

# Representation of China's National Image from the Perspective of Conceptual Metaphor: A Case Study of the American Documentary China: Time of Xi

Yuewen Qu\*

School of Foreign Languages and Literature, Beijing Normal University, No.19, Xijiekou Wai Street, Beitaipingzhuang Street, Haidian District, Beijing, China

\* E-mail of the corresponding author: 202111100075@mail.bnu.cn

## Abstract

With China's increasing global influence on the world stage, the portrayal and representation of China's national image have emerged as salient and widely discussed topics. How China is depicted and framed by foreign media outlets holds significant implications for shaping global perceptions and narratives surrounding the country. This paper adopts the lens of Conceptual Metaphor theory to critically examine and scrutinize the ways in which mainstream foreign media construct and frame China's national image. Specifically, this study takes the American documentary China: Time of Xi as the corpus. By employing a rigorous analytical framework grounded in Conceptual Metaphor theory, this research aims to uncover the underlying metaphorical structures and conceptualizations employed in the documentary's depiction of China. The findings reveal that the documentary extensively utilizes a diverse array of structural metaphors and ontological metaphors to intricately construct and shape China's national image across various domains and aspects. These metaphorical constructions permeate the documentary's representation of China's efforts in areas such as improving people's livelihoods, fostering scientific and technological innovation, promoting environmental protection, elucidating the country's political system, and navigating diplomatic cooperation and international relations. Through the strategic deployment of these metaphors, the documentary crafts intricate and multifaceted narratives that shape the viewer's understanding and perception of China's national image. By unveiling the pervasive use of conceptual metaphors in this influential media text, this study sheds light on the powerful role that metaphorical framing plays in mediating and constructing representations of nations and their images on the global stage. The findings underscore the importance of critically examining the metaphorical underpinnings of media narratives, as these can profoundly influence how nations are perceived and understood by international audiences.

**Keywords:** Cognitive Linguistics, Conceptual Metaphor, National Image, Other Modelling

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## 1. Introduction

Since its inception, the CPC has consistently embraced the pursuit of seeking happiness for the Chinese people and rejuvenation of the Chinese nation as its fundamental mission, rallying and guiding China through the momentous journey from standing up, to becoming prosperous, to attaining strength ("People's Daily," 2021). In the new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics, the adaptation of Marxism to Chinese conditions has marked a significant advancement. The historical strides in China's development have brought about tangible benefits to the Chinese people, and also garnered global attention towards theoretical milestones like "a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind" and "Targeted Poverty Alleviation". The documentary China: Time of Xi, produced by Discovery Channel and Meridian Productions, invites three distinguished professionals, American TV producer and designer Danny Foster, Australian biomedical engineer Dr. Jordan Nguyen, and British anthropologist Mary Ann Ochoa, to explore China's achievements in areas such as people's livelihoods, science and technology innovation, and economic progress, from the perspectives of their respective fields (Moulson, 2017). The three prominent Western scholars, in cooperation with official authoritative channels, jointly present China's image shaped by Western countries, notably the United Kingdom and the United States. This study aims to delved into China's national images internally represented by mainstream Western media by analyzing and scrutinizing the metaphors embedded in the documentary subtitles in the three episodes of China: Time of Xi, namely, "People's Sentiments," "Great Power Governance" and "Win-Win Cooperation" from the perspective of conceptual metaphor.

## 2. Literature review

National image is a composite representation comprising both its self-perception and the external perceptions of other countries, serving as an embodiment of its soft power. China's national image emerges through the interactive dynamics "self-modelling" and "other-modelling," undergoing a continuous evolution in the global interplay between China and other countries ("People's Forum," 2023). Previous studies on China's national image started from the perspectives of journalism and art communication, such as multimodality (Hu Zhengrong et al., 2023; Wu Jianguo et al., 2021), cross-cultural communication (Hu Bing et al., 2023; Yin Yating et al., 2023), rhetorics (Han Fei et al., 2021). These studies drew upon sources including newsreels, reports from Chinese and foreign mainstream media, and film and television works to elucidate the "image" across various domains such as China's politics, economy, society, culture and so on. However, there is still a scarcity of investigations that integrate perspectives on China's political, economic, social, cultural facets in the context of "other-modelling" and "self-modelling," and the discourse analysis from the perspective of linguistics.

