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Metaphors and China's COVID-19 policies: a diachronic analysis of Chinese-English bilingual news editorials

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Abstract: China implemented stringent COVID restrictions in 2020 but eased them in December 2022. Since metaphors can both reflect and shape people's views and stances, it is relevant to study how the state-backed newspaper *Global Times* used metaphors to frame the policy shift for different target readers. It extends our previous research on the newspaper's 2020 editorials, revealing the fluidity of metaphors used by the same text producer during a period of significant transition. Despite changes in COVID-19 policies, the newspaper continued to use WAR metaphors between January 2022 and February 2023. However, the gradual increase in JOURNEY metaphors and decrease in WAR metaphors over time suggest a transition from a "militaristic" to a "smoother" portrayal of the pandemic's progression. While the newspaper consistently maintained pro-China and anti-US stances, it used fewer metaphors to describe the US position. The metaphor shift for China from "a person who does not lie flat" to "a person who rolls up sleeves and works hard" aligns with the government's change in focus from the pandemic situation to economic recovery. It should be noted that translation practices further affect metaphor perception, with source-text readers exposed to more negative depictions of the pandemic and the US compared to target-text readers. Future research could explore these metaphors' impact on audiences.

Keywords: COVID-19; Chinese COVID policy; news translation; corpus-assisted discourse analysis; metaphor; US

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1 Introduction

Metaphors, as a way of thinking, are pervasive across all forms of discourse (Lakoff and Johnson 1980/2003). Through highlighting some aspects of a social reality while backgrounding others, metaphors demonstrate a “framing” effect (Semino et al. 2018), and they can both reflect and shape people’s views and stances (Littlemore et al. 2024). In light of this, metaphors have been widely studied in various communication scenarios, including the COVID-19 context (see Olza et al. 2021; Semino 2021; Wicke and Bolognesi 2020). Previously, we contributed to the field by examining how the Chinese government-backed bilingual newspaper, *Global Times*, expressed its stance towards the pandemic, as well as towards China and the United States – the two most frequently mentioned entities in our data – through the use of metaphors, and how this stance was mediated through metaphor translation in the newspaper’s 2020 COVID-19-related news editorials (Liu and Li 2022). Additionally, we conducted a focused investigation into the use of WAR metaphors in the data, examining their autocorrelation and potential influence on readers’ ideologies (Liu and Tay 2023).

While this article mainly builds on previous research on metaphors in the context of COVID-19, metaphors in policy persuasion, and metaphors in multilingual and diachronic discourses (see Section 2 for literature review), it represents a continuation of our earlier studies. This continuation is particularly relevant due to the significant shift in China’s COVID-19 policies in December 2022, which presents a valuable opportunity to examine the fluidity of metaphors used by the same text producer during a period of significant transition. The potential changes or lack of changes in metaphor usage could impact the beliefs and perception of two distinct groups: the recipients of Chinese news editorials and the recipients of English news editorials, particularly in relation to the pandemic, COVID-19 policies, and the two major players reported by the media outlet – China and the US. Analyzing metaphor usage for both groups may reveal this state-backed outlet’s varying communication strategies towards its domestic and international audiences. To explore these issues, we have formulated two research questions:

- (1) What metaphors does *Global Times* use in its Chinese and English news editorials to describe COVID-19-related, China-related, and the US-related topics before and after the policy shift in December 2022?
- (2) Are there differences in metaphor usage between the Chinese and English editorials for COVID-19-related, China-related, and the US-related topics, both before and after the December 2022 policy shift?

In the following sections, we first provide an overview of the relevant previous research. Next, we describe the research data and methodology in detail. Finally, we present the results, discuss their implications, and offer concluding remarks.

2 Literature review

2.1 Metaphors in the COVID-19 context

As previous studies have shown, WAR metaphors have remained the dominant way of representing the pandemic, especially during its early stages (see Charteris-Black 2021; Degani 2023; Hanne 2022; Sabucedo et al. 2020; Wicke and Bolognesi 2020). However, the use of WAR metaphors is quite contentious. On the one hand, they may have counterproductive effects, such as framing COVID patients as “fighters”, which may lead to feelings of guilt if they do not recover (Olza et al. 2021; Semino 2021). On the other hand, WAR metaphors can be beneficial by preparing the public for difficult times, encouraging behavioral changes, and fostering national unity and resilience (Seixas 2021). Charteris-Black (2021: 35) contends that WAR metaphors are not inherently wrong or unethical, but the political motives behind their use need to be examined. For example, Benzi and Novarese (2022) suggest that governments might exploit WAR metaphors to foster obedience and thereby undermine democracy. Musolff (2022) also holds that WAR metaphors may undermine public trust in government communication and potentially fuel conspiracy theories. Besides WAR metaphors, JOURNEY, SPORTS, and NATURAL FORCES/DISASTERS metaphors are also employed, among others (Olza et al. 2021).

Specifically in the Chinese context, WAR metaphors also remain prevalent, but other metaphors, such as RACE and CHALLENGE (Gui 2021), FLOOD and CRIME (Liu and Li 2022), as well as SEASON and HOMEWORK (Zhang et al. 2022), are also used. WAR metaphors in Chinese news media reflect the stringent COVID policies in China, with their frequent use aiming to persuade citizens to comply with measures, such as social distancing and wearing face masks (Liu and Tay 2023). Metaphors with positive connotations were employed to describe China's role in the pandemic (e.g., portraying China as a “war hero”), whereas metaphors with negative connotations were used to frame the US's role (e.g., depicting the US as a “sinner”) (Liu and Li 2022). Since these studies rely mainly on data from 2020, their findings might not be readily applicable to later periods, particularly during times when COVID policies underwent significant changes.

2.2 Metaphors in policy making and policy persuasion

Metaphors are often assumed to affect how individuals understand public policies and therefore their acceptance of these policies (Charteris-Black 2011; Chilton and Lakoff 1995/2005). This claim is supported by evidence from studies employing a response-elicitation approach (see Boeynaems et al. 2017 for a systematic review). For instance,

based on interviews, Lau and Schlesinger (2005) found that the American public's understanding of policy metaphors – such as viewing healthcare as a marketable commodity versus a community obligation – could impact their support for American healthcare policies. Ahrens et al. (2022) concluded, based on between-subjects experiments, that novel metaphors, compared to conventional metaphors, could better draw participants' attention and potentially lead them to evaluate proposed foreign policies more favorably. Hart (2021) reported that using extreme metaphors – such as depicting immigrants as animals or armies – reduced support for anti-immigration sentiments and hostile immigration policies compared to literal framings.

