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A Study of Multimodal Metaphors in the Chinese Environmental Documentary, *Behemoth*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how the environmental documentary *Behemoth*, directed by Zhao Liang, uses metaphor to represent environmental degradation in China, particularly in regions like Inner Mongolia and Shanxi, where industrialization and coal mining have caused severe pollution. Despite its serious impact on public health, awareness among the population remains limited due to institutional constraints that restrict open communication. The objective of this study is to analyse how the documentary uses multimodal metaphors to communicate environmental issues and raise awareness. Drawing on Forceville's multimodal metaphor theory and using a textual analysis method with coding adapted from Fan's multimodal metaphor coding sheet, the study identifies how visual, verbal, and textual metaphors are strategically employed. The findings show that *Behemoth* uses split images, orientation metaphors (e.g., good vs. evil), and metaphors of life (lambs, sheep, coal miners), hope, and religion to emphasize the severity of ecological destruction and position humans as its root cause. These metaphors play a critical role in helping audiences comprehend the scale and impact of environmental crises, suggesting that metaphorical imagery is a powerful tool for environmental communication.

Keywords: multimodal metaphor, environmental communication, Chinese documentary, *behemoth*, textual analysis.

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Introduction

Since China's reform and opening, the country has made remarkable economic progress. One of the most significant outcomes of this development is rapid urbanization. In line with China's economic policy priorities at the start of the 21st century, local governments have devoted considerable effort and resources to promoting urban growth through large-scale investment projects and urban planning initiatives. Over the past 30 years, urbanization has accelerated rapidly. The proportion of the urban population increased from 18.6% in 1978 to 43.3% in 2005, approaching the levels of moderately developed countries (Zhou, 2020).

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However, rapid urban development requires vast amounts of resources, such as electricity, construction materials, and steel, most of which are still predominantly derived from fossil fuels. According to the 2007 China Energy Situation and Policy issued by the Information Office of the State Council, China is relatively rich in fossil energy resources, particularly coal (Y. Li, 2020).

Coal remains China's primary energy source, and shifting away from this coal-based energy structure has proven difficult (Gao, 2021). In 2006, China's coal resources amounted to 10.345 billion tons, with proven recoverable reserves accounting for roughly 13% of the global total, ranking third worldwide. Local governments often exploit these resources with a focus on economic gains, often at the expense of environmental protection. Outdated methods of coal production and consumption have further intensified environmental pressures (He, 2018).

In Ordos, Inner Mongolia, extensive coal mining has displaced many residents to make way for urban expansion. A report from the Ordos government to the Inner Mongolia authorities revealed that in the Ijinholo Banner area alone, approximately 20,000 square kilometres of arable land had collapsed due to mining. This led to a loss of 28,000 square kilometres of forests and grasslands and caused economic losses exceeding 80 million yuan (Gao, 2021). Coal mining has also led to significant land subsidence, with studies showing maximum rates of 65 mm/year and a total of 246 mm of subsidence between 2006 and 2015 (X. Li et al., 2020). The rapid growth of surface mining has contributed to severe ecological damage, including habitat loss, land degradation, desertification, and air, water, and soil pollution (Dong et al., 2018).

Coal mining also poses serious risks to human health. A survey conducted in Ordos (Yu et al., 2015) identified pneumoconiosis as a widespread occupational disease caused by prolonged exposure to coal dust. The disease is progressive and irreversible. From 2010 to 2014, 372 new cases of two types of pneumoconiosis and 18 cases of tuberculosis were diagnosed by institutions in Ordos. Pneumoconiosis remains the most prevalent and harmful occupational disease in the region.

In response to the environmental degradation caused by coal mining, many Chinese artists have turned to creative expression to raise public awareness. Over the past decade, eco-documentaries have emerged as a compelling genre that has resonated with both domestic and international audiences. These films often use metaphorical storytelling rather than direct commentary to communicate the emotional and ecological consequences of environmental destruction. For example, Zhao Liang's *Behemoth* uses surreal and allegorical imagery to depict the toll of coal mining on both the environment and human lives in Inner Mongolia.

