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The construction of anti-pandemic image: a semiotic study of the role metaphors play in pandemic discourse in China

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Abstract: The pandemic has attracted extensive media attention around the world. In reports on the pandemic, metaphors are widely used to frame pandemic events through cross-domain mappings. Based on critical metaphor analysis, this study examines the metaphors in pandemic reports published in *China Daily*, the largest government-owned English-language newspaper in China and explores the metaphorical construction of China's anti-pandemic image. We find more than 13 metaphor varieties, among which, the metaphors of war, journey, and family and friend are dominant. Through these metaphors, China is largely constructed as a people-oriented, united, resilient, responsible, and friendly country as well as a victim of political stigmatization. We argue that the stance and ideology of *China Daily* and the international background of infodemic influence the representation of China's anti-pandemic image.

Keywords: pandemic discourse; critical metaphor analysis; national image; conceptual metaphor; *China Daily*

1 Introduction

At the beginning of 2020, a novel coronavirus pneumonia broke out and spread at an unprecedented rate across the world. When more than 100 countries and regions had been affected and the total cases exceeded 100,000, the WHO proclaimed a

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pandemic on March 11, 2020.¹ China, as the first hard-hit country, has been put under the spotlight, and its fight against the pandemic has been widely commented on by people around the world. Some have recognized China's anti-pandemic efforts, while others have stigmatized China's communities or individuals by using pejorative terms such as the "Chinese virus," the "China's fault," and the "Yellow Alert" (Yu 2022). Under this background, China needed not only to design and implement prevention and control measures against the pandemic but also to respond to the stigmatization and to defend its national image at the world stage (Gong and Firdaus 2024).

The global outbreak of the pandemic has been experienced differently by people depending on their socio-cultural contexts. These varied experiences are expressed in various forms of communication (Olajimbiti and Jolaoso 2024: 267), including news reports. *China Daily*, the most influential English-language newspaper in China with a readership of more than 350 million across 180 countries,² plays a crucial role in reporting social events and in portraying China's image. Directed by the State Council Information of the People's Republic of China, *China Daily* takes international English speakers and domestic educated citizens as the target audience, shoulders the mission of telling the world about China (Huang and Ren 2020; Yu 2022), and often demonstrates a high degree of nationalism (Zhang 2022) as well as ideological congruency with Chinese government and the Communist Party of China (Gong and Firdaus 2024). During the period of the pandemic, this newspaper has published abundant reports concerning China's anti-pandemic development. In these reports, metaphors, as cognitive-semiotic operations, have been strategically used either to conceptualize pandemic-related policies and actions, or to construct other social aspects (e.g., Zhang et al. 2022), which conveyed journalists' subjective viewpoints, influenced audience's perception, and might restore and even promote China's image in global crisis.

Despite the major research focus on the use of war metaphors in the pandemic discourse (McCormick 2020; Rajandran 2020; Tang and Sun 2023; Wang et al. 2023) and on the potential and effective use of some novel metaphors (Olza et al. 2021; Peng et al. 2023; Semino 2021), insufficient attention has been paid to the systematic analysis of metaphor choices for the construction of national image in the government-owned and international-oriented news media. To fill this research gap, we conducted a critical metaphor analysis (CMA) to investigate metaphors in the pandemic-related reports published in *China Daily* (the English version), aiming to discover the framing of China's anti-pandemic image (i.e., the image of how China has dealt with the pandemic) and to shed light on how government-owned news

1 For more details about the timeline, visit <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/interactive-timeline>.

2 For more information, visit http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/e/static_e/about.

media respond to the public health crisis at the international arena. Specifically, the following questions will be addressed:

RQ1: What types of metaphors are used in *China Daily*'s reports on the pandemic?

RQ2: What are the mappings between the source domains and the target domains?

RQ3: What kind of anti-pandemic image of China is constructed by the metaphorical mechanism in *China Daily*'s reports on the pandemic?

2 Literature review

2.1 Metaphor and its use in pandemic discourse

Metaphor was traditionally regarded as a rhetorical device, but since the 1970s, the development of cognitive linguistics has led to rising attention on metaphor from a cognitive perspective, i.e., metaphor is a cognitive mechanism for knowing the world (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Semioticians view metaphor as a sign consciously used to construe an intentional object (e.g., Moskaluk et al. 2022). Transferring the attributes of one thing from the source domain to a different thing in the target domain, it strategically frames particular aspects of reality (Roderick 2019) and may convey covert ideology (Charteris-Black 2004; Zhao et al. 2020).

Given the role of simplifying explanations about diseases and vividly presenting human experience (Rajandran 2020), metaphors have been widely used in disease discourse, especially in pandemic discourse. Sontag (1989), for example, analyzed how metaphors for illnesses like AIDS shamed and blamed those infected with the disease. Similarly, Chiang and Duann (2007) demonstrated how political agendas and underlying ideologies permeated the use of metaphors in SARS discourse. Scholars have also investigated metaphors in discourse around H1N1 (Angeli 2012), Ebola (Balterio 2017), and Zika (Ribeiro et al. 2018).