In the COVID-19 context, few studies have examined the association between metaphors and the acceptance of COVID policies. One notable exception is Schnepf and Christmann (2022), who investigated participants' responses to American and German COVID policies using “war” versus “struggle” metaphors.

However, these studies focus on a relatively stable period with minimal changes in policies. Specifically, in the COVID-19 context, shifts in policies could lead to the use of different metaphors, potentially reducing the use of WAR metaphors and introducing new ones. Metaphors might also be used to foreshadow policy changes (Hobbs 2008). Additionally, the way the public interprets metaphor shifts may influence their responses to both old and new COVID policies. Addressing the latter requires a response-elicitation approach, which could be conducted in the future. This article will primarily focus on the former – whether and how shifts in policies could lead to the use of different metaphors.

2.3 Metaphors across languages and over time

Investigating metaphors in multilingual and diachronic contexts benefits our understanding of metaphor universality and variation (see Kövecses 2005). Examples include a compilation of pandemic metaphors in multiple languages (Olza et al. 2021) and a study examining over 100 years of pandemic metaphors in British media and political discourse (Taylor and Kidgell 2021).

In terms of multilingual metaphors, Liu et al. (2024) distinguish between metaphors used by different text producers and those employed by the same text producer(s). While the former typically emphasizes the ideologies of different text producers towards the same event, the latter highlights how the same text producer mediates its ideologies towards the same event when addressing different audiences, possibly through translation practices. This article examines the metaphors used by the same producer, *Global Times*, in its original Chinese news editorials and their English translations, linking these to how the newspaper frames China's COVID policy, either similarly or differently, for the two target audiences.

In terms of diachronic analyses of metaphors, some studies have examined changes in metaphors over time in relation to policies, such as metaphor variations concerning Hong Kong's education and economic policies (Ahrens and Zeng 2022; Zeng et al. 2021). They found that the shift in Hong Kong's socio-political context following its transition from British to Chinese governance impacted the metaphors used by the Hong Kong government to frame its policies. Similarly, in the COVID-19 context, a pertinent question is whether metaphor usage changes during and after periods of significant policy changes. The COVID policy shift in China provides a valuable opportunity to explore this.

3 Data and methodology

3.1 Data collection

This study comprises COVID-19-related news editorials from *Global Times* (环球时报, huánqiú shíbào). *Global Times* (GT) is the only media outlet in China that issues both Chinese and English newspapers. With a daily print circulation exceeding 2.6 million, 8 million daily page views, 2.5 million app users, and 100 million followers across social media platforms,¹ GT is notable for advocating viewpoints that other state media outlets are reluctant to air openly (Cai 2016) and echoing the Chinese government's policies (Liu 2022).

To better capture the newspaper's stance, we chose to collect data exclusively from GT's editorials, as they often more accurately represent a newspaper's stance and opinions (Marques et al. 2019). GT's English editorials are often translations of its Chinese editorials. We focus on both Chinese and English COVID-19-related editorials that contain any of the following keywords in either the title or content: "COVID" (新冠, xīnguān), "coronavirus" (新冠病毒, xīnguān bìngdú), "pandemic" (大流行, dàliúxíng), "epidemic" (流行病, liúxíngbìng), "pneumonia" (肺炎, fèiyán), or "Omicron" (奥密克戎, àomìkèróng).

In the present study, we limited the time span to January 2022 and February 2023 (both inclusive), considering both China's COVID policies and the date we began collecting the data. China's COVID policies went through three stages: (1) the strict zero-COVID policy since early 2020; (2) the dynamic-clearing policy since August 2021; and (3) the relaxation of nationwide COVID restrictions since December 2022. However, some Western analysts have suggested that "dynamic clearing" was merely a rebranded version of "zero-COVID", given that COVID restrictions in China

¹ See <https://www.globaltimes.cn/adv.html>.

remained stringent.² The selected time range starts in January 2022, which helps us understand whether and how COVID policy shifts occurred gradually and how these shifts might be reflected in the metaphors used by the outlet. The time range ends in February 2023, as we began collecting data in early March 2023. This timeframe should allow for an investigation of metaphor usage following the December 2022 COVID policy shift. We can also easily compare these findings with those from our earlier studies (Liu 2023; Liu and Li 2022), which analyzed data from the zero-COVID policy stage. Sections 4 and 5 will elaborate on this in detail.

The search using the specified keywords and time range yielded 82 Chinese COVID-19-related editorials and their English translations (see Table 1 for data description). Figure 1 below shows the number of collected editorials per month. It demonstrates that COVID-19-related editorials were published each month, increasing from 5 to 10 after the December 2022 policy shift.

To answer our research questions, we annotate the metaphors describing COVID-19-related, China-related and the US-related topics in the collected editorials. Specifically, we generated concordance lines (window size: 150 words) using COVID-19-related and China/US-related keywords³ and conducted a word-by-word analysis for metaphors. Table 2 below lists the number of concordance lines generated using AntConc.⁴

Table 1: Data description.

<i>Global Times Editorial</i>		
Language	Chinese	English
No. of articles	82	82
No. of words	54,848	72,885
Mean length of article	669	889
Total words		127,733

² See relevant reports on *Bloomberg* and *South China Morning Post*: “Why China Is Sticking With Its ‘Covid Zero’ Strategy” (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-10/why-china-is-sticking-with-its-covid-zero-strategy-quicktake#xj4y7vzkg>).

³ Please access <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.22814816> for the list of editorials and the list of keywords. As can be seen from the list of keywords, we focus on COVID-19-related, China-related, and US-related topics in a broad sense. This includes any mentions of the virus, the pandemic, vaccines, as well as the Chinese and American governments, politicians, and other related entities.

⁴ The corpus software AntConc Version 3.5.9 was utilized to generate concordance lines. However, it is worth noting that this method may not capture all pandemic metaphors present in the datasets. Instead, it is focused on identifying the most direct metaphors of COVID-19 and the entities involved in the pandemic.

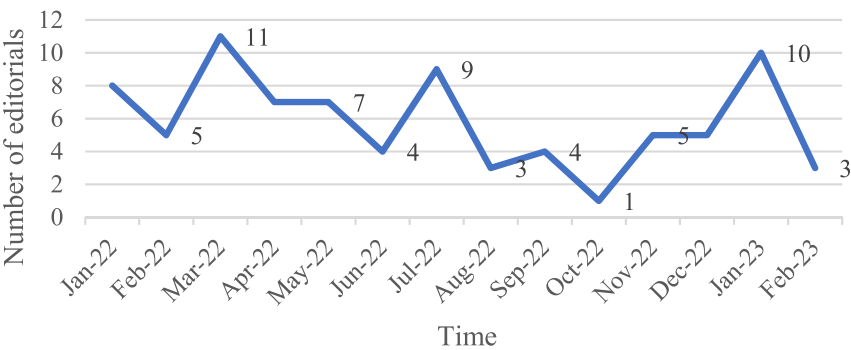


Figure 1: Number of editorials over time.

