

The Conceptual Metaphor “Traditional Handicrafts Are Fire” In Vietnamese Newspaper Discourse

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Abstract

Original Research Article

Traditional handicrafts constitute a traditional sphere of production deeply embedded in Vietnamese cultural identity and folk knowledge. The HANDICRAFT domain is a body of knowledge and experience encompassing the activities, products, and production processes associated with the making of handcrafted goods. Drawing on the theoretical framework of cognitive linguistics, this article examines the conceptual metaphor TRADITIONAL HANDICRAFTS ARE FIRE. The data were collected from 30 Vietnamese-language newspaper articles on traditional handicrafts published between 2020 and 2026. The analysis identified 12 metaphorical lexical realizations, occurring 25 times in 21 metaphorical expressions, in which FIRE functions as the source domain. Four stages—KINDLING THE FIRE, THE FIRE BLAZING UP, KEEPING THE FIRE ALIVE, and PASSING ON THE FIRE—are mapped respectively onto four stages in the target domain of TRADITIONAL HANDICRAFTS: INITIATING THE CRAFT, DEVELOPING THE CRAFT, PRESERVING THE CRAFT, and PROMOTING THE CRAFT. The model shows that only the positive properties of FIRE are activated, whereas its negative properties remain inactive. This selective activation derives from Vietnamese cultural cognition, shaped by wet-rice civilization, in which fire is regarded as a source of life for human beings and all living things.

Keywords: traditional handicrafts, conceptual metaphor, fire, mapping, cultural cognition.

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1. Introduction

In the traditional view, as summarized by Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 3) and briefly described by Kövecses (2010, p. 11), metaphor is a basic mechanism for transferring the meanings of lexical units and a vehicle of poetic imagination realized through ornamental rhetorical devices. Metaphor is thus treated as a matter of language rather than human thought. Under this approach, people can think and communicate normally without using metaphor. Cognitive linguistics, by contrast, regards metaphor primarily as a conceptual phenomenon

that reflects how human beings perceive the world. Metaphor serves not only expressive purposes but also enables people to understand and conceptualize abstract concepts through concrete experience. Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life: it occurs not merely in language but is deeply embedded in thought and action. It is part of the ordinary conceptual system that structures the ways in which people think and conduct their lives. From a cognitive-linguistic perspective, therefore, metaphor is a systematic pattern of human thought expressed through language; it is both universal to humankind and culturally

specific (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 3; Kövecses, 2010, p. 12).

On the basis of these views, conceptual metaphor may be defined as follows: conceptual metaphor involves understanding one conceptual domain (the target domain) in terms of another (the source domain) through a set of systematic mappings whereby elements or properties of the source domain are projected onto elements or properties of the target domain, thereby forming a cognitive model that facilitates comprehension of the target domain (Kövecses, 2010, pp. 4, 9).

Conceptual metaphors are neither arbitrary nor accidental; rather, they are grounded in human experience, because many abstract concepts arise from concrete bodily experience and human interaction with the external world (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Metaphorical mappings in human cognition are structured by three specific experiential bases: the physical body, the surrounding material environment, and the sociocultural environment. These correspond to three forms of embodiment: experience derived from the physical body, experience arising from interaction with the material environment, and experience arising from interaction with the sociocultural environment (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, pp. 65–69). The corpus analyzed in this study suggests that the conceptual metaphor TRADITIONAL HANDICRAFTS ARE FIRE is grounded predominantly in sociocultural embodiment.

This study draws on a corpus compiled from mainstream online newspaper articles on traditional handicrafts published between 2020 and 2026. Traditional handicrafts comprise products made primarily by hand, for which the craftsperson's individual skill and experience are decisive. Traditional handicrafts are transmitted from one generation to the next, and their products embody cultural qualities; the products or works are made by hand, or the production stage decisive to product quality is performed manually. A handicraft product is a handcrafted object whose cultural and aesthetic functions are more important than its ordinary utilitarian function (Article 3, Decree No. 43/2024/ND-CP). Traditional handicrafts and their products are therefore an important medium for transmitting cultural traditions and bear the

imprint of the agricultural worldview of earlier generations of Vietnamese people.