Research on the role metaphors play in pandemic discourse has increased substantially since 2020, the recent outbreak point of the pandemic, with scholars paying much particular attention to the wide use of war metaphors. Some have analyzed the structural correspondence between the pandemic and a war scenario. Rajandran (2020), for example, studied public broadcasts by Malaysian and Singaporean officials and pointed out that the deployment of war metaphors could evoke a sense of alarm. Taking a developmental view, Tang and Sun (2023) illustrated how war metaphors were adopted to frame tough defense at the initial stage and to depict

conventional societal reactions at the later stage in Chinese documentaries. Other scholars have noted the negative effects of war metaphors, such as increasing anxiety, and explored alternative frames to war metaphors. Olza and his colleagues (2021), for example, initiated #ReframeCovid to collect non-war metaphors for the pandemic in any language, and Semino (2021) discussed the proliferation and appropriateness of fire metaphors to describe the pandemic. Further, to investigate whether people's reasoning about the pandemic was influenced by war metaphors, Panzeri and her colleagues (2021) conducted empirical research and concluded that sociopolitical individual variables, favored the acceptance of metaphor entailments. Roberts and Bolognesi (2024) discovered that war metaphors may influence people's suggestion of restrictive solutions to control the virus spread.

In addition to the studies of war metaphors, scholars have discussed the creative use of bushfire metaphor to stress the threat of the pandemic and to reassure the public about government capability (Woodbridge 2023), the use of water metaphor to depict various stages of the pandemic (Peng et al. 2023), the use of family metaphor to foster empathy and collectivism (Fu 2024; Zhang and Lin 2023). Despite this rich research on the use of metaphors and their functions in framing the pandemic, studies that explore the role of metaphorical construction of national image in pandemic discourse are quite rare.

2.2 National image and the role of metaphors in its discursive construction

From the perspective of constructivism, national image is the cognitive and affective representation that a person holds of a given country (Kunczik 1997). It generally contains two sides: one is the conscious portrayal of the nation-state to foreign audiences; the other is the sum of associations built by other members at the international stage, such as the subjective perceptions of a nation's strengths and weaknesses (Maags 2014). In the era of globalization, national image, an intangible soft-power resource (Chen 2012), has become increasingly important because of its significant influence on the success of a country's businesses, trade, tourism, diplomacy, and other aspects (Buhmann and Ingenhoff 2015).

Concerning the construction and dissemination of national image, media play a dominant role by utilizing various semiotic resources to frame social events in an intentional way (Adegoju 2017; Liu and Chang 2021; Martikainen and Sakki 2021; Wu et al. 2022). During this process, metaphors are widely employed (Alkhawaldeh 2021). Morozova (2019), for instance, investigated how Ukrainian print media adopt the conceptual metaphor A HERO'S JOURNEY to frame Ukraine's development towards

the European Union. Romano (2019) demonstrated the role of water metaphor in constructing Spain and the U.K. as being threatened by Syrian refugees. Zaripov and Budaev (2021) analyzed the metaphorical representation of future Russia in French media as old age, decline, and limited space. Paying attention to the news reports on the Belt and Road Initiative, Zhang (2023) discovered that a friendly, brave, and indomitable image of China was constructed via 12 main metaphor varieties (e.g., architecture metaphor, friendship metaphor, and travel metaphor) in *China Daily*.

Under the context of the pandemic, countries have been increasingly observed and evaluated by global media and the public, which might be both a crisis and an opportunity for constructing a certain national image. Therefore, conducting a systematic investigation of how government-owned media employ metaphors to justify anti-pandemic measures and defend or even promote national image in the pandemic might be worthwhile.

2.3 Linking CMA with national image construction

To address the research gap concerning the role of metaphors in framing social events and portraying national image in the pandemic discourse, the present study attempted to integrate the approach of critical metaphor analysis (CMA) with the analysis of national image. Put forward by Charteris-Black (2004), CMA integrates the methods of CDA, cognitive linguistics, corpus linguistics, and pragmatics, aiming to reveal the underlying intentions and covert power relations behind metaphor choices. Three steps are included: metaphor identification, interpretation, and explanation. Specifically, metaphor identification refers to the identification of metaphors in a text according to whether there exists a semantic tension, i.e., a word or phrase contains a hidden meaning instead of its literal or ordinary meaning, which is usually caused by shifting the use of word from one context to another (Charteris-Black 2004). For example, the word “fight,” usually occur in the domain of war, and when they are present in the pandemic context, semantic tension is created and it can be identified as a metaphor. Metaphor interpretation is a decoding process, which involves establishing a relationship between metaphors and the cognitive and pragmatic factors that determine them. Metaphor explanation is concerned with exploring metaphors’ social role in persuasion and identifying social factors behind metaphor choice.