Table 2: Concordance lines of COVID-19-related, China-related and the US-related topics.

	COVID-19-related topics	China-related topics	The US-related topics
In Chinese editorials	851	1,244	928
In English editorials	911	1,452	989
Total	1,762	2,696	1,917

3.2 Identification of metaphors

According to both Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP, Pragglejaz Group 2007) and Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit (MIPVU, Steen et al. 2010), a lexical unit is metaphorical when its contextual meaning contrasts with its basic meaning but can be understood in relation to it. We apply this definition here. Nevertheless, there are some adjustments at the operational level. On the one hand, MIP does not distinguish word classes or include similes in the annotation process, whereas we do. This is because of the fact that whether a word functions as a noun or a verb can affect its basic meaning and, consequently, its metaphoricity; similes, which liken one thing to another, reveal opinions and beliefs in the same way that metaphors do. On the other hand, while MIPVU distinguishes word classes, it also differentiates between direct and implicit metaphors and labels metaphor flags – an approach we do not use. We analyze both metaphors and similes but do not assign separate labels to them. We use the Chinese expression “考卷” and its English counterpart “exam” in example (1)⁵ to illustrate this.

5 To facilitate comparison, both the source text (ST) and the translated text (TT) are provided for each example. Only metaphorical words relevant to our point of analysis are highlighted in bold and underlined. For instance, while the words “答” and “ace” are metaphorical in example (1), they are not highlighted because only “考卷” and “exam” are relevant to our current demonstration of

(1) Article #68, December 27, 2022

ST: “乙类乙管” 是 新 考卷, 中国 有
 yílèiyiguǎn shì xīn kǎojiǔ zhōngguó yǒu
 Class B management Be new examination paper China have
 能力 答 好 它
 nénglì dá hǎo tā
 capability answer well it

TT: ‘Class B management’ is a new exam, and China will ace it

The analytical procedure is as follows:

First, we read the entire text to establish a general understanding of the meaning: China has implemented well the “Class B management” for COVID-19.

Second, we identify the lexical units: “考卷” in the source text (ST) and “exam” in the translated text (TT); both are nouns.

Third, we establish their contextual meanings: both “考卷” and “exam” in the context implies that China’s COVID response was undergoing scrutiny.

Fourth, we determine whether they have a more basic contemporary meaning in other contexts: Yes, the basic meaning of “考卷”/“exam” is “a spoken or written test of knowledge”,⁶ which is often used in an educational context.

Fifth, we decide whether the contextual meaning contrasts with the basic meaning but can be understood in relation to it: COVID-19 pandemic is not education, but the contrast is understandable, as governments’ COVID-19 responses could test their governance.

Sixth, if the answer is yes, we mark them as metaphorical: Yes, Both “考卷” and “exam” are metaphorical.

3.3 Verification of source domains

To verify metaphors’ source domains, we employed the Source Domain Verification Procedure (SDVP, Ahrens and Jiang 2020). SDVP draws upon corpus-based resources including the Suggested Upper Merged Ontology (SUMO, www.ontologyportal.org), WordNet (wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn), Handian Dictionary (www.zdic.net), and the Word Sketch function in Sketch Engine (www.sketchengine.eu). Similarly, we illustrate this method using the expression “考卷”/“exam” in example (1):

methodology. Similarly, in the examples provided throughout the paper, we will highlight only those metaphors pertinent to our analytical focus, rather than every metaphor present.

⁶ See the definition of “exam” in the Longman Dictionary <https://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/exam>; See the definition of “考卷” in Handian Dictionary <https://www.zdic.net/hans/%E8%80%83%E5%8D%B7>.

Step 1: Based on the basic meaning of “考卷”/“exam” and the context, we propose that the potential source domain is EXAM/TEST.

Step 2: By searching the word “exam” in SUMO, we find that the noun “exam” has one sense under the Noun Synset 10719702–TestForm: “a set of questions or exercises evaluating skill or knowledge”.⁷

By searching the word “test” in SUMO, we find the noun “test” also has one sense under the Noun Synset 107197021–TestForm: “a set of questions or exercises evaluating skill or knowledge”.⁸

Step 3: We conclude that “考卷” and “exam” are conceptually-semantically associated with Exam/Test.⁹

Step 4: We confirm that the source domain of “考卷” and “exam” is EXAM/TEST.

We identify the target domain as COVID RESPONSE based on the context. Hence, the cross-domain mapping is COVID RESPONSE IS AN EXAM/TEST.

3.4 Categories of translation methods

The study also identifies six types of translation methods for metaphors based on Toury's (2012) categorization: retaining the same metaphor in the TT (M-M), replacing the original metaphor with a new metaphor (M1-M2), paraphrasing the metaphorical expression into a literal expression (M-P), translating a literal expression into a metaphor (P-M), omitting the original metaphor (M-0), and creating a metaphor from a zero-element (0-M). In example (1), “考卷” was translated into “exam”, with the same metaphor retained (M-M).

The data was annotated by a native Chinese linguist experienced in metaphor analysis for both Chinese and English. The annotator reviewed and recoded the data twice, with intervals of one to three months between reviews, to ensure accuracy. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion with another metaphor expert. We chose intra-coder reliability over inter-coder reliability because the former ensures consistency and transparency in the coding process, whereas the latter “would not have reduced the ‘subjectivity’ of the coding per se” (Bednarek 2015: 6) but would only guarantee consistency in the use of the coding manual.

⁷ See SUMO <https://sigma.ontologyportal.org:8443/sigma/WordNet.jsp?word=exam&POS=1>.

⁸ See SUMO <https://sigma.ontologyportal.org:8443/sigma/WordNet.jsp?word=test&POS=1>.

⁹ If SUMO cannot confirm the conceptual-semantical association, other resources can be referred to, including WordNet (), Handian Dictionary (www.zdic.net), and the Word Sketch function in Sketch Engine (www.sketchengine.eu).

4 Results

4.1 Metaphors over time: shifting narratives of the pandemic, China, and the US

Overall, more metaphors were used to describe the COVID-19-related topics (300 instances in the STs versus 274 instances in the TTs) than China-related topics (125 versus 103 instances) and the US-related topics (66 versus 49 instances). Hence, these editorials centre around framing various COVID-19 topics, such as the virus, the pandemic, and COVID-19 responses, with some references to China and the US as significant players.

Table 3 below lists the top 10 most frequently used metaphors for COVID-19-related topics.