Many Vietnamese craft villages have existed and developed over several centuries, encompassing such crafts as silk weaving, ceramics, folk painting, carpentry, and embroidery. Well-known pottery villages include Bát Tràng, Thanh Hà, and Phù Lãng; prominent silk-weaving villages include Vạn Phúc, Tân Châu, and Hội An; and noted embroidery villages include Quất Động, Văn Lâm, and Minh Lãng. Folk-painting traditions include Đông Hồ, Hàng Trống, and Kim Hoàng, while prominent woodworking villages include Kim Bồng, Đồng Kỵ, La Xuyên, and Mỹ Xuyên.

This article examines the conceptual metaphor TRADITIONAL HANDICRAFTS ARE FIRE. It constructs and analyzes mappings from the source domain FIRE—through the stages of KINDLING THE FIRE, THE FIRE BLAZING UP, KEEPING THE FIRE ALIVE, and PASSING ON THE FIRE - onto the target domain TRADITIONAL HANDICRAFTS and the corresponding stages of INITIATING THE CRAFT, DEVELOPING THE CRAFT, PRESERVING THE CRAFT, and PROMOTING THE CRAFT. It also interprets the motivations underlying these mappings to identify features of Vietnamese cultural cognition reflected in the relationship between FIRE and TRADITIONAL HANDICRAFTS in Vietnamese newspaper discourse from 2020 to 2026.

Theoretically, this study seeks to demonstrate that Lakoff and Johnson's theory of conceptual metaphor can be applied to the previously unexplored domain of traditional handicrafts, thereby further substantiating the proposition that "we live by metaphors": metaphor is pervasive in everyday life. Practically, the study contributes to elucidating traditional Vietnamese conceptions of FIRE and underscores the importance of preserving and promoting the values of craft villages, safeguarding and developing national cultural identity, and fostering attachment to one's homeland and the ethic of remembering the source from which one has benefited.

2. Analysis and Discussion

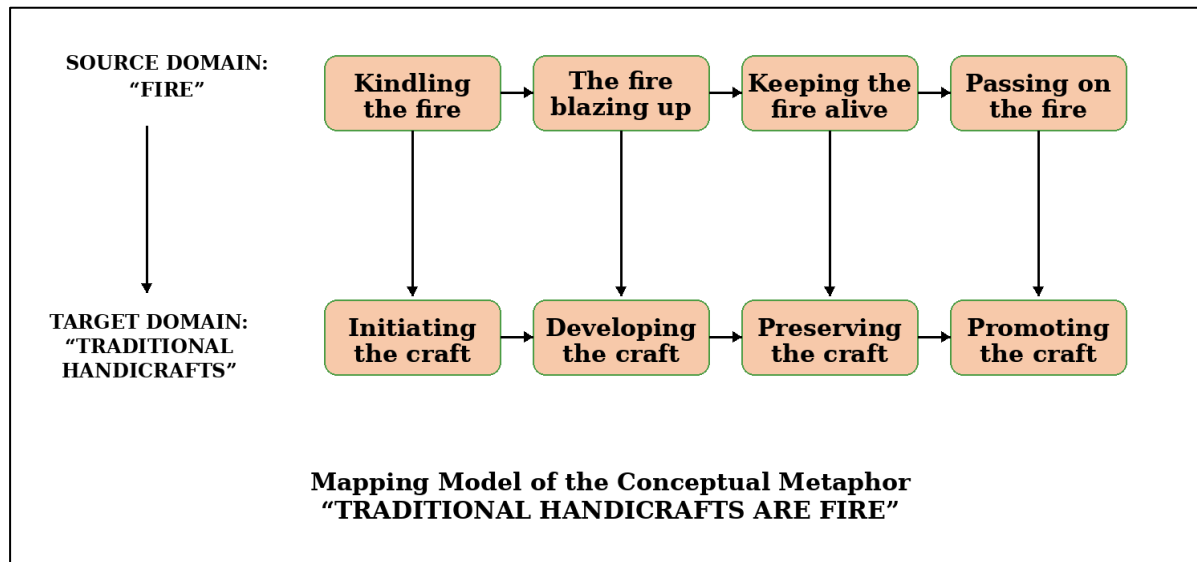
Among natural phenomena, fire holds particular significance in human material and spiritual life. Fire is defined as “heat and light produced simultaneously by a burning object” (Hoàng Phê, p. 754). According to Trần Ngọc Thêm (1999, p. 66), “the arrangement of the Five Elements according to the cardinal directions clearly reveals their agricultural origins.” Fire, one of the Five Elements, represents yang phenomena such as the sun and sunlight. Fire can therefore be understood as sunlight - the solar energy that enables crops and grains to flower and bear fruit, produces abundant harvests, and brings prosperity to inhabitants of wet-rice civilizations.