Although China's news media operate within a commercial framework, they remain state-owned and continue to serve as ideological state apparatuses (Zhang, 2020). As a result, environmental communication often reflects official narratives and tends to lack critical depth. This media environment makes it difficult for the public to fully grasp the gravity of environmental issues. In such a constrained context, eco-documentaries provide a subtle yet impactful platform for raising awareness (Zhuang, 2018).

Independent environmental documentaries, such as *Balance* (2002), *Water Question* (2011), *Long River in the Desert* (2011), *Song of the Forest* (2007), and *Under the Dome* (2015) have successfully captured public attention and inspired civil society to question unsustainable development practices (Yang, 2018). However, these documentaries also face challenges in terms of distribution and engagement.

One issue stems from the creators themselves. Documentaries produced by television networks tend to adopt an educational tone that lacks narrative appeal and emotional resonance (Liu, 2016). Another issue lies in production limitations. Although many of these documentaries address important problems, they often struggle to present them clearly and artistically. As a result, they fail to captivate audiences. Additionally, while many films highlight environmental damage, few investigate the root causes of pollution. Directors often raise questions without offering answers, contributing to a lack of depth in environmental storytelling (Liu, 2016).

In contrast, *Behemoth* stands out as a powerful eco-documentary that has had a significant impact both in China and abroad. It explores the causes and consequences of pollution, particularly those related to

coal mining and air quality through a rich use of metaphor. Directed by Zhao Liang in 2015, the film tells the stories of miners and farmers in Ordos, Inner Mongolia, who live and work in harsh, dust-polluted environments. Zhao's independent filmmaking style explores the tension between economic growth and social well-being. According to Liu (2016), Zhao uses cinematic language to connect reality and metaphor, combining real-life scenes with surreal, symbolic imagery to address human–environment relations.

Yet despite the growing interest in such documentaries, there has been little research into how and why they resonate with the public. Understanding what makes these films effective can offer valuable insights for future environmental communication efforts. This is the focus of the current research.

The use of metaphor in *Behemoth* is not just a narrative technique but a powerful tool for critiquing environmental damage and social inequality. According to Forceville (2024), metaphor functions not only as a linguistic device but also as a way of thinking and acting. Metaphors can be expressed through various modes - language, imagery, gestures, sound, and more. Studying multimodal metaphors provides a deeper understanding of the messages a documentary conveys.

However, research on metaphor in Chinese eco-documentaries remains limited. This study seeks to explore how metaphors are used in *Behemoth* to depict environmental pollution, reveal its underlying causes, and raise public awareness about environmental issues.

Literature Review

Environmental Issues in China

China faces numerous environmental challenges, including severe air and water pollution as well as widespread land degradation caused by rapid and unregulated development. For a long time, the importance of environmental protection has been underestimated in the process of resource exploitation in certain regions. As a result, the rate of ecological restoration has not been able to keep up with the pace of environmental destruction.

One major issue is accelerated land desertification. China is among the countries most severely affected, with a total decertified land area of 262.2 million hectares. Desertification has significantly impacted industrial and agricultural production, as well as the lives of residents. It poses serious threats to farmland, pastures, towns, villages, transportation infrastructure, and water conservation facilities. The direct economic losses caused by desertification amount to over 54 billion yuan annually (Gao, 2021).

Second, forest resources have declined sharply. In many of China's major forested regions, forest cover has drastically decreased. The amount of timber harvested and consumed far exceeds the rate of forest regrowth.

Third, soil erosion has worsened in recent years. Eroded land in China now covers an area of 3.67 million square kilometres. Statistics show that China loses around 5 billion tons of topsoil annually (X. Li et al., 2020). This translates to the disappearance of approximately 1 cm of fertile soil from farmland each year, leading to economic losses of about 10 billion yuan.