The results show that WAR metaphors remain dominant, accounting for around 45 % of the total. This finding is consistent with our previous studies on GT's COVID reports in 2020 (Liu 2023; Liu and Li 2022). While WAR, FIRE and SHADOW metaphors clearly convey a negative evaluation of the pandemic (see example 2 below), the evaluative meanings of EXAM/TEST, JOURNEY and WEATHER metaphors require further exploration in context. Example (1) in Section 3 and examples (3)–(4) below provide the contexts of these metaphors.

Table 3: Top 10 frequently used metaphors for COVID-19 in source news and translated news.

Chinese source news				English translated news			
Rank	Source domain	Freq.	%	Rank	Source domain	Freq.	%
1	WAR	136	45.33	1	WAR	131	47.81
2	JOURNEY	25	8.33	2	FORCE	25	9.12
3	FORCE	20	6.67	3	JOURNEY	23	8.39
4	EXAM/TEST	18	6.00	4	EXAM/TEST	15	5.47
5	HUMAN	12	4.00	5	FIRE	11	4.01
6	FIRE	11	3.67	6	LIQUID	10	3.65
7	MOVEMENT	10	3.33	7	MOVEMENT	9	3.28
8	WEATHER	10	3.33	8	WEATHER	7	2.55
9	SHADOW	5	1.67	9	SHADOW	5	1.82
10	LIQUID	7	2.33	10	OBJECT	4	1.46

(2) COVID-19 PANDEMIC IS SHADOW (Article #69, December 29, 2022)

ST: 在 战争 的 炮火 和 疫情 的 阴影 之
 zài zhànzhēng de pàohuǒ hé yìqíng de yīnyǐng zhī
 PREP war PART cannon fire and pandemic PART shadow PART
 下, 北京 冬奥会 和 卡塔尔 世界杯 成功 举办,
 xià běijīng dōng'àohuì hé kǎtǎ'ěr shìjièbēi chénggōng jǔbàn
 under Beijing Winter Olympics and Qatar World Cup success hold
 不仅 让 人 感受 到 竞技 体育 的 魅力,
 bùjǐn ràng rén gǎnshòu dào jìngjì tǐyù de mèilì
 not only let human feel PART competitive sports PART charm
 还 给 了 世界 温暖 治愈 的 拥抱, 展现 出
 hái gěi le shìjiè wēnnuǎn zhìyù de yōngbào zhǎnxiàn chū
 also give PART world warm healing PART hug present PREP
 和平 与 团结 的 伟大 力量。
 hépíng yǔ tuánjié de wěidà lìliàng
 peach and unity PART great power

TT: Under the shadow of the war and the pandemic, the success of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games and the Qatar World Cup not only made people feel the charm of sports but also offered the world a warm and healing embrace, showing the great power of peace and unity.

(3) COVID RESPONSE IS A JOURNEY (Article #66, December 7, 2022)

ST: 中国 的 疫情 防控, 再次
 zhōngguó de yìqíng fángkòng zàicì
 China PART pandemic prevention and control once again
朝着 精准、科学 的 方向
 cháozhe jīngzhǔn kēxué de fāngxiàng
 towards precise scientific PART direction
迈出 重要 一步
 màichū zhòngyào yībù
 take important one step

TT: Once again, China's epidemic prevention and control work has again taken an important step toward precision and science.

(4) COVID-19 PANDEMIC IS WEATHER (Article #66, December 7, 2022)

ST: “谁 无 暴风 劲雨 时, 守得 云开
 shuí wú bàofēng jìnyǔ shí shǒudé yúnkāi
 who no storm heavy rain time wait fog clear
 见 月明。
 jiàn yuè míng
 see shining moon

”走出 疫情 阴霾 的 这 一天, 我们 都 期待 很 久 了。
zǒuchū yìqíng yīnmái De zhè yītiān wǒmen dōu qīdài hěnjiǔ le
walk out haze PART this day we all expect very long PART

TT: The rainbow comes after the storm. We have all expected a long time for this day to come out of the haze of the epidemic.

Example (1) not merely compares a government’s response to COVID-19 to taking an exam but also underscores the positive evaluation of the Chinese government (cf. “China will *ace* it”). A comparable effect is observed in example (3), where the conventional JOURNEY metaphor highlights China’s significant “strides” towards precision and science in COVID responses. In example (4), GT further emphasizes that the Chinese government has been making prudent decisions by comparing the current COVID condition in China to “clear skies” and “rainbows” after “storms” and “rains”.

When plotting metaphors in STs and TTs over time in Figures 2 and 3 below, we observed that the metaphors accumulated between January and May 2022 and between December 2022 and January 2023 in both STs and TTs.

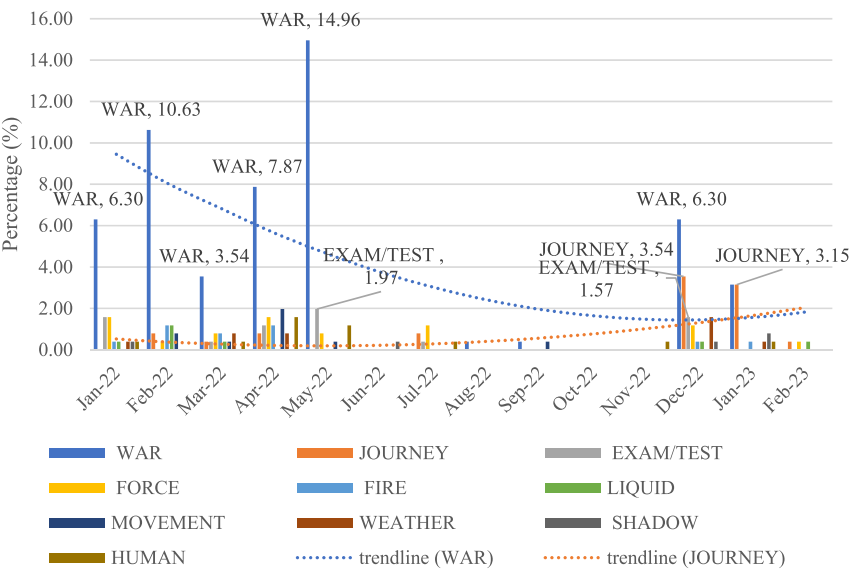


Figure 2: Metaphor use for COVID-19 over time in Chinese source news.

