

Multimodal Construction of China's Image in The Economist's Political Cartoons: A Combined Analysis Based on Visual Grammar and Critical Metaphor Analysis

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Abstract: Political cartoons, as a unique genre that combines images, text, and symbolic elements, have become a crucial medium for shaping public perception. To deeply deconstruct their mechanisms of meaning construction, this study employs a multimodal critical discourse analysis approach to examine how political cartoons in *The Economist* construct the image of China. By integrating Visual Grammar and Critical Metaphor Analysis, a systematic investigation of 50 cartoons was conducted. The analysis reveals that, through formulaic visual strategies and conceptual metaphors, the cartoons frame China within narratives like “strategic competitor” and “rule challenger.” Methodologically, the study offers an integrated pathway for visual discourse analysis; practically, it provides a critical perspective for understanding and responding to Western narratives concerning China.

Keywords: political cartoons; image of China; multimodal discourse analysis; Visual Grammar; *The Economist*

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1 Introduction

In the contemporary era, political cartoons, through the synergistic interaction of various semiotic resources such as images, text, composition, and color, they construct and communicate complex narratives about nations, events, and ideologies in a condensed, exaggerated, and emotionally impactful manner (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). For international audiences, this visual discourse often serves as a crucial channel for forming perceptions of an international recognition and the national images it shapes profoundly influence international public opinion and sentiment. *The Economist*, a British newsweekly with a global reputation, is noted for its political cartoons distinguished by their distinct stance, incisive style, and rich symbolic meaning. The magazine's sustained and intensive coverage and commentary on China make it a key specimen for examining how mainstream Western media represents China. As a visual condensation of the magazine's editorial stance, political cartoons provide a microcosmic yet powerful entry point for discerning the deep-seated mechanisms of this representation.

Traditional critical discourse analysis has primarily focused on linguistic text, paying insufficient attention to other semiotic resources like images and layout, which equally carry ideology (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). Consequently, this study argues for the necessity of adopting an integrated analytical framework capable of simultaneously addressing image and text, form and meaning, and signifier and ideology. In response to these limitations, this research aims to construct a multimodal critical analytical model by integrating Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) Visual Grammar with Forceville's (2009) Multimodal Metaphor Analysis. This model will be employed to systematically reveal and critically examine the multimodal construction of China's image in China-related political cartoons published in the mainstream Western periodical *The Economist*.

This study aspires to deepen the understanding of the complexity of China's image in mainstream Western media, it is expected to aid in decoding the visualization of China within Western visual discourse, comprehending its construction logic and potential impact, thereby providing valuable reflections and insights for cross-cultural communication and the construction of national image.

2 Literature Review

This study focuses on how political cartoons, as a specific type of multimodal discourse, construct national image. Its theoretical foundation and methodological resources are drawn primarily from Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), and Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA).

2.1 Studies on the national image

Early research in national image often employed content analysis, quantifying media frames, tones, and themes to reveal the media image constructed by the press and the factors influencing it (e.g., Zhang & Cameron, 2003). As research deepened, scholars recognized that national image is not singular or fixed but is a representation constantly constructed and contested through discourse (Boulding, 1959). This epistemological discourse turn and constructivist turn shifted the analytical focus from “what is reflected” to “how it is constructed,” paving the way for the introduction of discourse analysis tools. However, a long-standing “textual-centrism” is evident in this research, with insufficient attention paid to the visual construction of national image (Berger, 2012). Visual images, due to their immediacy, emotional impact, and polysemy, possess unique and potent efficacy in shaping public perceptions of foreign countries. In recent years, this “visual turn” has gradually gained recognition (Mitchell, 1994). Although attention has begun to focus on national image in political cartoons, there remains insufficient systematic interpretation of the visual design systems behind their metaphorical scenarios.

2.2 Multimodal discourse analysis approaches to political cartoon analysis

Early analyses often stemmed from semiotic and content paths, focusing on interpreting the symbolic meaning of individual signs within cartoons (e.g., the eagle representing the USA, the bear representing Russia, the dragon representing China) and the “anchorage” relationship between image and text. Running parallel was quantitative content analysis, which involves coding and statistically analyzing cartoon elements (themes, characters, emotional valence) based on predefined categories to objectively describe macro-level trends (Boucher, 1999).