In the past decades, scholars have applied CMA to study metaphors in various types of discourse (e.g., Bas 2021; Ferrari 2007; Zibin 2020), demonstrating that the method is practical and powerful in exploring the use of metaphors. A few studies attempted to combine CMA and image construction analysis. For instance, in the

study of metaphors in SARS discourse, Chiang and Duann (2007) incorporated the image construction of Self and Other at the stage of metaphor explanation. Shi et al. (2024) followed CMA procedures and conducted a diachronic study of China’s image framed in *The New York Times*. These previous efforts inspired the present study: First, as discussed in the preceding section, metaphor is a common discursive device in news reports to construct social events and disseminate national image. Carrying writers’ judgment and evaluation, metaphors equip social events with characteristics of the source domain and shape the audience’s perception of and attitudes toward a country (Zhang 2023). Second, concentrating solely on metaphors is not enough (Chiang and Duann 2007). Since the national image portrayed in news reports is an indicator of underlying ideologies (Liao and Dong 2023), integrating an investigation of national image into CMA helps researchers better understand the writer’s attitude and probe into the social factors behind the use of metaphors. Hence, the present study revised the original CMA approach and added national image analysis at the third step (cf. Figure 1).

In the following analysis, through steps of metaphor identification, interpretation, and explanation, we endeavor to figure out the metaphorical mechanisms in pandemic discourse from China’s government-owned newspaper, to deconstruct China’s anti-pandemic image, and to propose some potential reasons for that kind of national image construction.

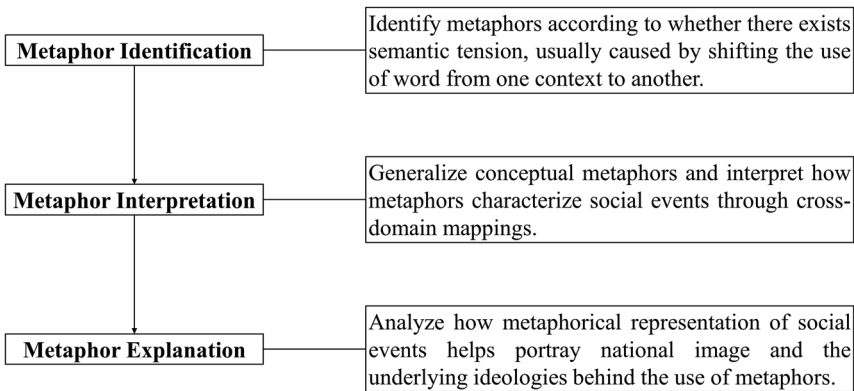


Figure 1: Analytical framework of the present study.

3 Data and methods

The research data consist of news reports on China's anti-pandemic actions published between January 2020 and March 2020 on the official website of *China Daily* (www.chinadaily.com). According to the statistics of confirmed cases published by the National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China,³ the first three months of 2020 represent the first pandemic wave in China, during which China went through the stages of appearance, outbreak, peak, slowdown of the spread, and the single-digit growth of domestic cases. Thus, we set that period as the time span to investigate China's measures for pandemic prevention and control and to facilitate a better understanding of China's image that news producers intended to construct.

In the *China Daily* website's advanced search engine, we set as filter criteria that the full text should contain "China" and at least one of the following words: "pandemic," "COVID-19," "virus," "coronavirus," "epidemic," and "pneumonia." We chose January 1, 2020, to March 31, 2020, as the data range, selected "Web News" as the source, ticked "Duplication Removal" and "Sort by Relevance," and secured 3,769 results on the search page. Articles originally published in other media websites and those about brief statistics, rumor corrections, and other viruses were eliminated. Then, the first 300 most relevant reports were collected with a total of 143,375 words.

To address the research questions, we conducted a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the metaphors in the pandemic discourse with the aid of WordSmith8.0. As mentioned in the previous section, we first manually examined half of the selected news reports and identified metaphor candidates according to whether there exists semantic tension resulting from a shift in domain use. We then input these words into the WordSmith8.0's Concord, set the span of context words with five words left and five words right respectively, and examined all the concordances. Metaphors were confirmed and included in the data with the full agreement of all authors.

With reference to the *Master Metaphor List* (Lakoff et al. 1991) and common source and target domains listed by Kövecses (2010), we classified metaphorical expressions according to the source domains to which they belong and we identified variants of the same lexeme as one type. For example, words like "defend," "defending," and "defended" were put under the type "defend." We then calculated the type and token frequencies and resonance of each metaphor variety. Type frequency refers to the number of different linguistic forms; token frequency refers to the sum of times each form occurs; and resonance, a measure of each source domain's productivity, is calculated by multiplying the former two indices. Metaphor

3 Daily briefings on the confirmed cases in China are presented in the website, <http://en.nhc.gov.cn/DailyBriefing.html>.

interpretation is the next step, the focus of which is to identify conceptual metaphors from a set of metaphorical expressions⁴ and to interpret how they characterize China's anti-pandemic events. Finally, drawing on the social background, we explored *China Daily's* portrayal of the anti-pandemic image of China and discussed the underlying ideology.