The concept of conceptual metaphor was initially proposed by Cognitive linguists Lakoff and Johnson in their seminal work *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), positing that metaphor serves as a fundamental cognitive mechanism universal in the process of human communication. Consequently, conceptual metaphor has garnered attention within cognitive science research. In addition to the theoretical underpinnings explored through discourse analysis (Zhang Delu, Guo Enhua 2013), cognitive scientists have delved into mechanisms of cognitive recognition (Chen Lang, 2022) and conducted experimental research (Sun Yi, Chen Lang, Duan Cui'e 2019), while also extending its application to the analysis of literary works (Feng Zhengbin et al., 2023). Given the explanatory power of conceptual metaphor in the realm of ideology construction and interpretation, it has also been widely applied to diverse domains such as politics, diplomacy, media and other fields in recent years, emerging as a valuable avenue for research related to national image construction (Tan Wenhui et al. 2021). Jingru Liang et al. analysed The Economist's report on the social and legal system in 2016 through the perspective of conceptual metaphor, revealing prevalent negative evaluations and narratives by foreign media on various Chinese issues, which could potentially impede the cultivation of a positive international image for China (2020). Similarly, Chen Hui et al. analysed the coverage of "China-US trade" by American mainstream media and Chinese English media during 2018-2019 from the perspective of conceptual metaphors, highlighting the tendency of American media to employ war-related metaphors that portray China-US trade relations antagonistically. This contrasts with the positive image of China's pursuit of win-win and peaceful development that is depicted by Chinese media through the metaphor of competition, thereby hindering the construction of a favorable international image for China (2020). As China's international status continues to ascend, there is a scarcity of research on the "othering" of China's image in the new era. To address the aforementioned gaps, this study embarks on a cognitive metaphorical exploration to analyse documentaries produced by Western mainstream media to explore China's international image constructed by others in the new global landscape.

## 3. Research design

### 3.1 Corpus Data

The study encompassed all three episodes of *China: Time of Xi* available on the official website of China Central Television (CCTV), totaling 127 minutes and 42 seconds. The selection process considered the following criteria: (1) the documentary's comprehensive coverage of various aspects such as politics, economy, science and technology, and culture of China, enabling a multifaceted portrayal of China's image; (2) originating from Western mainstream media and hosted by several authoritative experts in the field, providing a reflection of China's international image from a Western perspective.

In terms of corpus transcription, three AI software tools for Chinese and English phonetic, Xunfei Hear, Wangyi Jianwai, and Dingding Shanji, were used to transcribe and cross-validate the documentary's lines. Subsequently, a manual second proofreading process was carried out to meticulously correct and enhance the transcription results, ensuring the accuracy and reliability of the corpus.

### 3.2 Conceptual Metaphor Recognition

To ensure a uniform standard for conceptual metaphor identification and to avoid subjectivity-induced analysis bias, this study adopts the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) proposed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007). The steps of the MIP procedure are as follows: (Pragglejaz Group 2007:3)

- (1) Reading through the text of a single sentence to grasp the overall meaning.
- (2) Identifying Lexical Units in the text.

(3) Analysing vocabulary units:

- A. Determining the contextual meaning of each vocabulary unit;
- B. Assessing whether the vocabulary unit has a broader basic meaning in other contexts;
- C. Evaluating the coherence between the contextual meaning of the vocabulary unit and its fundamental meanings, and examining their comprehensibility in comparison.

(4) Recognizing a lexical unit as metaphorical if the criteria in step (3) C are met.

Take the words “especially to those traditional industries that once powered China’s economic miracle” from the second episode of Great Power Governance as an example:

- Contextual meaning: Here, “power” refers to the traditional industry’s role in driving and facilitating the functioning of China’s economy.