The strength of such research methods lies in their operational feasibility and ability to reveal generalizable patterns across large samples, potentially covering the universal for political cartoons related to large-scale nations. However, their limitations have been widely critiqued. They often isolate signs from their overall composition and context, neglecting the meaning-integration mechanism of the cartoon as a narrative whole (El Refaie, 2009). Further, they tend to describe “what is” but struggle to explain “why” and “how meaning is produced,” often lacking sufficient critical force regarding ideology.

To overcome the above limitations, scholars led by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996/2006), drawing on Halliday’s (1994) Systemic Functional Linguistics, developed the Visual Grammar theory. This theory provides a systematic and detailed descriptive toolkit for analyzing images, positing that images similarly realize three metafunctions: Representational, Interactive, and Compositional meaning.

Currently, Visual Grammar has been widely applied to political cartoon analysis. For instance, some researchers have used this framework to analyze action processes and perspectives in cartoons about the Sino-US trade war, revealing representations of power dynamics. Its core strengths are its systematicity and explanatory power. It transforms seemingly subjective image interpretation into describable, verifiable grammatical analysis, profoundly revealing the ideological choices behind visual design (e.g., diminishing a participant through a high-angle shot).

However, the method also faces criticism. It can sometimes be overly focused on formal description and insufficient in deeply integrating formal analysis with broader socio-political critique (Machin, 2007). Further, it lacks specialized analytical tools for the pervasive metaphorical phenomena in images, relying primarily on analysts’ indirect inference from representational meaning. This may lead to a less direct and in-depth grasp of the core mechanisms of cognitive persuasion in cartoons.

2.3 Critical metaphor analysis and its multimodal extension

Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory posits that metaphor is fundamentally cognitive, it is a basic mode of thinking through which we understand and construct an abstract domain (the target domain) via a more concrete domain of experience (the source domain). This theory has had a revolutionary impact on discourse analysis. Building upon this, Charteris-Black (2004) proposed Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA), which combines three steps, including metaphor identification, metaphor interpretation, and metaphor explanation (analysis of ideology and power relations), aiming to reveal how language shapes beliefs and actions through metaphor.

Political discourse, including political cartoons, is replete with metaphors. Conceptual metaphors such as “THE NATION IS A PERSON,” “POLITICS IS A JOURNEY,” or “INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IS A WAR” provide concise and powerful cognitive frameworks for complex, abstract political realities. The strength of the CMA approach lies in its profound cognitive insight and critical orientation, enabling it to penetrate surface signs and reach the underlying thought patterns and ideological motivations.

With the development of multimodal studies, scholars began exploring how metaphor is realized in images, i.e., multimodal metaphor (Forceville, 2009). In political cartoons, metaphors are constructed not only through language but directly through visual form (e.g., depicting a national leader as a boxer, a chess player, or a parent). El Refaie (2003, 2009) is a pioneer in this field, extensively exploring how political cartoons evoke emotion, simplify complex issues, and guide specific interpretations through visual metaphors.

As reviewed above, this study proposes an integrated analytical framework. It adopts qualitative analysis as the dominant method, with its core being the in-depth interpretation of the meaning-construction process within the cartoon samples. This is supplemented by quantitative techniques to enhance systematicity and provide supportive evidence. Specifically, this study integrates Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) Visual Grammar analytical framework with Forceville’s (2009) Multimodal Metaphor Analysis to systematically deconstruct the visual design in *The Economist* cartoons and deeply interpret the underlying conceptual metaphors and power discourse.

To address this gap, the study focuses on the question: “What kinds of China’s image are constructed through which multimodal resources in *The Economist*’s political cartoons? Specifically, it examines what dominant conceptual metaphors underlie these images and what ideological stances and power discourse are reflected in these metaphorical constructions.

3 Research Methodology

This chapter will detail the protocols for data collection, the specific steps involved in the two analytical steps, the tools employed for analysis and their integration, and will particularly emphasize the measures implemented to ensure research reliability and validity to guarantee the transparency, rigor, and replicability of the entire research process.

3.1 Data collection and description of research materials

To ensure the reliability and validity of the study, the study systematically designed the data acquisition channels and composition of research materials. Specifically, the original sources of the data and their screening methods constitute the cornerstone of the analytical framework of this research. The following section will elaborate in detail on the sources and selection of research materials of this study.