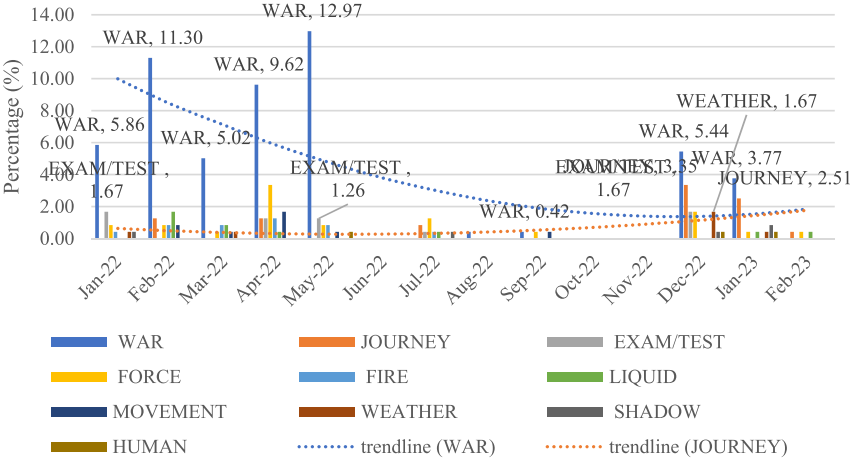


Figure 3: Metaphor use for COVID-19 over time in English translated news.

No metaphors were used to describe COVID-19-related topics in October and November 2022, right before the policy shift, despite the publication of six COVID editorials during this time. The trendlines of WAR and JOURNEY metaphors indicate that GT increased the use of JOURNEY metaphors and decreased the use of WAR metaphors over time. In particular, the use of JOURNEY metaphors peaked in December 2022, coinciding with the time of the policy shift. This may be because GT reduced the need to prepare the audience for difficult times or to persuade them to comply with strict COVID-19 measures using WAR metaphors, which were more necessary during the earlier stages of the pandemic (Liu and Tay 2023; Seixas 2021). Instead, framing the pandemic as a journey could help the audience come to terms with the situation, implying that the return to normalcy is a gradual process (Olza et al. 2021). Following the policy shift, GT increased the use of EXAM/TEST metaphors. Although previous studies had identified EXAM/TEST metaphors in the GT's 2020 editorials, their use was primarily to emphasize the challenges faced by the Chinese government (Liu and Li 2022). In contrast, in this study, EXAM/TEST metaphors are used to portray the Chinese government as a successful exam-taker.

Despite an overall decrease in the WAR metaphor frequency, WAR metaphors were still employed more frequently than JOURNEY metaphors between December 2022 and January 2023. As a result, the audience might continue to perceive the previous stringent COVID-19 policies as reasonable and necessary based on the ongoing dominance of WAR metaphors. However, the introduction of JOURNEY metaphors could also render the relaxation of these restrictions acceptable, implying

that it is time to “move” to the next stage. This warrants further reception-oriented research.

GT paid attention to more varied China-related and US-related topics (see Figure 4 below). Besides the countries themselves, the governments, the party, the people and others were also mentioned.

Table 4 below presents the metaphors describing different China-related and US-related topics. There are fewer diverse categories of metaphors describing the US, but more diverse categories describing China. Metaphors for China-related topics are evidently positive (e.g., LIGHT, ENGINE and BRIGHT SPOT). However, metaphors for US-related topics are mostly negative (e.g., American politicians as TRICKSTERS and the US as BAD FRUIT).

HUMAN metaphors remain dominant for both China-related and US-related topics, taking up around 70 % of the total. Figures 5 and 6 below plot HUMAN metaphors over time, with a cutoff frequency set at a minimum of 2 instances in either the source news or the translated news. The results corroborate that GT puts more emphasis on China than on the US in the selected time range, as HUMAN metaphors for China occur in 9 out of 14 months, whereas those for the US occur only in 6 out of 14 months.

China was often associated with positive human characteristics, frequently described as “a person who shoulders responsibility” and “a person who does not lie flat” before the policy shift but as “a person who has vigor” and “a person who rolls up sleeves and works hard” after the policy shift. This is closely tied to the

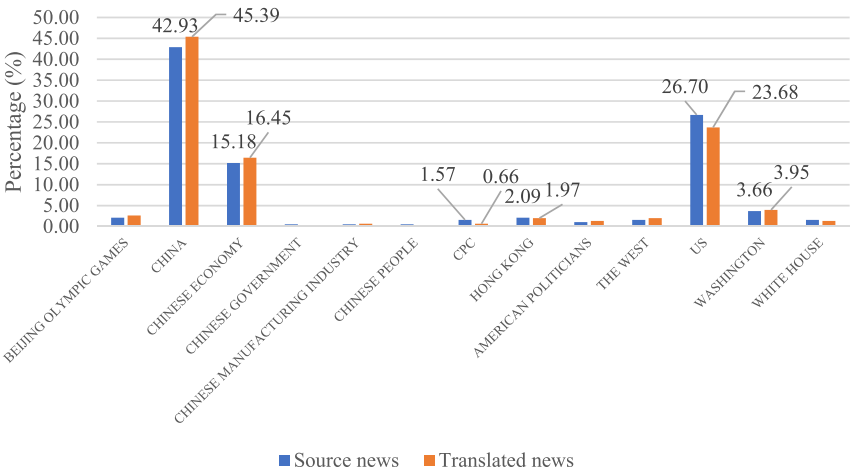


Figure 4: Frequency of China-related and US-related topics in metaphor distribution.

Table 4: Summary of China-related and US-related metaphors in datasets.

Target domain	Source domain	Chinese news		English news	
		Freq.	%	Freq.	%
BEIJING OLYMPIC GAMES	JOURNEY	1	0.80	1	0.97
	INJECTION OF STRENGTH	1	0.80	1	0.97
	LIGHT	2	1.60	2	1.94
CHINA	HUMAN	78	62.40	64	62.14
	MOUNTAIN	1	0.80	0	0.00
	OBJECT	3	2.40	2	1.94
	ENGINE	0	0.00	1	0.97
	FORCE	0	0.00	2	1.94
CHINESE ECONOMY	ENGINE	1	0.80	1	0.97
	BRIGHT SPOT	1	0.80	1	0.97
	FORCE	1	0.80	0	0.00
	HUMAN	12	9.60	11	10.68
	LIGHT	1	0.80	2	1.94
	LIQUID	1	0.80	0	0.00
	OBJECT	10	8.00	8	7.77
	PLANT	2	1.60	2	1.94
CHINESE GOVERNMENT	HUMAN	1	0.80	0	0.00
CHINESE MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY	HUMAN	1	0.80	1	0.97
CHINESE PEOPLE	OBJECT	1	0.80	0	0.00
CPC	MAGIC CUDGEL	1	0.80	0	0.00
	HUMAN	2	1.60	1	0.97
HONG KONG	HUMAN	4	3.20	3	2.91
Total of China-related metaphors		125	100.00	103	100.00
AMERICAN POLITICIANS	TRICKSTER	2	3.03	2	4.08
THE WEST	HUMAN	3	4.55	3	6.12
The US	OBJECT	1	1.52	0	0.00
	ANIMAL	1	1.52	0	0.00
	HUMAN	49	74.24	35	71.43
	(BAD) FRUIT	0	0.00	1	2.04
WASHINGTON	HUMAN	7	10.61	6	12.24
WHITE HOUSE	HUMAN	3	4.55	2	4.08
Total of US-related metaphors		66	100.00	49	100.00

Chinese government's shift in focus following December 2022, from a heavy emphasis on the domestic pandemic situation (see example 5) to economic recovery (see example 6).