Given these roles, fire has long been a vital element in Vietnamese life. Its observable phases and properties being kindled, maintained, spread, intensified, and transferred from one place to another provide a salient experiential

source through which people conceptualize numerous phenomena in social life, particularly traditional handicrafts.

From a cognitive perspective, long-standing cultural experiences of fire have provided Vietnamese speakers with a basis for using the image of a flame to conceptualize many domains of social life. In newspaper discourse, traditional handicrafts are construed as a fire that may be kindled, nurtured, lit, made to blaze, kept alive, and passed from one generation to the next.

In the source–target configuration FIRE–TRADITIONAL HANDICRAFTS, the corpus comprises 21 metaphorical expressions, 12 metaphorical lexical realizations, and 25 occurrences. The analysis identifies properties of the source domain FIRE that can be activated and connected to properties of the target domain TRADITIONAL HANDICRAFTS, giving rise to the mappings presented below:



First, the mapping KINDLING THE FIRE → INITIATING A TRADITIONAL CRAFT

The initiation of a traditional craft is conceptualized through the first stage, KINDLING THE FIRE, as instantiated by the metaphorical lexical realizations (1) *nhóm* “begin to kindle,” (2) *hùn đức* “temper/nurture,”

(3) *thắp sáng* “light up,” and (4) *thắp lên* “ignite,” in the following linguistic expressions:

(1) Mr. Hùng recalled that nearly 30 years ago, large numbers of Western tourists visited Hội An. They were particularly interested

in green tourism and impressed by destinations featuring green spaces connected with craft villages and local cultural values. The first stirrings of an idea for bringing visitors to the village had begun to kindle within him at that time (Đà Nẵng Newspaper, 2024).

- (2) According to artisan Nguyễn Đăng Tâm, his earliest years in the craft were the most difficult, involving the search for and restoration of raw-material supplies, relearning traditional techniques, and finding markets for the products. Despite the difficulties spanning production and consumption, those unforgettable experiences further tempered his confidence in and attachment to the craft. In addition to quietly preserving the craft, Mr. Tâm taught each stage to his son, Nguyễn Đăng Hiếu from carving wooden blocks and mixing natural pigments to printing pictures in a way that fully preserves every traditional line (VTV News, 2025).
- (3) Artisan Huỳnh Sướng of Kim Bồng woodworking village, Hội An the guardian of the village's soul. Amid the historic landscape of Hội An, where the Hoài River flows past the more-than-500-year-old Kim Bồng craft village, a carpenter quietly awakens the soul of wood and inscribes tradition into every carved detail. He is People's Artisan Huỳnh Sướng, who not only inherits the village's finest traditions but also helps relight a craft village now undergoing revival (Văn Hóa Newspaper, 2025).
- (4) With that tireless heart, he is breathing new life into embroidery a life sustained in memory, in the gaze, and in the emotions of those who remain. Moving beyond the story of one devoted individual, portrait embroidery is gradually being recognized as part of the cultural heritage that must be safeguarded and revived (Văn Hóa Newspaper, 2025).