All analytical materials in this study are sourced from official distribution channels of *The Economist* Group, including its website’s online archives, digital compilations of the print magazine, and original content published on its official social media accounts. The selection of official channels ensures the authority, authenticity, and completeness of the published materials. The sampling timeframe for this study is set from January 1, 2016, to December 31, 2025. This ten-year period represents a critical phase of profound adjustments in globalization and

accelerated evolution of the international order, providing highly representative and rich corpora for analyzing the multimodal construction of China's image in a mainstream Western media outlet.

To obtain research materials with high information density and significant analytical value, this study consists initial retrieval and refined selection criteria. Utilizing the advanced search function on The Economist website, with "China," "Chinese," and "Beijing" as core search terms, combined with specific thematic keywords (e.g., "trade war," "technology," "COVID-19," "climate"), within the timeframe of 2016–2025. Establish explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria for manual screening of initially aggregated entries.

Inclusion Criteria: The core of the cartoon's visual narrative must explicitly focus on the entity "China." Specifically, anthropomorphized representation of China serving as the primary actor; a current or iconic historical Chinese leader as the visual focal point; featuring a widely recognized cultural or political symbol with strong national referentiality, such as the dragon, panda, Five-Starred Red Flag, The Great Wall, or high-speed rail, as the compositional focal point, supplemented by accompanying text that anchors its national identity.

Exclusion criteria: Chinese elements appear only as background scenery or as undifferentiated components within a collective image; non-satirical, purely informational graphic illustrations; thematically unrelated content (e.g., purely entertainment or general cultural and artistic subjects).

3.2 Data analysis procedures and analytical tools

The analysis proceeds through three logically contiguous and mutually reinforcing phases, managed end-to-end with NVivo 12 Plus to ensure systematic coding, retrieval, and visualization. Stage one is contextual pre-processing and macro-theme indexing. This stage establishes the macro-contextual frame for subsequent micro-analysis and completes initial data grooming. Including data ingestion and holistic immersion and explicit thematic coding. Stage two is systematic formal description and operation of Visual Grammar. This stage delivers an "anatomical" dissection of every multimodal text and constitutes the analysis backbone of the study. Kress & van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar is converted into a step-by-step coding manual; each cartoon is interrogated along three intersecting dimensions, namely, representational meaning, interactional meaning and compositional meaning. Stage 3 is deep interpretation and critique: identification of multimodal metaphors and deconstruction of ideology. This stage penetrates the formal surface to expose the cognitive mechanisms and social functions of meaning-making, it is tightly tethered to the coding outputs of Stage 2, including systematic identification and classification of multimodal metaphors, micro-interpretation of metaphorical mappings and ideological critique and discourse strategy explanation.

4 Results

Based on the aforementioned integrative analytical framework, as well as preliminary observations of The Economist's editorial stance and its historical cartoons, this study anticipates that the systematic analysis of relevant cartoons from 2016 to 2025 reveal patterned findings across the following dimensions.

4.1 Systematic representational patterns at the level of Visual Grammar

In terms of representational meaning, the image of China is expected to be primarily coded as a powerful, proactive "Actor." Specifically, "Actional processes" with China as the "Actor" are predicted to dominate. For instance, cartoons may frequently depict China in personified form or via its leaders engaged in acts such as "building" (infrastructure), "reaching for" (global resources and technology), "confronting" (the U.S., often represented by tariffs or regulations), or "surveilling" (through digital technology). This constructs an image of an active, potent, and often aggressive agent.

In terms of interactive meaning, the analysis expects to reveal a complex construction of power and affective relations: perspective: a level or slightly low-angle shot directed at the image of China is anticipated to be frequent, visually acknowledging its power and scale as a formidable participant. However, this may coexist with a high social distance (long shot) and a lack of eye contact (the image of China is often shown with its back or side to the viewer, engrossed in its own actions). This combination strategically fosters a perception of being "powerful yet distant, unapproachable, even enigmatic;" modality: while The Economist's cartoon style typically employs vivid colors but simplified lines, placing it in a medium-high modality (between realistic and cartoonish), cartoons concerning China might modulate a serious, cold, and slightly threatening visual modality. This could be achieved through the use of cool color tones (e.g., blue, grey), exaggerated size contrasts, or oppressive shadows, creating a tension with the humorous intent of verbal satire.