Finally, grassland ecosystems are in rapid decline. China has over 400 million hectares of grasslands, four times the area of its arable land and three times that of its forests ranking second globally in total grassland area (Wu, 2017). These natural grasslands are mainly located in mountainous or high-altitude regions, making them difficult to utilize. They are also the source areas of major rivers such as the Yangtze, Yellow, Huai, and Pearl Rivers. Due to severe damage to grassland vegetation, these regions have become hotspots for soil erosion and frequent dust storms (Dong et al., 2018).

Environmental Documentaries in China

Existing studies on environmental documentaries are often limited because their content tends to conflict with official government narratives. *Behemoth* is particularly important to study because its powerful visual storytelling effectively raises public awareness of environmental destruction.

The year 2006 was a major year for environmental films in China. Since the beginning of the 2000s, domestic documentaries on environmental protection have been emerging. As mainstream media, CCTV has been paying close attention to environmental documentary filming and has set an excellent example by producing well-received documentaries such as *Water Question* and *The Red Line*. Meanwhile, the Central New Film Group has also worked with relevant departments to produce environmental documentaries such as *The Long River in the Desert*. These films revolve around the threats posed by environmental issues to people's survival, and help them tackle these issues (Hou, 2018).

The former CCTV journalist Chai Jing's self-funded documentary about haze was broadcast online on February 28, 2015, and has attracted widespread attention. According to online statistics, the documentary was downloaded hundreds of millions of times on several major Internet sites in just one day. In addition, it has gone viral on media platforms such as WeChat and Weibo (Qin, 2016).

In general, the common grounds of environmental documentaries are to reveal facts about environmental destruction, criticize the pursuit of economic benefits, and call on people to respect, protect, and live in harmony with nature. The creation of documentaries on environmental issues has been encouraged. Although environmental documentaries already exist, they are still far from sufficient in terms of quantity, quality, duration, and funding. Therefore, there is still a long way to go for environmental documentary filming, especially in China.

Behemoth

Behemoth was not screened in the Chinese cinemas. Therefore, the international spread of *Behemoth* has remained successful. After Behemoth's creation was complete, it had its world premiere at the Venice Film Festival in Italy. This premiere was also the first time the film had spread internationally so that more people could know of its existence. The Amsterdam Documentary Film Festival was also included in the "master" (master unit) for screening. It was an important independent Chinese documentary that was screened. In addition, the film's spread at international film festivals is still very high, and it is also shown at the Montreal International Documentary Film Festival (RIDM).

The documentary attracted significant international attention and received numerous prestigious awards. Its wide-reaching impact was largely due to its status as a co-production between China and France, and its broadcast on the official website of the French television channel Arte (Hou, 2018). The full-length version and trailer of *Behemoth* were viewed on various international video platforms. In China, *Behemoth* was screened privately in cinemas, universities, and via the internet, sparking interest and discussion, particularly among younger audiences.

This influence stems from the director's unique metaphorical narrative techniques. Behemoth combines unique Chinese Mongolian culture with Western Christian culture from a novel perspective. Through the metaphors in Dante's Divine Comedy (2024), the director conveys an entirely different concept of environment to the audience. Director Zhao Liang does not directly criticize specific individuals or institutions, such as coal mine owners or local authorities. Instead, he uses neutral, poetic visuals that invite viewers to reflect critically. This approach engages the audience through harsh realities and profound metaphors, prompting deeper contemplation. It stands in stark contrast to traditional documentaries, which often rely on interviews and explicit commentary. *Behemoth*, notably, contains no interviews and only minimal narration . This stylistic choice is an integral part of Liang's metaphorical storytelling. Despite its international acclaim, Behemoth has received limited academic attention, particularly in terms of metaphor analysis, both within China and globally.

Multimodal Metaphors

Multimodal metaphors, which combine various modes of communication such as images, sounds, and colours, have evolved from traditional visual or image-based metaphors found in paintings and illustrations. Researchers such as Su et al., (2020) contributed to our understanding of how images function similarly to language, demonstrating how visuals can convey meaning. However, their work focused primarily on specific examples rather than on developing a comprehensive theoretical framework.