According to Hoàng Phê's Vietnamese Dictionary, nhóm "kindle" means "to cause fire to catch onto fuel and begin burning" (Hoàng Phê, p. 915); hun đúc literally means "to burn something so that smoke and heat act directly

upon it" (p. 590); and thấp "light/ignite" means "to apply a flame so that something begins to burn" (p. 1165). In essence, kindling, tempering, and lighting not only create the initial flame but also establish the conditions that enable it to persist, spread, and grow. A small spark, when supplied with fuel and properly tended, can grow stronger and perform its function. This property corresponds to the initiation of a traditional craft. A craft does not emerge abruptly; it usually begins with enabling conditions such as an idea, a social need, available raw materials, production techniques, or a craftsman's dedication. At this formative stage, these factors function as the "first spark," laying the foundation for the craft's future establishment and development.

Thus, in the mapping KINDLING THE FIRE → INITIATING A TRADITIONAL CRAFT, the use of expressions such as begin to kindle, temper/nurture, light up, and ignite to describe the emergence of a craft foregrounds its small-scale beginnings, gradual accumulation, and potential for long-term development.

Second, the mapping THE FIRE BLAZING UP → DEVELOPING A TRADITIONAL CRAFT

The development of a traditional craft is conceptualized through the second stage, THE FIRE BLAZING UP, as instantiated by (5) ngọn lửa bùng lên "the flames blaze up" and (6) cháy rực "burn brightly," in the following linguistic expressions:

- (5) Like flames blazing up from the earth, the Bát Tràng pottery tradition will never be extinguished, for it is the soul of a community and of a craft village imbued with the lives of generations; it will continue to shine through time (Lao Động Newspaper, 2025).
- (6) Chuôn Ngọ Village in Chuyên Mỹ Commune, Phú Xuyên District, Hanoi, has long been renowned nationwide for its refined and distinctive mother-of-pearl inlay. After nearly a millennium, the flame of the local inlay craft still burns brightly: it is not merely a handicraft but part of the community's very soul and a source of local pride. Located on the left bank of the tranquil Nhuệ River, Chuôn Ngọ has

produced generations of gifted artisans who have woven works of art from mother-of-pearl and seashells (Journal of Culture and Arts, 2025).

Once kindled, a fire will blaze up when conditions are sufficient, shifting from a small flame to vigorous combustion of greater scope and intensity. This process is characterized by a rapid increase in scale and reach, allowing the fire to exert a more visible effect than at the initial stage. This property corresponds to the development of traditional handicrafts. Once established from initial enabling conditions, a craft gradually accumulates resources, expands production, attracts additional participants, and increases its influence in socioeconomic life.

Thus, in the mapping THE FIRE BLAZING UP → DEVELOPING A TRADITIONAL CRAFT, expressions such as the flames blaze up and burn brightly foreground the craft's vigorous growth, expansion in scale, and widening influence.

Third, the mapping KEEPING THE FIRE ALIVE → PRESERVING THE CRAFT

The preservation of a traditional craft is conceptualized through the third stage, KEEPING THE FIRE ALIVE, as instantiated by (7) giữ lửa “keep the fire alive,” (8) ngọn lửa đam mê “the flame of passion,” (9) âm ỉ cháy “smolder,” and (10) không bao giờ tắt “never be extinguished,” in the following linguistic expressions:

- (7) Confronted with this picturesque scene, few realize how many hardships and challenges the custodians who keep the flame of Vạn Phúc weaving alive have endured in order to sustain and develop the craft (Tuổi Trẻ Thủ Đô Newspaper, 2021).
- (8) Recognizing the decline of the traditional craft, in 1996 the Hội An municipal authorities worked with artisan Huỳnh Ri to organize a vocational class for 15 young learners from outside the family lineage. With UNESCO's support, Mr. Huỳnh Sướng further fueled the flame of passion in 30 full-time trainees. He subsequently expanded his teaching and training both within and beyond the locality, remaining committed to the mission of “preserving the

craft, building livelihoods, and developing people” (Văn Hóa Newspaper, 2026).