4 Results and analysis

The distribution of metaphor varieties in the *China Daily* corpus is summarized in Table 1. As shown in the table, 172 types of linguistic metaphors and 1,901 tokens were yielded, categorized into more than 13 source domains.

With regard to different metaphor varieties, as Table 1 presents, the war metaphor ranks at the top position with 64.3 % of total resonance, followed by the journey metaphor with 19.9 % and the family and friend metaphor with 4.4 %. As Bybee (2006) proposed, token frequency indicates the lexical strength of words and has a strong influence on memory representations. We also compared the token frequency of each metaphor variety to examine its entrenchment and pervasiveness (i.e., the extent to which a metaphor variety is firmly established in the writers' mind and is likely to be used in their writing, which might further influence the public's perception of and response to the pandemic). In this method of ranking, the former three varieties still remain in the same positions, taking up 69.7 % of the total tokens together. Therefore, we now turn to a critical study of the metaphors of war, journey, and family and friend and to a brief analysis of other types of metaphors as well as the use of mixed metaphors.

4.1 War metaphor

In the present study, the war metaphor accounts for 45.0 % of the total tokens and 64.3 % of the total resonance (cf. Table 1), representing the most dominant category,

⁴ Due to the page limit, the present study paid major focus on conceptual metaphors which most metaphorical expressions in a certain metaphor variety belong to. For instance, most tokens (99.766 %) in the variety of war metaphor can be categorized into the conceptual metaphors PANDEMIC PREVENTION AND CONTROL IS A WAR or POLITICS IS A WAR; however, few tokens (0.234 %), like "combat all biological threats" might not appropriately belong to these two conceptual metaphors since biological threats include not only pandemic, but also species invasion, toxins, etc.

Table 1: Distribution of metaphors in China Daily reports.

Metaphor varieties	Type				Token				Resonance			
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total ^a	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
War	12 24.0 %	27 21.4 %	29 21.0 %	34 19.8 %	49 36.8 %	347 44.5 %	460 46.4 %	856 45.0 %	588 56.5 %	9,369 62.8 %	13,340 66.7 %	29,104 64.3 %
Journey	8 16.0 %	27 21.4 %	25 18.1 %	31 18.0 %	19 14.3 %	131 16.8 %	143 14.4 %	290 15.3 %	152 14.6 %	3,537 23.7 %	3,575 17.9 %	8,990 19.9 %
Family and friend	8 16.0 %	10 7.9 %	10 7.3 %	11 6.4 %	22 16.5 %	67 8.6 %	90 9.1 %	179 9.4 %	176 16.9 %	670 4.5 %	900 4.5 %	1,969 4.4 %
Building	2 4.0 %	9 7.1 %	11 8.0 %	12 7.0 %	2 1.5 %	33 4.2 %	53 5.4 %	88 4.6 %	4 0.4 %	297 2.0 %	583 2.9 %	1,056 2.3 %
Body	2 4.0 %	6 4.8 %	7 5.1 %	10 5.8 %	6 4.5 %	27 3.5 %	44 4.4 %	77 4.1 %	12 1.2 %	162 1.1 %	308 1.5 %	770 1.7 %
Water	3 6.0 %	9 7.1 %	9 6.5 %	13 7.6 %	4 3.0 %	18 2.3 %	33 3.3 %	55 2.9 %	12 1.2 %	162 1.1 %	297 1.5 %	715 1.6 %
Disaster	1 2.0 %	4 3.2 %	7 5.1 %	8 4.7 %	10 7.5 %	42 5.4 %	34 3.4 %	86 4.5 %	10 1.0 %	168 1.1 %	238 1.2 %	688 1.5 %
Game and sport	5 10.0 %	6 4.8 %	8 5.8 %	10 5.8 %	9 6.8 %	24 3.1 %	30 3.0 %	63 3.3 %	45 4.3 %	144 1.0 %	240 1.2 %	630 1.4 %
Animal and plant	0 0.0 %	8 6.4 %	8 5.8 %	9 5.2 %	0 0.0 %	20 2.6 %	15 1.5 %	35 1.8 %	0 0.0 %	160 1.1 %	120 0.6 %	315 0.7 %
Force	1 2.0 %	5 4.0 %	5 3.6 %	7 4.1 %	1 0.8 %	12 1.5 %	21 2.1 %	34 1.8 %	1 0.1 %	60 0.4 %	105 0.5 %	238 0.5 %
Education	1 2.0 %	3 2.4 %	4 2.9 %	4 2.3 %	3 2.3 %	22 2.8 %	32 3.2 %	57 3.0 %	3 0.3 %	66 0.4 %	128 0.6 %	228 0.5 %
Clothes	1 2.0 %	3 2.4 %	5 3.6 %	5 2.9 %	2 1.5 %	12 1.5 %	16 1.6 %	30 1.6 %	2 0.2 %	36 0.2 %	80 0.4 %	150 0.3 %

Table 1: (continued)