Later, Forceville (2024) advanced the field by linking metaphors to multiple sensory modalities, such as sight and sound. He defined how different types of media can be integrated to express more complex or abstract meanings. His research, particularly on how advertisements use visuals to create metaphors, laid a foundational framework for studying multimodal metaphors in documentaries and other multimedia forms. Unlike traditional verbal metaphors, multimodal metaphors engage multiple senses and modes of expression. Forceville also emphasized that the interpretation of such metaphors is shaped more by cultural context than by direct physical experience.

This body of work has significantly influenced current approaches to metaphor analysis in media, especially in documentary film (Thibodeau et al., 2019).

Theoretical Framework

Su et al., (2020) explained that film metaphors using visuals, sounds, and other elements, called multimodal metaphors, are based on a deeper idea known as Conceptual Metaphor Theory. Over time, metaphors have shifted from being merely decorative language to playing a central role in how we think and make sense of the world.

According to Lakoff and Johnson (2008, as cited in Forceville, 2024), one concept is often understood by comparing it to another. For example, we may think of time as money, as in the phrase "spending time." This idea forms the foundation for studying metaphors in media. Forceville (2024) added that such comparisons, or metaphors, can appear in various forms, including images, sounds, or text. What matters is whether the concepts being compared are abstract or concrete, not the type of medium used.

Lakoff and Johnson (2008) explained that a metaphor works by linking two ideas: one familiar (called the Source Domain) and one more abstract or complex (the Target Domain). Building on this, Forceville (2024) introduced the concept of multimodal metaphors, which use different modes of communication such as pictures, sounds, words, or gestures. These metaphors may appear in a single form, like visuals alone, or across multiple forms at once, such as combining visuals, music, and speech. For instance, the emotional message of a scene might be conveyed through music, while the situation itself is shown through images.

In some cases, the abstract idea (Target Domain) is presented using one mode, while the more concrete idea (Source Domain) is expressed through several modes, such as a mix of visuals and language. Understanding these metaphors involves recognizing how the two ideas are connected across different forms and considering the cultural and situational context.

Familiar ideas help explain abstract ones through different modes, and this conceptual relationship forms the theoretical foundation of the present study. Table 1 below illustrates the mapping process of multimodal metaphors, showing how source and target domains interact across various communication modes.

Table 1

The Mapping of the Multimodal Metaphor

Source Domain	Target Domain
Disappear but supported by the context	Present on the screen
Multi-mode or single mode	Multi-mode or single mode
Verbal-visual sound music mode	Verbal-visual sound music

Methods

This research used textual analysis methods to conduct a qualitative study of documentary films. The researcher analyses documents, text, and visuals repeatedly during the research process. Then, during the reading process, the documentary film information in the audiovisual language was converted into written language using a coding sheet. Finally, the text content was analysed.

Identification Criteria

In this analysis, the method proposed by Fan (2017) was used, adapting Forceville's framework for identifying visual metaphors in documentary films. It involves asking three simple questions to check if something is a metaphor:

1. What are the two things being compared?
2. Which one represents the deeper or abstract idea (Target Domain) and which one is the familiar or concrete example (Source Domain)?
3. What shared qualities or features are being transferred from one to the other?

According to Fan (2017), these two things must come from different categories, such as comparing a human to a machine (Question 1). He also said the metaphor should follow the format "A is B" (like "Life is a journey"), so the viewer can understand the message by seeing the connection between the two (Question 2). For the third question, he suggested looking for a key feature that links the two, similar to how a product designer helps customers recognize what a product is meant to do.

Coding Sheet

This study adapted the coding sheet for multimodal metaphors proposed by Fan (2017) to analyze the collected data. The coding framework used in this research is shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Coding Sheet for Multimodal Metaphor (Fan, 2017)

Time (***When the multimodal began and finished***)	**Content** (***An introduction to the metaphor content***)	**Multimodal Metaphor** (***How the multimodal metaphor is mapped***)		**Identification Criteria**	**Meaning making of metaphor**
		Source Domain	Target Domain		

Results and Findings

How Does Behemoth Illustrate Environmental Issues Using Metaphors?