- (9) The son of Lê Tuất the first Party-cell secretary of Duy Xuyên District and a co-founder of the Việt Quảng ceramics kiln, which produced porcelain while financially supporting the Central Vietnam Party Committee in the 1930s Lê Đức Hạ grew up in Điện Phương pottery village, immersed in the craft from the days when he “played with clay” beside his father's kiln. Despite years as a soldier on the southwestern battlefield (1978) and later travels to learn ceramic-production techniques in Bát Tràng, Bình Dương, and Hải Dương, his passion for the traditional craft continued to smolder within him (People's Public Security Newspaper, 2026).
- (10) Like flames blazing up from the earth, the Bát Tràng pottery tradition will never be extinguished, for it is the soul of a community and of a craft village imbued with the lives of generations; it will continue to shine through time (Lao Động Newspaper, 2025).

Hoàng Phê's Vietnamese Dictionary defines giữ “keep/preserve” as a verb meaning “to cause something to remain as it is, without change or alteration” (Hoàng Phê, p. 513). In relation to traditional handicrafts, giữ lửa “keep the fire alive” means safeguarding, preserving, and sustaining a craft's vitality so that it can continue to be inherited and developed. Đam mê “passion” is “an exceptional enthusiasm for and continuous absorption in an activity, to the point of taking little interest in anything else” (p. 1076). In the expression ngọn lửa đam mê “the flame of passion,” a flame blazes intensely and brilliantly and cannot be extinguished, resembling the surging enthusiasm and passion of those devoted to traditional handicrafts, which no obstacle can restrain. In âm ỉ cháy “smolder,” the verb phrase denotes “a state of hidden combustion that is not intense but persists over time” (p. 20). It evokes a fire that continues to smolder and cannot be put out. This state resembles the enduring vitality of a traditional craft, which persists despite countless difficulties and challenges.

The third stage in this conceptual-metaphor model, KEEPING THE FIRE ALIVE, therefore entails ensuring that the fire continues to exist, does not go out, and maintains stable combustion. This requires people to add fuel regularly, regulate the fire, and tend it so that it continues to burn. The same property characterizes the maintenance and preservation of traditional handicrafts. Once established and developed, a craft can endure only if it is continuously safeguarded, nurtured, and transmitted across generations of artisans while adapting to changes in social life. Without attention, investment, and succession, a craft—like a fire deprived of fuel—will gradually weaken and risk disappearing.

Thus, in the mapping KEEPING THE FIRE ALIVE → PRESERVING THE CRAFT, expressions such as keep the fire alive, the flame of passion, smolder, and never be extinguished emphasize not only the continued existence of the craft but also the preservation of traditional values, the nurturing of its vitality, and the motivation required for its future development.

Fourth, the mapping PASSING ON THE FIRE → PROMOTING A TRADITIONAL CRAFT

The promotion of traditional handicrafts is conceptualized through the fourth stage, PASSING ON THE FIRE, as instantiated by (11) and (12) truyền lửa “pass on the fire” and (13) and (14) lan tỏa “spread,” in the following linguistic expressions:

- (11) The craft village is also home to many artisans who work with passion, passing the fire from one generation to the next so as not only to preserve but also to develop their traditional culture (Nhân Dân Newspaper, 2025).
- (12) Notably, driven by a passion for preserving and developing traditional crafts, experienced and creative craft-village artisans have passed the fire to the next generation, thereby enabling traditional crafts to develop further (Nhân Dân Newspaper, 2025).
- (13) When a love of heritage is carried forward across generations and spreads throughout the community, especially among young

people, Đông Hồ folk painting will gain a firmer foundation for preservation and sustained development in contemporary cultural life (VTV News, 2026).

