

“I regret having children”: A critical metaphor analysis of maternal regret posts on Chinese Weibo

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It has been widely acknowledged that being a mother should be happy, satisfying, and worthwhile, and regretting motherhood is a strong taboo. In recent years, however, many studies have been analyzing feelings of parental regret using data from online platforms such as Mumsnet, Reddit, vauva.fi, etc (Matley, 2020; Moore & Abetz, 2018; Sihto & Mustosmäki, 2021). Yet, to the best of our knowledge, little study investigates how the overall regretting motherhood experience is conceptualized by Chinese mothers. Metaphor is a useful device to analyze sensitive topics and thus is very suitable to explore mothers' hidden maternal regret experience in the overarching discourses of normative motherhood in China. To critically explore how Chinese mothers utilize metaphor to represent maternal regret, this study collected 1153 posts with the hashtag “#Do you ever regret having been a mother# (当了妈妈你后悔了吗)” on Weibo, a popular social media platform in China. It has been known that critical metaphor analysis combines different disciplines such as cognitive linguistics and critical discourse analysis and can reveal ideologies behind language by investigating metaphorical representations (Amaireh, 2022). Drawing on this approach (Charteris-Black, 2004), the study analyzed 330 posts implying or indicating maternal regret. Three dominant metaphors were identified. In the *Journey metaphors*, motherhood was represented as a very difficult phase in life, especially compared with the past days without children. Chinese mothers described an imagined, childless and free past life, stressing that they would not have had children or would have had children sooner or later if they could go back in time. In the *War metaphors*, mothers presented having children as a war between a mother and challenges brought by childbearing. These challenges included deteriorating relationships with family members, childcare difficulties and tremendous changes in personal life. In the *Burden metaphors*, motherhood was conceptualized as an enormous burden. Mothers felt that they could hardly bear the burden due to factors such as inadequate preparation for the birth of children, inopportune timing of motherhood, physical and mental changes, loss of self, challenges of raising children, and a lack of family members' help. Therefore, they regretted being mothers. These findings disclose three major conceptual metaphors that Chinese mother use to discuss their maternal regret experience: motherhood is a difficult journey, motherhood is a battle, and motherhood is a burden.

The results of this study uncover how Chinese mothers construct their maternal regret experience from a cognitive perspective, and can be utilized in counseling practice to help mothers cope with such feelings of regret.

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