The findings identified two metaphors used in *Behemoth* to illustrate environmental issues: split images (Figure 1) and orientation metaphors (good vs. evil) to portray the severity of environmental problems.

Behemoth uses split or broken images, such as shattered mirrors, to show how objects are out of place or damaged. This visual style connects to a biblical reference from the Book of Job, where the sky (or "firmament") is described as hard, like a cast mirror. However, in the documentary, the mirror is broken, suggesting that human actions, especially endless mining have shattered what was once whole and sacred, like the sky created by God.

This idea is reinforced around minute 4:15 in the documentary, when the director states that the place has been destroyed. Later, at 4:49, the main character meets a guide who leads him through symbolic

versions of hell, purgatory, and heaven. The guide carries a broken mirror that reflects the shattered state of the world (Figure 2). The broken mirrors in the film explain why the images are split; they represent a world fractured by environmental destruction.

Figure 1

Split Images as Symbols of Environmental Devastation from Relentless Mining



Figure 2

The Guide Carrying a Broken Mirror Image on His Back



The second metaphor concerns the orientation. In *Behemoth*, the idea of "up" as good and "down" as bad is illustrated when the main character descends into dark underground mines, symbolizing a journey into evil or suffering. Darkness is also used as a metaphor for evil: the deeper the descent, the worse the conditions become. Later in the film, illness is represented through powerful imagery: a man carries an infusion bottle on a motorbike, grey dust billows from trucks, and doctors extract grey fluid from patients' lungs. The colour grey becomes a symbol of disease and danger. The narrator even compares this to purgatory, a place of suffering and uncertainty, where all life is at risk.

What Are the Root Causes of These Environmental Issues as Revealed Through Metaphors?"

Behemoth is the primary cause of environmental destruction through metaphors, which are humans. This documentary suggests that humans are behemoths. The film opens with scenes of massive explosions in a coalmine. According to the documentary in the Bible, God created the beast Behemoth on the fifth day, which is an enormous creature of the earth. However, humans can cause destruction. Their explosions tear through mountains and carve deep craters like a monster devouring the land. Although the creature Behemoth never appears visually, the film uses this powerful metaphor to show that human activity, especially mining, is a real destructive force. In this way, *Behemoth* metaphorically equated humanity with the mythical beast.

The second root cause was human desire. In *Behemoth*, director Zhao Liang highlighted the waste of resources in Ordos by filming its ghost town - an area filled with high-rise buildings that remain uninhabited (*Figure 3*). Only a few sanitation workers are seen cleaning the roads, which is spotless simply because no one lives there. Through its main character, the director presents the city as a dream or mirage, suggesting that its beauty is an illusion. In essence, a city without residents is a ghost town.

This phenomenon was also discussed in an interview conducted by Chai Jing with Tsinghua University academician Jiang. He noted that China is facing a severe overpopulation in cities, with 80 natural villages disappearing every day. The average lifespan of a house is only 30 years, and over 200 prefecture-level cities are being built, 184 of which are planned to become metropolitan areas. However, China has a population of only 1.3 billion, while the urban planning underway is designed for 3.4 billion people.

This reflects a serious surplus in urban construction, particularly in real estate development, resulting in resource wastage and pollution. This overdevelopment was driven by the pursuit of profit. While X. Li et. al. (2020) argue that urbanization promotes economic growth; the unchecked drive for development is the root cause of the problem. Humans aim to build better homes, yet in doing so, they end up harming the environment on which they depend. Ultimately, human desire lies at the heart of environmental degradation.

Figure 3

The Ghost City as a Representation of Illusory Development



How Does Behemoth Use Metaphors to Create Public Awareness on Environmental Issues?

Three metaphors are used in *Behemoth* to raise public awareness of environmental issues. The first is life, represented metaphorically by two groups: lambs and sheep, as well as coal miners. The second is hope, which symbolizes the need for a deeper understanding of environmental problems. Religion reflects the role of spiritual values in encouraging humans to respect their surroundings.