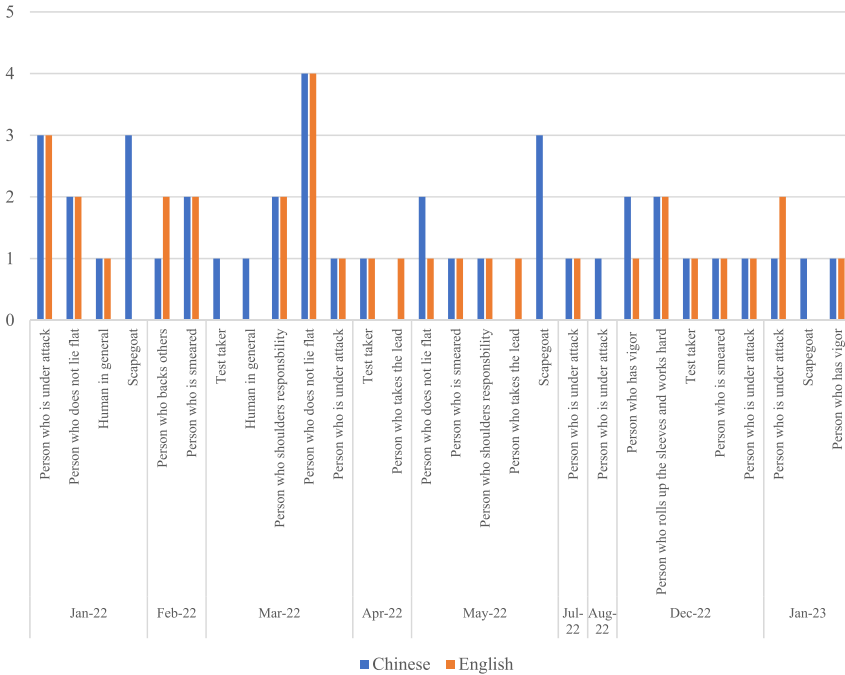


Figure 5: Raw frequency of HUMAN metaphors for China over time.

- (5) CHINA IS A PERSON WHO DOES NOT LIE FLAT (Article #03, January 9, 2022)
- ST: 践行 “人民 至上、 生命 至上” 理念 的
 jiànxíng rénmin zhìshàng shēngmìng zhìshàng lǐniàn de
 practice people highest life highest principle PART
 中国 绝不会
 zhōngguó juébùhuì
 China never
 “躺平”, 中国 迎战 奥密克戎 是 具有 世界性
 tǎngpíng zhōngguó yíngzhàn àomìkèróng shì jùyǒu shìjièxìng
 lie flat China confront Omicron Be have world-level
 意义 的。
 yìyì de
 meaning PART
- TT: China, which adheres to prioritizing people and their lives, will not lie down, and its fight against Omicron is vital for the international community.

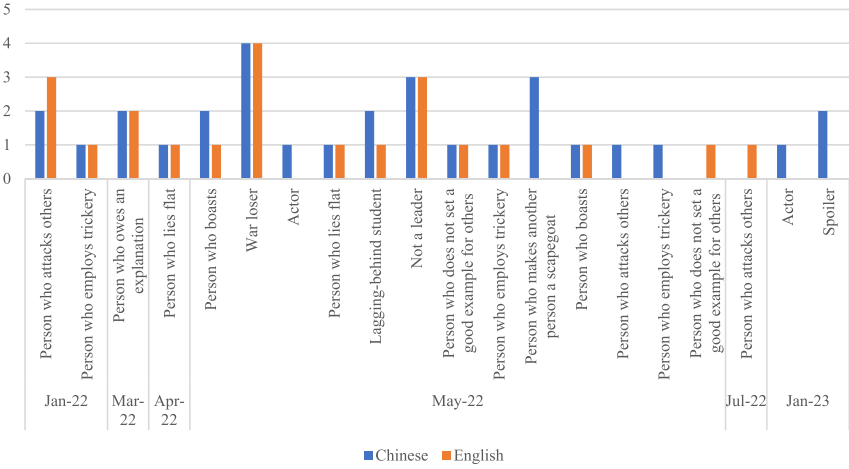


Figure 6: Raw frequency of HUMAN metaphors for the US over time.

(6) CHINA IS A PERSON WHO ROLLS UP SLEEVES AND WORKS HARD (Article #67, December 9, 2022)

ST: 而 中国 社会 在 有效 抵御 住 病毒 的
ér zhōngguó shèhuì zài yǒuxiào dǐyù zhù bìngdú de
but China society PREP effectively resist stop virus PART
最 强烈 冲击 后, 整体 上 呈现
zuì qiáng liè chōngjī hòu zhěngtǐ shàng chéngxiàn
most intense impact afterwards overall PREP present
出 “撸起 袖子 加油 干”
chū lūqǐ xiùzi jiāyóu gàn
PREP roll up sleeve hard work
“争分夺秒 抢 时间” 的 景象。
zhēngfēnduómǎo qiǎng shíjiān de jǐngxiàng
race against time grab time PART scene
TT: However, an overall scene of “rolling up the sleeves and working hard”
and “racing against time” is being witnessed in China, after the country
withstood the strongest impact of the virus.

In contrast, the US was often associated with negative human characteristics, frequently criticized as “a person who attacks others” and “a war loser” before the policy shift. However, after the policy shift, it received minimal mention, with only three instances describing it as an “actor” or “spoiler”. Compared to studies of the newspaper’s 2020 editorials (Liu and Li 2022; Liu 2023), the present study finds that

while the newspaper’s positive stance towards China and negative stance towards the US remain unchanged, its focus has shifted over time. With changes in COVID-19 policies, the newspaper now emphasizes addressing domestic issues in China more than criticizing the US. Consequently, the audience may begin to focus on domestic economic recovery rather than China-US relations. This impact requires further research.

4.2 Metaphors across languages: translation practices in Chinese news media

This section addresses the second research question by comparing the metaphors used in GT’s Chinese editorials and their English translations. Figure 7 below plots the percentages of the six translation methods for the top 10 most frequently used metaphors describing COVID-19-related topics.