Metaphor varieties	Type			Token			Resonance				
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total ^a	Jan	Feb	Mar	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
Disease	0	2	2	3	0	16	11	0	32	22	81
	0.0 %	1.6 %	1.5 %	1.7 %	0.0 %	2.1 %	1.1 %	0.0 %	0.2 %	0.1 %	0.2 %
Others	6	7	8	15	6	9	9	36	63	72	360
	12.0 %	5.6 %	5.8 %	8.7 %	4.5 %	1.2 %	0.9 %	3.5 %	0.4 %	0.4 %	0.8 %
Subtotal	50	126	138	172	133	780	991	1,041	14,926	20,008	45,294
Total				172							45,294
Density of metaphor tokens: 1,901/143,375 ≈ 0.01325 in total; 133/11,526 ≈ 0.0115 in January; 780/65,321 ≈ 0.0119 in February; 991/66,527 ≈ 0.0149 in March											

Note: The words “win” and “winner” are classified into the domain of war instead of that of game and sport because of their collocations with war expressions in the corpus. Also, in this study, some expressions of speed not highly related to the competition with other players are classified into the category of the journey metaphor. ^aThe same linguistic metaphors that occur repeatedly in different months are taken as one type when the total types of each metaphor variety during the three months are calculated.

which corresponds to the results in other studies (Wang et al. 2023; Zhang and Lin 2023). The implications of blood, pain, injury, and death (Warren 1991), which highlight the seriousness of the pandemic and justify anti-pandemic measures (Rajandran 2020), might contribute to the wide use of war metaphor in pandemic discourse. Olimat (2020) also discovered politicians’ tendency to use war metaphor to construct the pandemic as a foreign enemy. Within *China Daily*’s corpus, thirty-four types of tokens and two main conceptual metaphors are identified, that is PANDEMIC PREVENTION AND CONTROL IS A WAR and POLITICS IS A WAR.

Table 2 illustrates how pandemic prevention and control in China is framed as a war.

In this war, the pandemic is the enemy; the hit areas are the battlegrounds; and those who engage in anti-pandemic actions are fighters. By uniting as one and deploying medical resources as weapons, Chinese government and its people fight against the pandemic and pursue the final victory. This conceptual metaphor portrays that China deals with the pandemic with bravery, confidence, solidarity, and responsibility. Three examples from *China Daily* will be discussed in detail.

Table 2: PANDEMIC PREVENTION AND CONTROL IS A WAR.

Source domain	Target domain	Tokens	China’s image
Enemy	Pandemic	Arsenal,	Chinese government and its people deal with the pandemic bravely and unitedly to make the domestic situation under control and to contribute to the global fight against the pandemic.
Fighter	Those who engage in anti-pandemic action	Amok, Attack,	
Battleground	Pandemic-hit areas	Battle,	
Weapon	Medical resources, etc.	Combat,	
Victory	Control the pandemic	Conquer,	
		Defeat,	
		Defend,	
		Enemy,	
		Fight,	
		Front-line,	
		Hero,	
		Morale,	
		Victory,	
		War,	
		Weapon,	
		etc.	

Example 1: ...President Xi Jinping issued “an order of war” on Saturday, instructing all leading local officials to put people’s health first and lead the fight against the virus on the frontline.⁵

Example 2: The people of China have stood by their government in its fight against probably the most daunting challenge in the history of modern China. Chinese doctors have been working around the clock to fight COVID-19.⁶

Example 3: China has served as a strong line of defense for the world as the outbreak spread.⁷

In Example 1 and Example 2, the anti-pandemic actions and the actions of fighting a war belong to two totally different domains, and semantic tension is caused when the elements of war are used in the pandemic discourse. Thus, dealing with the pandemic is fighting a war. The token “issue an order of war” compares President Xi Jinping to the general commander making top decisions such as war declarations. “Frontline,” which refers to the military line that is closest to the enemy, a most dangerous area where sacrifices frequently occur, highlights the heroism of officials and medical workers in Wuhan. The use of “stand by their government” to modify fighting actions of Chinese people indicates that Chinese people support the government and actively shoulder their responsibility. The two examples above depict the image that putting people’s health first, President Xi Jinping and the Chinese government lead people from all walks of life in China to jointly fight the domestic war against the pandemic.

Besides the domestic control, China is also constructed as a responsible country contributing to the global fight against the pandemic. In Example3, “defense line,” normally refers to the military construction set up to defend territory during an armed conflict, and is used metaphorically here to describe the role of China in controlling the virus spread, providing timely information and test kits, sending medical teams to help other countries, and so forth. The modifier “strong” highlights the important and unignorable influence exerted by China on the world.

Another conceptual metaphor is POLITICS IS A WAR and Table 3 presents the cross-domain mappings between war and political issues related to the pandemic.

In this political war, people who carry out stigmatization strategies are considered as attackers with weapon, and China is framed as a victim whose

⁵ Source: <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202001/26/WS5e2d4a4ba3101282172734fd.html>. Accessed October 19, 2021.

⁶ Source: <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202003/20/WS5e741cf5a310128217280a4e.html>. Accessed October 19, 2021.