Lambs and sheep appear frequently in the film *Behemoth*, reflecting the setting of Inner Mongolia home to China's largest natural grasslands. People in this region have traditionally relied on herding livestock, making it a land of shepherds and sheep. However, coal mining has begun to destroy these natural habitats. In one scene, only a small patch of grass remains for the sheep to graze, whereas the surrounding area is stripped bare, revealing exposed loess and a series of mining pits.

As sheep are herded away, the camera pans to reveal a vast, barren minefield-black earth with no trace of greenery. At 22:38, in the documentary, a group of sheep is seen rushing down what appears to be a mountain. However, in the following shot, it is revealed that this "mountain" is a heap of mining waste. Sheep were left to feed on a small patch of grass beneath the slag heap. The camera then lingers on a lone shepherd, silently observing the shrinking pastureland, powerless to stop destruction.

At the end of the film, the stone statue of a mother holding a lamb appears. In Chinese literature, land is often symbolized as a mother. In this context, the mother represents Mother Earth, giving life to humanity (symbolized by the lamb, as shown in *Figure 4*). Behind the statue is a chimney, representing modern industry. The once-white statue is stained, symbolizing the land pollution caused by human activity. The lamb in the mother's arms also appears to have been affected, representing a broader crisis facing humanity. This shot is followed by another in which shepherds reappear as stone statues. The director uses this imagery to deliver a powerful message: This land was once home to shepherds and sheep, but the presence of smoke-belching factories shows that it is no longer fit for life.

Figure 4

The Statues of Sheep Represent Human Activities Destroying Their Own Lands



The second group, which metaphorically represents life, comprises miners (*Figure 5*). Some herders have become miners to survive, turning to dangerous and exhausting work just to make a living. At one point in the documentary (31:46), the director shows close-ups of the miners' faces, covered in thick dust and shadows, making them look like they are wearing dark makeup. The narration explains that this dusty appearance is like a costume, resembling Gothic imagery, which is often associated with darkness or even the devil in Western culture (Huang, 2016).

Through this, the film uses miners as a metaphor: they are not evil, but the harsh, polluted environment they work in turns them into symbolic devils. This transformation is not a reflection of their inner selves; it is shaped by the wind and dust from mines and external forces beyond their control. Ultimately, this metaphor speaks to the tragedy of their situation: they are ordinary people trying to survive, yet the environment they depend on is so toxic that it deforms both their appearance and way of life. In this way, the film uses miners to symbolize the broader truth that the struggle for survival in a polluted world can strip away humanity, even when all people want to live.

Figure 5

The Miner as an Ordinary Individual Struggling to Survive in a Toxic Environment



The second metaphor used in *Behemoth* to raise public awareness is hope, symbolized by a small green plant cared for by a miner. The plant appeared several times in the documentary. At 37:23, even before the miner cleans his own body, he carefully washes the plant, showing that he values it deeply. This act suggests that the plant represents more than just greenery; it symbolizes the miner's inner soul and the small hope he holds in a damaged world. Normally, plants grow freely in nature, but in the film, this one survives only in a pot, just as humans, once in harmony with nature, now live in an environment damaged by overexploitation. At 44:20, the miner carried the plant through the blackened landscape of the mine. Everything around him is dark and lifeless, and the plant is the only spot of colour. In this contrast, the green plant becomes a powerful symbol of life and hope, even in places that resemble hell.

However, at the end of the film (1:27:33), the plant appears one last time in a mirror held by the guide, and then suddenly disappears. According to Yan (2020), this use of the mirror suggests that greenery was never real, and its disappearance meant that the miner had died of pneumoconiosis, a disease caused by inhaling coal dust. Despite this tragic ending, the plant remains a strong metaphor: it stands for life, resilience, and hope that still exists, even in the darkest places.