As can be seen, out of the 10 frequently used metaphors, three metaphors are mainly retained (M-M strategy): MOVEMENT (90 %), EXAM/TEST (83.33 %), and WEATHER (70 %). While MOVEMENT metaphors describe the progression of the pandemic as “sweeping” (席卷) and “rebounding” (反弹), EXAM/TEST and WEATHER metaphors primarily emphasize the desirable performance of the Chinese government in COVID-19 response and the mild pandemic situation in China, as shown in examples (1) and (4) above. The two target audiences received this information to a similar extent, as these metaphors were largely preserved in the translation process.

However, with 14.88 % of WAR metaphors paraphrased, 6.55 % omitted, and 2.38 % replaced, TT readers encountered fewer militaristic descriptions of the

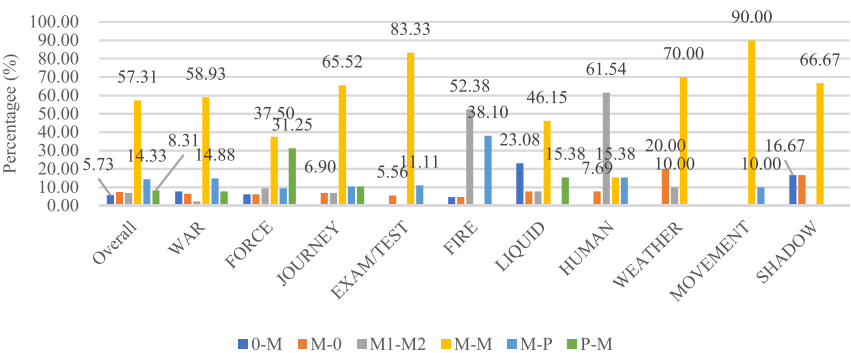


Figure 7: Frequency count of translation methods for COVID-19 metaphors.

pandemic than ST readers. This applies to both periods before and after the policy shift, as shown in example (7) and (8) below.

(7) COVID-19 IS WAR, M-P and M-0 (Article #34, May 13, 2022)

ST: 一个 全球 抗疫 的 差等生, 在
 yīgè quánqiú kàngyì de chàděngshēng zài
 one global pandemic fight PART low-achieving student PREP
 把 自己的 抗疫
 bǎ zìjǐ de kàngyì
 PREP self PART pandemic fight
 成绩 搞 上去 之前, 不可能
 chéngjì Gǎo shàngqù zhīqián bùkěnéng
 score make up before impossible
 有 什么 号召力。
 yǒu shénme hàozhàoli
 have any mobilizing power

TT: A lagging-behind student cannot be appealing until he improves his anti-epidemic results.

(8) COVID-19 IS WAR, M-0 (Article #69, December 29, 2022)

ST: 2022 年 是 大战 大考 的 一年,
 2022 nián shì dàzhàn dàkǎo de yīnián
 2022 year Be big battle big test PART one year
 它 让 中国 更加 坚强、 坚定。
 tā ràng zhōngguó gèngjiā jiānqiáng jiāndìng
 it make China more strong determined

TT: China has taken a big test in 2022, which made us stronger and more determined.

In May 2022, when China practised the “dynamic clearing” policy, GT either paraphrased or omitted the WAR metaphor (cf. “抗疫”). In December 2022, when China eased its Covid restrictions, GT continued to use the “war” frame in its Chinese editorials (cf. “大战”) but omitted it in the English version. This observation aligns with the findings of our earlier studies (Liu 2023; Liu and Li 2022). Regardless of the stages of COVID-19 policies, ST readers were exposed to more WAR metaphors than TT readers. However, the impact of these WAR metaphors – whether they foster obedience (Benzi and Novarese 2022) or undermine public trust in government communication and potentially fuel conspiracy theories (Musolff 2022) – requires further investigation through reception-oriented studies.

The translation of FIRE metaphors was handled differently before and after the COVID policy shift. As shown in Figures 2 and 3 in Section 4.1, FIRE metaphors were not used after July 2022 in the English news, but it continued to be used in the Chinese news. Before July 2022, FIRE metaphors in the TTs (cf. “raging”) were primarily used to replace HUMAN metaphors in the STs (cf. “肆虐”), as shown in example (9).

- (9) COVID-19 IS A BRUTAL KILLER→COVID-19 IS A RAGING FIRE, M1-M2
(Article #28, April 15, 2022)

ST: 新冠	肺炎	疫情	持续	<u>肆虐</u>	叠加
xīnguān	fèiyán	yìqíng	chíxù	sinüè	diéjiā
corona	pneumonia	pandemic	continue	brutally kill	plus
俄乌	冲突	影响,	给		
éwū	chōngtū	yǐngxiǎng	gěi		
Russia-Ukraine	conflict	impact	give		
世界	经济	复苏	的	前景	增加
shìjiè	jīngjì	fùsū	de	qiánjǐng	zēngjiā
world	economy	recovery	PART	prospect	add
了	更多	不确定性。			
le	gèngduō	bùquèdìngxìng			
PART	more	uncertainties			

TT: The raging COVID-19 pandemic and Russia-Ukraine conflict have added more uncertainties to the prospects of world economic recovery.

However, in December 2022 and January 2023, FIRE metaphors were exclusively used in the STs, which were paraphrased into non-metaphorical expressions in the TTs (see example 10). Consequently, while before the policy shift, both ST and TT readers were presented with the pandemic as either a “brutal killer” or a “raging fire”, after the policy shift, such negative narratives were maintained more consistently in the Chinese news than in the English news.

- (10) COVID-19 IS FIRE, M-P (Article #66, December 7, 2022)

ST: 由于	有效	控制	住	了	疫情	的	<u>蔓延</u> ,	中国
yóuyóu	yǒuxiào	kòngzhì	zhù	le	yìqíng	de	mànyán	zhōngguó
because	effectively	control	stop	PART	pandemic	PART	rage	China
制造业		整体	上	没有	受到	大	的	
zhìzàoyè		zhěngtǐ	shàng	méiyǒu	shòudào	dà	de	
manufacturing industry	overall	PREP	no	suffer	big	PART		
影响。								
yǐngxiǎng								
impact								

TT: As China has effectively controlled the spread of the epidemic, the country's manufacturing industry has not been greatly affected.

HUMAN metaphors describing China and the US were also processed differently, as shown in Figure 8 below.