⁷ Source: <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202003/17/WS5e70232aa31012821727f95b.html>. Accessed October 19, 2021.

Table 3: POLITICS IS A WAR.

Source domain	Target domain	Tokens	China's image
Attacker	People who use the pandemic to forward political agendas	Attack, Enemy,	China is an innocent victim of political stigmatization.
Weapon	Political strategies	Fight,	
Victim	China	Victim, War	

anti-pandemic efforts are criticized instead of being recognized. Here is an example:

Example 4: ...China, which is fighting the visible virus from nature, is also under attack from invisible, man-made viruses out there, noting that some people have put their political agenda above public interests and common sense ...⁸

As illustrated in Example4, the first war token “fight” is used metaphorically to describe China’s efforts against the pandemic and the following token “attack” refers to political agenda or stigmatization. Associating disease with a foreign place has long been a tradition in crisis management (Seixas 2021) In fact, in the selected reports, 31 out of 37 times metaphorical use of the token “attack” were related to the accusations of the so-called “ineffectiveness” of China’s measures, which to some extent contrasts with China’s important contribution framed by the previous conceptual metaphor. Hence, a negative image that China is under attack by some politicians regardless of its efforts and public interests is conveyed, indicating the innocence of China.

4.2 Journey metaphor

Journey metaphor ranks at the second position in *China Daily*’s corpus (cf. Table1). Entailing a starting point, a predetermined destination, a traveler, one or more routes, and motion (Morozova 2019), this metaphor type conveys a sense of motivation and mission (Roberts and Bolognesi 2024) and is suitable to depict progressive movement toward a worthwhile goal (Shi et al. 2024). Trough the use of tokens such

⁸ Source: <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202003/20/WS5e741cf5a310128217280a4e.html>. Accessed October 19, 2021.

as “step up,” “path,” “progress,” and “turning point,” two conceptual metaphors are derived in the selected news reports: PANDEMIC PREVENTION AND CONTROL IS A JOURNEY and CHINA’S DEVELOPMENT IS A JOURNEY.

Table 4 demonstrates how pandemic prevention and control is compared as a journey.

In the anti-pandemic journey, China and other countries are compared to travelers moving toward the final destination (i.e., controlling the pandemic effectively) and the different places they pass refer to different stages of the pandemic. It presents the image that China continuously makes progress in controlling the pandemic and that China is a leading guide for other hard-hit areas. Here are the examples:

Example 5: The number of cases cured has notably exceeded the number of fatalities ... Those Chinese experts also agreed that relevant data revealing a turning point of the epidemic just around the corner.⁹

Example 6: Italy has followed in the footsteps of China to contain the virus by first placing more than 16 million people under quarantine and then extending the lockdown to the entire nation.¹⁰

Table 4: PANDEMIC PREVENTION AND CONTROL IS A JOURNEY.

Source domain	Target domain	Tokens	China’s image
Travelers	China and other countries	Accelerate	China continuously moves forward to control the domestic spread of the pandemic and acts as a tour guide for other hard-hit areas around the world.
Movement	Anti-pandemic practices	Crossroad, Guide, Go further,	
Different places	Stages of the pandemic	Move Forward,	
Destination	Effective control of the pandemic	Milestone, Foothold, Path, Progress, Starting/turning point, etc.	

9 Source: <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202002/07/WS5e3d48c9a310128217275e3c.html>. Accessed October 31, 2021.

10 Source: <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202003/20/WS5e741cf5a310128217280a4e.html>. Accessed October 19, 2021.

In Example 5, “turning point,” whose literal meaning is a point at which a change in direction or motion takes place, is used metaphorically to refer to the pandemic trend in China, where the number of cases cured notably exceeded the number of fatalities. It vividly shows that China is moving forward from crisis to relative safety. Example 6 describes the anti-pandemic actions taken by another hard-hit country, Italy. The phrase “follow in the footsteps of China” constructs China as a leading tour guide and Italy as a follower in the global anti-pandemic journey. Generally, a tour guide has a good sense of direction and is able to lead tourists to a destination. This metaphoric choice underlines China’s leading role in solving global public health crisis.

Another conceptual metaphor is CHINA’S DEVELOPMENT IS A JOURNEY, the cross-domain mappings of which are provided in Table 5.

The development of China is considered a journey in which different sectors in China are the travelers who move progressively toward the recovery and prosperity. It portrays China as a resilient and fast-developing country. See the following example:

Example 7: China has made considerable progress in speeding up production and resumption of work.¹¹

In Example 7, through the phrases “made considerable progress” and “speed up,” China’s production and resumption of work is compared to a traveler. A mental schema of the rapid development of different sectors in China is delivered, which stresses that in face of the pandemic, China is resilient and works hard to maintain the functioning of the society and to achieve prosperity.

Table 5: CHINA’S DEVELOPMENT IS A JOURNEY.

Source domain	Target domain	Tokens	China’s image
Travelers	Different sectors of China (e.g., economy)	Accelerate, Advance,	China recovers from the pandemic hit rapidly and works hard to pursue the prosperity.
Movement	Actions taken by different sectors in China	Ramp up, Speed up,	
Destination	Recovery and prosperity of China	Make progress, etc.	