The third category concerns religion. In *Behemoth*, religion is used as a metaphor to explore human consciousness and the struggle between good and evil. At one point in the film (43:47), the guide leads the main character into a large, unfinished Buddha statue (see Figure 6). The statue was built by a mine owner who, after having a troubling dream, tried to ease his guilt by restoring the figure. In Buddhism, the Buddha symbolizes peace and self-restraint, especially the need to control desires. Here, the statue reflects the mine owner's regret and inner conflict regarding environmental damage caused by mining. However, because the statue was incomplete, this suggests that his conscience was not strong enough to stop him.

Later in the documentary (47:33), a snake appears, symbolizing evil and temptation, much like in Christian stories where the serpent tempts humans to sin (Li, 2018). In the film, a snake represents a powerful lure of greed. Even when people know that mining causes harm, they continue because their desire for profit is too strong. The image of the snake disappearing into a hole shows how temptation leads people to ignore their judgment and continue doing harm. Together, the Buddha and the snake serve as religious metaphors for good and evil, showing how human desire can overpower conscience and lead to environmental destruction.

Figure 6

The Great Buddha Statue as a Symbol of Religion and Moral Awareness



Discussion and Implications

Behemoth presented seven key metaphors. To illustrate the severity of environmental issues, it employed (i) split images and (ii) orientation metaphors. Additionally, (iii) humans and (iv) human greed serve as metaphors for the root causes of environmental destruction, while (v) life, (vi) hope, and (vii) religion help the public understand and respond to these issues.

In *Behemoth*, director Zhao Liang employed a range of metaphors to depict the devastating impact of environmental degradation caused by industrial and mining activities. One of the central metaphors is the coal mine as "hell," representing the ruined environment. The mine is shown as a downward spiral, symbolizing how human exploitation of natural resources resembles the expansion of hell. While this metaphor has appeared in Chinese literature - typically to describe the physical dangers faced by miners and their exploitation by mine owners (Wu, 2017) - Zhao reinterprets it to emphasize environmental destruction and raise public awareness.

Zhao also uses color symbolism, particularly grey, as a metaphor for disease and air pollution. The film is filled with grey-toned imagery, scenes of the sick, dying, and lifeless industrial landscapes, conveying a sense of illness, suffering, and death. Through this bleak visual language, he underscores the severe health consequences of environmental pollution for both people and the planet.

Another powerful metaphor in the film is “mining is Behemoth,” where the mythical beast represents the destructive force of the human industry. In Zhao’s depiction, Behemoth devours mountain peaks, just as mining activities erode the natural world: flattening mountains, collapsing land, and leaving irreversible damage. This metaphor captures the vast scale of destruction and the uncontrollable hunger of industrial expansion. The film concludes with striking subtitles.

“*The area of lakes in Inner Mongolia has been reduced by about 20% in the last 30 years due to industrial and mining exploitation, and the resulting land pollution and destruction are beyond measure.”*

Finally, Zhao draws on religious imagery by portraying humans as sheep—vulnerable and displaced in a degraded landscape. In multiple scenarios, sheep are driven from hills stripped bare by mining waste. This shrinking pastureland reflects a broader loss of habitable spaces for humans. By invoking biblical symbolism, where sheep often represent people, Zhao suggests that just as sheep lose their grazing grounds, humans are also losing their natural environment, largely because of their own unsustainable actions.

At the core of the environmental crisis, *Behemoth* suggested that it lies unchecked human greed. Director Zhao Liang uses vivid imagery and metaphors to reveal how relentless resource exploitation drives pollution and environmental degradation, particularly for urban development. The pursuit of ever-growing material desires fuel city buildings, but this ambition comes at a devastating cost. Drawing on Georges Bataille's philosophy, Tian and Sun (2022) argue that ecological crises are not merely conflicts between humans and nature but also internal struggles within humanity. Our deep, persistent, and often-unexamined desires lie at the heart of this crisis. Therefore, addressing environmental problems requires confronting these inner drivers.