In terms of compositional meaning, the image of China is expected to be consistently endowed with significant "information value" and "salience": The image of China is likely to be positioned at the center or foreground of the frame, becoming the focal point of the composition, visually substantiating its "unignorable" central status. In left-right compositions, China may be placed on the right side (the position for new information, the unknown, or the problematic), suggesting its framing as a "new challenge" that demands a response.

4.2 Cognitive frameworks at the level of critical metaphor analysis

Building on the cues provided by the visual grammar analysis, the study anticipates identifying several interrelated and recurrent core conceptual metaphors. These metaphors constitute the fundamental cognitive frameworks through which The Economist's cartoons comprehend China:

The "CHINA IS A THREATENING BEHEMOTH" Metaphor: This is predicted to be the most prevalent metaphorical cluster. Its visual realizations include depicting China as a dragon, bear, giant, or gigantic robot whose physique overwhelms other nations. The mapping from the source domain (behemoth/machine) to the target domain (China) emphasizes the immense scale, uncontrollable nature, and inherent otherness of China's power. This metaphor often co-exists with a supporting metaphor such as "THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY IS

A FRAGILE SPACE/HOME,” aiming to evoke audience unease and fear. It is closely aligned with the narrative of the “China Threat Theory.” Quantitative analysis may show this metaphor has the highest frequency in cartoons concerning security and technological competition.

The “INTERNATIONAL POLITICS IS A CHESS GAME/GAME, AND CHINA IS A SHREWD/AGGRESSIVE PLAYER” Metaphor: This is iconographically instantiated through depictions of Chinese leaders holding chess pieces over a world map resembling a chessboard, or engaged in games like poker. This metaphor reduces complex geopolitics to strategic calculation, rule exploitation, and zero-sum competition. The image of China it constructs is that of a calm, shrewd, strategic, and ruthless competitor. This metaphor serves to interpret China’s actions as purely strategic offensives, downplaying its internal developmental logic or diverse motivations, thereby placing it within the familiar Western cognitive framework of “power games” for judgment.

The “CHINA IS A CLOSED FORTRESS/ISLAND” Metaphor: This metaphor is expected to be prominent in cartoons related to pandemic and human rights issues. Visual representations include China being entirely enclosed by the Great Wall, high walls, masks, glass domes, or digital firewalls. The mapping of this metaphor emphasizes China’s closeness, exclusivity, and opacity, creating a binary opposition with the West’s self-representation as an “open society.” It implies China’s isolation from the global system both physically and ideologically, framing it as an image that needs to be “opened up” or remains perpetually enigmatic.

5 Conclusion

This study systematically examines the image of China in The Economist’s political cartoons from 2016 to 2025 by integrating Visual Grammar and Critical Metaphor Analysis. If the anticipated research findings are validated, they will support the following main conclusions. In terms of representational form, The Economist’s cartoons, through the deliberate deployment of visual grammar, construct a visual image of China that is powerful, proactive, and often objectified. At the cognitive and ideological level, Critical Metaphor Analysis reveals the underlying cognitive frameworks driving these visual forms, this metaphorical network profoundly reflects the deep-seated contradictions and anxieties in Western discourse regarding perceptions of China.

This study confirms the effectiveness of the integrated framework of Visual Grammar and Critical Metaphor Analysis. Visual Grammar provides an indispensable systematic tool for precisely describing the “multimodal rhetoric” of cartoons while Critical Metaphor Analysis penetrates the formal surface to reach the cognitive structures and ideological core behind the discourse. Their combination successfully achieves a layered deepening from “how it is constructed” to “with what thinking it is constructed” and further to “why it is constructed this way”, offering a more explanatory path for the critical study of political cartoons and multimodal discourse.

The findings of this study have clear practical significance. They indicate that when visually representing China, Western elite media, represented by The Economist, do not deviate from their long-held ideological base and cognitive frameworks. The image of China in the cartoons is a composite of power representation and ideological critique. This study also has limitations. It focuses on a single media outlet, The Economist, and the generalizability of its conclusions needs to be tested through comparative studies of a more diverse range of Western media.

In summary, through the analysis of multimodal discourse, this study dissects the image of China in The Economist’s political cartoons, revealing the systematic representational strategies and deep-rooted cognitive-ideological frameworks behind them. This not only deepens the understanding of the complexity of Western media’s discourse construction of China but also demonstrates the powerful potential of multimodal critical discourse analysis in decoding contemporary international political communication.

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