11 Source: <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202003/30/WS5e816712a310128217282fb9.html>. Accessed November 2, 2021.

4.3 Family and friend metaphor

The family and friend metaphor is the third metaphor variety most commonly used in the *China Daily*’s corpus (cf. Table 1). Since the pandemic poses a worldwide threat, the media tend to use the family and friend metaphor to describe the relationship between different countries or institutions and to call on people’s solidarity. Metaphorical tokens identified in the present study, including “friend,” “neighbor,” and “partner,” formulate the conceptual metaphor THE WORLD IS A COMMUNITY (cf. Table 6).

In this conceptual metaphor, the world is compared to a community where China and other countries as well as international organizations are neighbors, friends, and family members. Given that in *China Daily* corpus, the tokens of family and friend metaphor often occur in the context that China receives and offers help, a sociable and friendly image of China is delivered, which is discussed in the following examples.

Example 8: It is very touching that some countries in Africa have provided us financial and material assistance ... which fully reflects the brotherhood between China and Africa.¹²

Table 6: THE WORLD IS A COMMUNITY.

Source domain	Target domain	Tokens	China’s image
Community Neighbors, friends, and family members	World China, other countries and international organizations	Brothers, Closely, Couple, Friend, Helping hand, Jointly, Neighbor, Partner, Teamwork, Trust	China is a close friend and family mem- ber of other countries or international organizations, receiving aid from other countries and offering help as its capacity allows.

12 Source: <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202003/11/WS5e6834b7a31012821727e011.html>. Accessed November 3, 2021.

Example 9: ... Xi said, adding that China will continue to support its neighbor's efforts to contain the outbreak and is willing to cooperate with it to help overcome difficulties as soon as possible ...¹³

In Example 8, the word “brotherhood” creates a semantic tension by personifying African countries as China’s brothers and the event of providing financial and material assistance implies a positive and close relationship between these countries. In Example 9, neighbors and countries belong to two different domains, but they share the similarity of relative distance. Chinese government’s declaration of supporting its neighbors constructs China as a warm-hearted member who is willing to help others in the international community.

4.4 Other metaphor varieties and the use of mixed metaphors

Some tokens in the rest of metaphor varieties as well as the use of mixed metaphors also play an active role in the construction of China’s image. For instance, “the initial wave of infections/pandemic” point to a water metaphor, comparing the increasing confirmed cases of the pandemic as a rising line of water, while “tide over,” often co-occurs with the agents China and other countries, constructing China as a confident and cooperative sailor in the crisis. “Epicenter” suggests in the category of the disaster metaphor, calling up an earthquake’s focus point; it occurs 65 times in these reports to mainly refer to Wuhan, demonstrating that China is a major victim in the pandemic. Despite the seriousness of pandemic situation in China, “(market/economy) rebound” suggests a metaphor of game and sport, “rein in the outbreak” an animal metaphor, “yield results” a plant metaphor, and “tighten restrictions” a force metaphor. These present China’s resolution and effectiveness in implementing anti-pandemic policies and, due to these efforts, China is evaluated as capable of controlling the domestic epidemic situation and restarting its economy. Additionally, in *China Daily* reports, there exist some mixed metaphors, i.e., metaphor tokens that do not belong to the same domain or share any direct inferential entailments but occur within a single cluster (Kimmel 2010). A typical example is “build a community of shared future for mankind” in which the predicate “build” belongs to the variety of building metaphor and the object “a community of shared future for mankind” family and friend metaphor. The former metaphor entails design, time, and efforts when building a construction and represents the actions of China here, and the latter indicates the unity and warmth of the world, referring to the goal that China wants to

¹³ Source: <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202003/18/WS5e7157b7a31012821727fdcf.html>. Accessed November 3, 2021.

achieve. The combination of these two metaphors enriches textual meanings, attracts readers' attention, and conveys that China endeavors to pursue a win-win development.

5 Discussion

Metaphor is a vital semiotic resource employed in media reports to construct and publicize a particular image of real-life objects or events. Through the critical analysis of metaphors in *China Daily*'s reports on the pandemic, a comprehensive evaluation of China's anti-pandemic image is delivered. Generally, China is portrayed as a positive actor in the pandemic: For the domestic pandemic situation, based on the principle of putting people's health first, President Xi Jinping and the Chinese government lead different sectors and social groups to fight against the virus jointly and are resilient to make continuous progress on the road to recovery in all social aspects; in the world stage, China fights together with other countries against the pandemic, receives and provides help, and creates an effective anti-pandemic path that other countries can follow. Despite China's anti-pandemic efforts, some metaphors in *China Daily* also framed China as a victim of political stigmatization, which contrasts with the former positive image of China's fight against the pandemic and implies that the efforts of China are not well recognized by some politicians.