- (14) Within this current, seemingly quiet craft villages emerge as “well-springs,” silently transforming into sources of strength. Through the hands of artisans, Vietnamese culture is preserved, disseminated, and kept vibrant. Craft villages are no longer regarded merely as heritage sites in need of preservation; they have become creative actors in the cultural economy (Vietnam News Agency, 2026).

The expression truyền lửa “pass on the fire” is defined literally as the physical act of carrying fire from one place to another (Hoàng Phê, p. 1334). The verb truyền “transmit/pass on” also means “to leave what one possesses to another person, usually of a later generation” and “to spread or cause something to spread so that it becomes known to many people in many places.” Passing on the fire thus entails not only the physical movement of flame but also inheritance and dissemination. In traditional Vietnamese culture, fire serves everyday needs while symbolizing life, reunion, and communal cohesion. For agrarian communities, the hearth is the center of the home, where family members gather, sustain family practices, and transmit cultural values from one generation to the next. This is clearly reflected in the proverb Tối lửa tắt đèn có nhau, approximately, “In dark and difficult times, neighbors stand by one another” (Vũ Ngọc Phan, 2021). The custom of asking for fire has long existed among Vietnam’s agrarian communities. When a household’s cooking fire went out and no flame remained for cooking or warmth, people would ask a neighboring family for fire usually a few glowing embers to relight their own hearth. This simple and seemingly ordinary act met an everyday need while also expressing the cultural beauty of village community. It embodied mutual assistance, protection, and sharing in times of hardship, adversity, and deprivation. Fire consequently acquired not only material significance but also symbolic associations with connection, responsibility, and the continuity of cultural values. Folk understandings of passing on fire

and cultural knowledge about fire thus motivate the activation of expressions such as pass on the fire and spread to conceptualize the inheritance and development of a craft.

Thus, in the mapping PASSING ON THE FIRE → PROMOTING A TRADITIONAL CRAFT, expressions such as pass on the fire and spread invoke fire's capacity to travel from one place to another. Similarly, the values of traditional handicrafts are disseminated throughout the community and transmitted across generations, helping to preserve and develop Vietnamese cultural identity. Passing on the fire involves not only teaching techniques, experience, or production secrets, but also transmitting passion, an awareness of the need to preserve the craft, cultural identity, and responsibility for national heritage.

The source domain FIRE is activated through four stages: (1) KINDLING THE FIRE (begin to kindle, ignite, temper/nurture), representing initiation; (2) THE FIRE BLAZING UP (blaze up, burn brightly), representing development; (3) KEEPING THE FIRE ALIVE (the flame of passion, smolder, never be extinguished), representing the maintenance and preservation of traditional crafts; and (4) PASSING ON THE FIRE (pass on the fire, spread), representing the transmission and promotion of traditional crafts. In addition to these positive properties, fire possesses negatively valenced, opposing properties such as dying out and burning to ashes, which symbolize decline and destruction. In the corpus, however, only the positive properties of fire are activated in the conceptualization of traditional handicrafts.

Corresponding to the properties of the source domain, the target domain TRADITIONAL HANDICRAFTS is conceptualized as an entity that undergoes formation, maintenance, development, and transmission. The similarity between the domains rests on the construal of continuous movement and development: just as fire must be kindled, fed, and passed on if it is not to go out, a traditional craft must be initiated, preserved, developed, and transmitted across generations if it is to survive and flourish.

3. Conclusion

1) The Vietnamese speech community predominantly selects positive properties of fire such as warmth, life-sustaining energy, diffusion, and continuity to conceptualize the formation, development, preservation, and transmission of traditional handicrafts. Conversely, negative properties such as burning, destruction, injury, loss of control, and devastation are not mapped onto the target domain.

