hand. The demonstrated differences should be viewed as cultural variations in the choice of a body part (the hand) over its subparts (the palm and the finger). In the first case, English holds “*CONTROL IS HOLDING IN THE HAND*,” instead of “*CONTROL IS HOLDING IN THE PALM OF THE HAND*,” as its primary metaphor. In the second case, the Chinese counterpart of the English “*THE FINGER IS THE DOER*” is “*THE HAND IS THE DOER*.” In both cases, commonality resides in the grounding of metaphor and metonymy in the common bodily experiences, whereas the difference lies in the choice of a body part versus its subpart. Overall, relativity, in this regard, exists in the larger context of universality.

It is worth noting that the Chinese compounds discussed here are very different from idioms. They are just everyday homely words, constituting the core of the Chinese lexicon. They are not metaphoric or metonymic in the traditional sense of the terms. Individual Chinese speakers use them because they have no other choices to express the same ideas. However, these compounds are metaphoric and metonymic in the sense of Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999) because they involve mappings from the bodily to the abstract.

From a comparative perspective, this study has revealed both commonalities and differences in metaphoric and metonymic uses of finger and palm between Chinese and English. The commonalities are grounded in common bodily experiences, specifically in the acts of pointing and holding, which are universal among human beings. On the other hand, cross-cultural variations are also obvious. In particular, I have observed the following differences. First, the body-part term is used to express a certain concept in one language but not the other, even though the act in which the metaphor or metonymy is grounded is a universal experience. For instance, “finger” occurs in such Chinese compounds as meaning “direct,” “depend,” “accuse,” and so forth, but their English equivalents often do not involve this body-part term. Second, the use of a body-part term is explicit in one language but implicit in the other. For example, in English *point out* implies the use of (index) finger, but its Chinese equivalent *zhi-chu* (finger pointing-out) ‘point out’ makes an explicit use of the body part. Third, if a bodily act is not universal but specific to a culture, then the metaphoric or metonymic expression based on it should be language specific as well. The English idiom “*cross one’s fingers*” or “*keep one’s fingers crossed*” is a telling example, with no equivalent in Chinese. Finally, a major difference this study has highlighted is in the choice of a body part (hand) in one language and its subpart (finger or palm) in the other. Although the human body plays an important role in human meaning and understanding in the mode of metaphor and metonymy, this role is tinted by specific cultures. For that matter, metaphoric and metonymic uses of body-part terminology may have much in common across languages because they reflect universal experiences with our body, but we also expect cross-linguistic differences as a reflection of cultural differences. Only through comparative study in a systematic fashion can we map potential human universals and cultural differences accurately.

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APPENDIX

The Character Version of the Chinese Examples

- (3) a. 指归 b. 指要 (4) a. 指鸡骂狗 b. 指桑骂槐 c. 指东说西 d. 指黑道白 (5) a. 指控 b. 指供 c. 指认 d. 指斥 e. 指责 f. 指摘 (5') a. 有人指控他纳贿。 b. 大家指责他玩忽职守。(6) a. 千夫所指 b. 指指戳戳 c. 指手划脚 (7) a. 指望 b. 指望 c. 指仗 (7') a. 我不指望他帮忙。 b. 这件事我们就指望你了。 c. 这里农民的一年生计就指仗地里的收成。(8) a. 指定 b. 指派 c. 指使 (8') a. 政府将指定谈判代表。 b. 该国已指派代表出席会议。 c. 一定有人幕后指使他做坏事。(9) a. 指挥 b. 指令 c. 指示 (10) a. 指点 b. 指出 c. 指明 d. 指引 e. 指导 f. 指拨 g. 指正 h. 指教 i. 指授 (10') a. 经他一点, 我就全明白了。 b. 他果真指出了我的弱点。 c. 她指明了两者之间的差别。 d. 教师正在指导学生做试验。(11) a. 屈指 b. 屈指可数 c. 莫可指数 d. 指不胜屈 (12) a. 弹指 b. 弹指之间 c. 弹指光阴 d. 弹指数载 e. 弹指可待 f. 弹指可得 (14) a. 掌心 b. 掌控 c. 魔掌 d. 掌握 (15) a. 掌握技术 b. 掌握一门外语 c. 掌握新情况 d. 掌握军权 e. 掌握局势 f. 掌握分寸 (16) a. 掌勺 b. 掌锅 c. 掌灶 d. 掌柜(的) e. 掌舵 (17) a. 掌印 b. 掌权 c. 掌事 d. 掌管 e. 主掌 f. 执掌 (17') a. 他掌管一项工程。 b. 他主掌财务。(18) a. 磨拳擦掌 b. 易如反掌 c. 反掌可得 d. 掌上观纹 e. 孤掌难鸣 (23) a. 了如指掌 (25) a. 听任 ... 从指缝间溜掉 b. 错过(机会等) (26) a. 手紧 b. 手松

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