5.1 Potential explanations for the metaphorical portrayal of China in *China Daily*

Possible hidden reasons for the use of metaphors for describing China's anti-pandemic efforts and portraying China's image might lie in two aspects: the political stance and ideology of *China Daily* and the international background.

First, paying major attention to conveying and publicizing Chinese governments' opinions and practices (Zhang 2022), *China Daily* is often regarded as "voice of China" (Huang and Ren 2020), and "the channel for promoting China's public diplomacy" (Hartig 2020). In the conceptual metaphor PANDEMIC PREVENTION AND CONTROL IS A WAR, the orderly government management and the unity of Chinese people are emphasized. The former coincides with the working logic of China's governance: the central government plays an important intervening role in handling the pandemic, and the local governments are mobilized to take coherent action to safeguard people's lives (Liu 2023). The latter corresponds to the dominant ideology of collectivism in *China Daily* (Gong and Firdaus 2024). Framing pandemic

prevention and control as collective actions is also a common discursive strategy in crisis management and it can also be found in news media from the United States, Germany, and South Africa (Bhatti et al. 2022; Meyer and van Schalkwyk 2023). The effectiveness of anti-pandemic measures and the resilience of China's society, publicized by the conceptual metaphor PANDEMIC PREVENTION AND CONTROL IS A JOURNEY and CHINA'S DEVELOPMENT IS A JOURNEY in *China Daily* reports, correspond to the argument that official media usually tend to highlight positivity in reporting the domestic situation in times of a global crisis (Yu and Liu 2023). Additionally, the mutual aid between China and other countries, mainly famed by the metaphor THE WORLD IS A COMMUNITY, is consistent with the political tenet of the Communist Party of China that people around the world are advised to work together.

Second, in the world stage, the pandemic also provokes an infodemic, i.e., a worldwide rapid spread of rumors and conspiracy theories (Pian et al. 2021). China, the first outbreak point of the pandemic, has been under heavy attack in this infodemic (Dubey 2020). As a result, the image of China has been threatened and it is urgent for China to take restorative actions in the global health crisis communication. Given that media reports function as a main channel for the public to gain information about global events, *China Daily*, China's official leading English-language newspaper with a worldwide readership, acts as a mechanism of soft power to defend and even advance China's national image. The negative image that China is a victim of political stigmatization, framed via the conceptual metaphor POLITICS IS A WAR, contrasts with the generally positive image of China constructed in *China Daily* reports, i.e., control the domestic spread of the pandemic effectively and shoulder global responsibility. In this manner, *China Daily* highlights the irrationality of the criticisms of China's anti-pandemic efforts, mitigates the reputation damage, and might further enhance China's international influence.

5.2 Implications for metaphor studies

Several implications were rendered in the present research. Theoretically, analyzing the construction of national image from the perspective of CMA enriches research approaches to the discursive construction of a national image and is an innovative attempt to strengthen CMA's power in unveiling the hidden ideology behind the metaphor use in media reports. In addition, this study expands the scope of the application of CMA by adopting it to the pandemic-related reports, which supplements current studies on metaphors in pandemic discourse. Practically, the systematic investigation of metaphors in *China Daily*'s anti-pandemic reports highlights the role of metaphors in framing social events and may provide some insights into

the discursive strategies used by government-owned media in global crisis communication. It may also help readers focus on the potential motives of writers behind the uses of metaphors, thus improving readers' critical reading capabilities.

6 Conclusions

Overall, this study found more than 13 metaphor categories in the selected 300 anti-pandemic reports in *China Daily*, among which the metaphors of war, journey, and family and friend are the most salient. By employing these metaphors, the government-owned media framed China as a people-oriented, united, resilient, responsible, and friendly country that effectively control the domestic pandemic situation and that receives and provides aids around the world, on the one hand, and a victim of political stigmatization on the other hand. *China Daily's* mission of articulating China's voice and the international background of infodemics might be two likely factors influencing the representation of China's image. The present study enriched CMA's content and application scope and provided insights into the role metaphors play in the discursive construction of national image.

Nevertheless, some limitations still exist, which need to be further addressed:

First, no discourse analysis can avoid potential bias, but this approach has still made a profound contribution to understanding how language and society are intertwined (Kremer and Felgenhauer 2022). The present study is an attempt to investigate how *China Daily* employs metaphors in pandemic discourse to frame social events and portray China's national image. Although a relatively large-scale corpus was built, absolute objectivity and conclusiveness are difficult to reach. Writers' thoughts on the choice of metaphors and readers' interaction with these metaphorical representations need to be further evaluated through structured or semi-structured interviews.

Second, since the research focus is on how official media use metaphors to defend and improve the national image in global crisis, the study selects the pandemic as the research context; China, the first outbreak point and major victim of stigmatization, as the research country; and its largest government-owned English-language newspaper, *China Daily*, as the source of studied discourse. To some extent, the study can reflect how China's official media reacted to the pandemic; however, the abundant reports on the pandemic around the world also make it possible to investigate how mainstream media around the world evaluate the fight against the pandemic and portray images of different countries, which requires future attention.

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