2) For members of wet-rice civilizations, including the Vietnamese, WATER and FIRE are vital to abundant harvests. FIRE is heat energy and sunlight, enabling crops and grains to flower and bear fruit.

In religious life, wet-rice communities have worshiped the sun since ancient times. Solar symbols can still be seen in the most sacred and prestigious positions: at the center of bronze-drum tympana and at the apex of ancient architectural structures such as royal palaces, mausoleums, shrines, temples, ancestral halls, and hermitages. Sun worship indicates that FIRE is understood as an energy source that sustains life. FIRE is also present in customs of keeping the hearth burning, lighting incense for ancestors, commemorating a craft's founding ancestor, and performing rituals for a craft village's prosperity. It thereby becomes a symbol of the vitality, longevity, and development of the craft village.

Within family life, relatives gather around the hearth after a hard day's work. The hearth is also a repository of traditional values transmitted from one generation to the next.

In neighborly relations, before matches and lighters became available, members of a household whose fire had gone out would commonly ask neighbors for fire to relight their hearth; households with glowing embers would readily share them. The practices of asking for and sharing fire strengthened neighborhood solidarity, giving rise to the saying *Tối lửa tắt đèn có nhau* approximately, "In dark and difficult times, neighbors stand by one another."

In Vietnamese cultural cognition, therefore, fire is not merely a natural phenomenon but also a symbol of life,

continuity, and enduring values that should be disseminated.

3) The positive properties of the source domain FIRE are activated in the Vietnamese conceptual metaphor TRADITIONAL HANDICRAFTS ARE FIRE because Vietnamese cognition has been profoundly shaped by wet-rice civilization, in which fire sustains life. Western cultures, by contrast, are described as deeply influenced by nomadic civilization, where fire is often construed as a symbol of power, the will to conquer, the desire for freedom, or destructive force. This difference is also reflected in Lưu Quý Khương and Bùi Thị Kim Phụng's (2015) study of conceptual metaphors of fire in twentieth-century American and Vietnamese poetry. They argue that Vietnam belongs to a wet-rice civilization in which the concept of fire is deeply rooted in people's consciousness. Customs and beliefs such as the worship of the Kitchen God (the god of fire), incense burning, and other ritual practices mean that images of fire are more frequently conceptualized in association with human beings, plants, souls, and rebirth than in American poetry. In American poetry, by contrast, fire symbolizes individual passion, conflict, rebellion, and the desire for transcendence. Consequently, both positive and negative properties of fire may be activated in Western cognition.

4) Against this cognitive background, newspaper discourse on traditional handicrafts employs numerous metaphorical expressions begin to kindle, temper/nurture, ignite, keep the fire alive, the flame of passion, burn brightly, smolder, never be extinguished, and pass on the fire to conceptualize the formation, development, preservation, and promotion of traditional crafts. Initiating a craft is construed as kindling a fire; developing it as a flame blazing up; preserving it as keeping the fire alive; and spreading its values throughout the community as passing on the fire. This chain of mappings reflects the cultural understanding that, like a fire, a traditional craft will gradually die out if it is not tended and supplied with fuel, but will burn across generations if it is preserved and passed on.

Taken together, these four findings show

that Vietnamese speakers use the source domain FIRE to conceptualize TRADITIONAL HANDICRAFTS through four correspondences aligned with four developmental stages of both fire and craft. FIRE is consequently an intimate, sacred, and cherished source domain in Vietnamese culture. Because the target domain TRADITIONAL HANDICRAFTS is imbued with traditional cultural values and Vietnamese identity, mappings between FIRE and TRADITIONAL HANDICRAFTS are activated, with particular emphasis on the positive properties of FIRE. This pattern suggests that Vietnamese conceptions of FIRE rooted in an Eastern wet-rice civilization differ from conceptions attributed to English-speaking Western communities with roots in nomadic civilization.

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