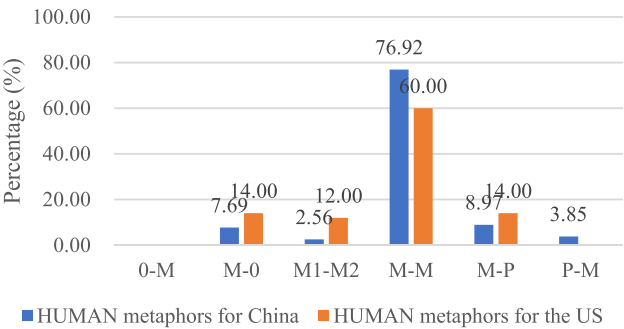


Figure 8: Frequency count of translation methods for HUMAN metaphors describing China and the US.

Overall, HUMAN metaphors describing China were more likely to be maintained than those describing the US: 76.92 % versus 60 %. Conversely, HUMAN metaphors for the US are more prone to omission (14 %), replacement (12 %), or paraphrasing (14 %), indicating a tendency 2–5 times higher than that observed for China. Given that HUMAN metaphors for the US predominantly convey negative meanings (as summarized in Section 4.1), the reduced use of HUMAN metaphors for the US in the translated texts could result in GT’s TT readers encountering fewer negative descriptions of the US.

As shown in example (11), the ST metaphor THE US IS A PERSON WHO MAKES ANOTHER PERSON A SCAPEGOAT in the phrase “甩锅” (literally, throw pot) was paraphrased as a non-metaphorical expression “pass the buck”; and the original metaphor THE US IS AN ACTOR in the phrase “上演大戏” (literally, to perform a drama) was omitted in the TT.

- (11) THE US IS A PERSON WHO MAKES ANOTHER PERSON A SCAPEGOAT, M-P;
THE US IS AN ACTOR, M-0 (Article #33, May 11, 2022)
- ST: 在 自己 国家 付出 沉重 的 生命 代价
zài zìjǐ guójiā fùchū chénzhòng De shēngmìng dàijià
PREP own country pay heavy PART life cost
之后, 又 不停 地 上演 “甩锅” 大戏。
zhīhòu yòu bùtíng de shàngyǎn shuǎiguō dàxì
afterwards then constantly PART perform throw pot drama
TT: After their own countries experienced a heavy human cost, they
repeatedly passed the buck.

HUMAN metaphors describing China were also slightly reduced in the TTs, with 7.69 % of them omitted and 8.97 % paraphrased. One oft-omitted metaphor is “Scapegoat”. Whether this omission was intentional or inadvertent, it could potentially lead ST readers to place greater emphasis on China-US relations and bolster their support for the previously implemented strict COVID-19 policies. However, the actual framing effects require further empirical investigation. In summary, while this study aligns with earlier research (Liu 2023; Liu and Li 2022) by demonstrating that ST readers encounter more negative descriptions of the US than TT readers, it diverges by highlighting a reduction in the use of metaphors framing the US. This change has resulted in a greater emphasis on metaphorically framing China rather than the US, especially following the policy shift in December 2022.

5 Discussion and concluding remarks

The present study has examined the metaphors used in the Chinese and English COVID-19-related editorials of the state-backed newspaper *Global Times*, both before and after China’s COVID policy shift in December 2022. It has extended our previous research on the newspaper’s 2020 COVID-19 editorials by revealing the fluidity of metaphors used by the same text producer during a period of significant transition. First, the changing COVID-19 policies in China have not impacted the newspaper’s frequent use of WAR metaphors to frame COVID-19-related topics. Additionally, the newspaper has maintained a primary focus on depicting China and the US as two significant players in the COVID-19 pandemic and COVID-19 response. These findings align with those from our earlier studies (Liu 2023; Liu and Li 2022).

Nevertheless, minor changes include a gradual decrease in the use of WAR metaphors and a corresponding increase in the use of JOURNEY metaphors. This shift may lead the audience to increasingly perceive the COVID-19 pandemic and the response as a gradual process, where the “journey” has reached a smoother phase. This alternation between JOURNEY and WAR metaphors aligns with Hanne’s (2022) finding that, as collective experience with the pandemic accumulates over time, JOURNEY metaphors are likely to be used more frequently.

This study also found that even when using the same metaphors, the framing can vary. For example, in GT’s 2020 editorials (Liu 2023; Liu and Li 2022), the metaphors of EXAM/TEST and WEATHER were employed to emphasize the “difficulty” of the “exam/test” and the “stormy weather” that China faced. However, in 2022 and early 2023, these metaphors were repurposed to portray the Chinese government as a competent “exam-taker” in its handling of COVID-19 or to highlight the “clear skies” of the improved COVID-19 situation. In summary, our study corroborates previous studies (e.g., Charteris-Black 2021; Littlemore et al. 2024; Semino et al. 2018) by

affirming the importance of contextualizing metaphors. Meanwhile, it specifically illustrates how the same metaphors can be used differently at various policy stages.

Moreover, unlike Hobbs (2008), who found that metaphors could be used by politicians and government outlets to foreshadow a policy change, we did not observe any use of metaphors to “foreshadow” China’s COVID policy shift in the editorials. There were no metaphors describing the pandemic in October and November 2022, immediately before China’s COVID policy shift, despite the publication of six COVID editorials during that period. Instead, the identified metaphors were used prominently only after the new COVID policy was announced. We hypothesize that, as a governmental outlet, GT may prioritize supporting rather than foreshadowing government policies to its audiences. It is plausible that the newspaper was not aware of the impending policy shift in advance. This, however, warrants future research.

This study has also examined the metaphors framing China/US-related topics, following the approach of our earlier research (Liu 2023; Liu and Li 2022). The findings show that while the newspaper consistently maintained pro-China and anti-US attitudes regardless of changes in COVID policy, it gradually reduced its focus on the US. China was often described as “a person who does not lie flat” before the policy shift but as “a person who rolls up sleeves and works hard” after the policy shift. This shift in characterization may have redirected the audience’s focus from COVID-19 response to economic recovery.

It should be observed that translation practices further influence how metaphors are perceived by readers of Chinese editorials compared to those of English editorials. The former were exposed to more negative depictions of the pandemic (e.g., more WAR/FIRE metaphors in the STs), and the US (e.g., more negatively-connotated HUMAN metaphors in the STs). However, whether the higher frequency of negatively connoted metaphors leads ST readers to believe in conspiracy theories requires further reception-based studies, even though previous research has shown that WAR metaphors can fuel conspiracy theories (Musolff 2022).

Our study did not gather information about the news editors and translators. Follow-up interviews with these key actors could provide deeper insights into GT’s editorial practices. Additionally, as already indicated, this study does not assess the impact of these metaphors on the audience. Future research might employ response-elicitation approaches, such as experiments and interviews with the audience, to determine whether these changes influence their opinions regarding the pandemic, the governments, and policies.

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