Zhao also critiques urbanization using powerful visual metaphors. One of the most striking features is the portrayal of the city as a paradise. Near the end of the film, the protagonist arrives in a gleaming, newly built city bathed in a serene blue light, symbolic of heaven in Christian tradition. This idealized city represents the human dream of an earthly paradise. However, the city is empty. It is Ordos, a ghost town in Inner Mongolia. Although outwardly beautiful, it is lifeless, a stark reminder that the dream of utopia has turned into a modern hell. Through this contrast between illusion and reality, Zhao reveals how blind urban expansion, driven by unchecked desires, ultimately leads to ecological collapse.

Emotional and religious metaphors deepened the impact of the film. According to Yang (2018), metaphors are the most effective when they tap into familiar emotional and cultural references. In *Behemoth*, symbols such as hells, purgatories, serpents, and shepherds recur throughout the film. These religious allusions personalize the environmental crisis and stir emotions such as fear, guilt, and empathy. Disturbing images of a smoky, industrial hell, or displaced sheep searching for pasture evokes a visceral response, encouraging viewers to reflect on their role in environmental destruction.

As Lakoff and Johnson (2008) explain, metaphors are most effective when they draw on shared cultural knowledge and common human experiences such as war, family, or emotion-making abstract ideas that are more relatable. In *Behemoth*, religious imagery and family roles–particularly the mother figure–are used to convey profound environmental messages. One of the film's most moving metaphors is the statue of a mother holding a lamb.

In Chinese culture, the land is often viewed as a nurturing mother. Here, the statue represents the Earth, and life-giving is yet to be defiled by pollution. The white figure is stained, symbolizing environmental damage, while the lamb in her arms, representing future generations, suggests that this destruction endangers not only the present, but also the future. This metaphor of a suffering mother resonates across cultures, framing environmental protection not only as a political issue but also as a deeply moral one.

Behemoth also demonstrates how metaphors are shaped by cultural context. As Forceville (2024) notes, the connection between a metaphor's meaning and its symbols is not universal, but culturally dependent. Metaphors such as sheep (helplessness), snakes (temptation), and hell (suffering) become more meaningful when viewers recognize their Christian or Chinese cultural significance.

According to the conceptual metaphor theory, the *Source Domain* (the symbolic image) helps us understand the *Target Domain* (the real-world issue), and both domains are often informed by cultural familiarity. For instance, the metaphor "Sheep is Human" only fully resonates within certain cultural frameworks. As Chen and Peng (2020) argued, metaphors are not merely expressive tools; they create new ways of seeing and understanding complex realities.

Conclusion

Through powerful metaphors and emotional storytelling, Zhao Liang's *Behemoth* delivers a clear message: human desire, masked as progress, pushes our world toward destruction. Whether through polluted landscapes, ghost cities, or forgotten sheep, the film forces us to confront our role in environmental degradation. However, within the sorrow, there are glimpses of hope, such as a single green plant carried through darkness. If we can recognize mistakes and reconnect with nature, we can still change the course.

Through metaphorical analysis of the documentary, metaphors can effectively help audiences understand environmental issues. However, this study had some limitations. One challenge is that

recognizing metaphors often depends on the cultural background. Metaphors can only be fully understood when the audience shares the same cultural context. For instance, *Behemoth* included many metaphors drawn from the Bible. Viewers familiar with Western Christian culture can grasp these symbolic meanings quickly. In contrast, audiences from Asian cultures, who are less familiar with these references, may find it difficult to identify or interpret metaphors.

In *Behemoth*, director Zhao Liang employed a variety of metaphors to highlight China's environmental problems and raise public awareness. First, he used metaphors of disease and death to show how environmental damage directly threatens human health. These images send a powerful message: When we harm the environment, we harm ourselves. Second, the documentary uses metaphors like the "mother" and the "dome" to emphasize our shared existence, we all live on the same earth and breathe the same air. These symbols encourage viewers to reflect on their own actions and recognize the need to control excessive desires to protect the planet for everyone.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Author Contribution Statement

PH: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Writing – Original Draft Preparation. NNNH: Project Administration, Writing – Review & Editing; Methodology, Validation, Supervision.

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This research did not require IRB approval because it did not involve human participants.

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