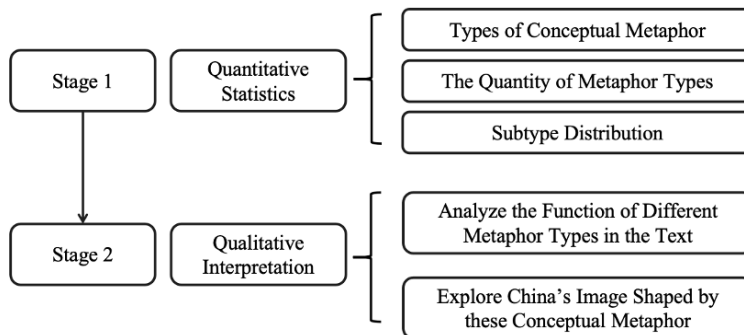
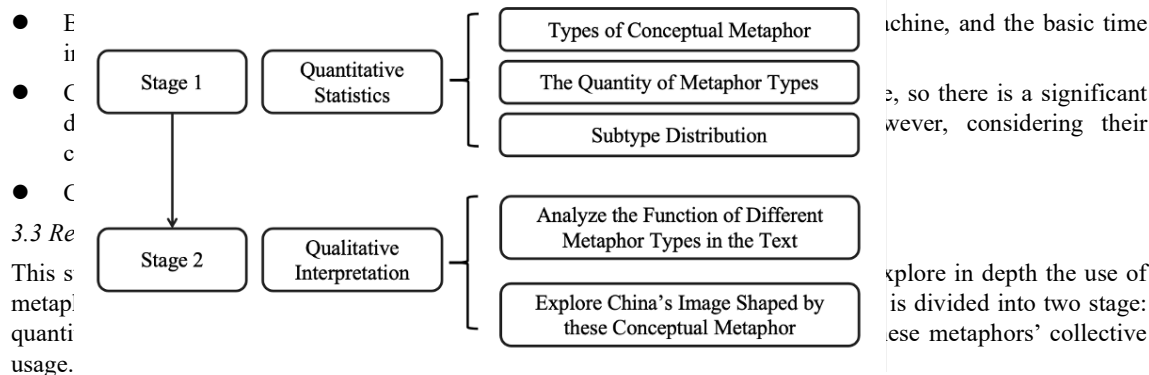


Figure 1. Research Procedures

In the first stage, a quantitative analysis of a substantial corpus was conducted to explore various metaphor types, including the types and number of metaphor types, as well as the distribution of their sub-types. By organizing and summarising this data, it was possible to gain insight into the actual use of metaphor types in the text, laying the foundation for the subsequent qualitative analysis.

In the second stage, this study synthesised the data of each metaphor type and carried out qualitative interpretations. This phase consisted of two main aspects: first, analysing the roles of different metaphor types in the text, and second, exploring the image of China projected by these metaphors. For instance, employing the engineering metaphor, the documentary portrays China setting “development goals,” specifying “development processes,” projecting China’s development into engineering construction, highlighting China’s creativity and vitality in science and technology, and further emphasising China’s comprehensive strength. This further emphasised China’s comprehensive strength. Additionally, specific images of China portrayed through these metaphors were comprehensively discussed and interpreted in depth.

**4. Theoretical foundation**

Conceptual metaphors are modes of thinking in which the way we understand and express abstract concepts is by mapping them onto concrete domains of experience. The study refers to Leckoff and Johnson’s categorisation of conceptual metaphors into three main types: structural, ontological and orientation metaphors (1980:11-13).

#### 4.1 Structural Metaphor

Structural metaphor involves mapping the structure of an abstract concept onto the structure of another more concrete or familiar concept. The use of such metaphors enables the use of the perception of concrete things to sort out and elaborate abstract concepts. For example, the documentary combines the process of China’s fight against poverty with more familiar concepts such as “journey” and “war,” so that viewers can have a more comprehensive understanding of China’s determination to win the fight against poverty and its spirit of working together despite difficulties. The use of structural metaphors helps the audience to understand the concepts more accurately and deeply.

#### 4.2 Ontological Metaphor

Ontological metaphors concretise abstract concepts, usually by treating them as people, containers or entities. For example, in the documentary film, China is given life, and through the human body metaphor, China is given human emotions and characters, which helps the audience more deeply appreciate China’s motherly tenderness to its people and its warmth and friendliness to other countries.

#### 4.3 Orientation Metaphor

Oriental metaphors subtly draw on spatial relationships (e.g., above and below, inside and outside, before and after, etc.) to understand and express abstract concepts. This kind of metaphor is closely related to physical experience and the surrounding environment, enabling the audience to understand and describe abstract concepts through intuitive and familiar spatial relationships. Orientation metaphors play an important role in China’s development process and help to shape our positive international image.

### 5. Results and Findings

#### 5.1 Types of Conceptual Metaphors in China: Time of Xi

Based on the identification of the metaphor types, it is found that all three metaphor types are widely used in documentaries. Orientational metaphors, when combined with other lexemes to introduce new concepts that have been generally accepted, exhibit meanings distinct from their original orientations, making it difficult for them to have an impact on the construction of the country’s image (Tan Wenhui et al., 2021). Therefore, documentaries have shaped China’s national image mainly through two categories: structural metaphors and ontological metaphors. The results of analysing the types of conceptual metaphors in documentaries are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Statistical Results of Conceptual Metaphor Types

Type	Subtype	Quantity	Percentage	Total
Structural Metaphor	The JOURNAL metaphor	85	16.47%	247 (47.87%)
	The PROJECT metaphor	78	15.12%	
	The SPORT metaphor	25	4.84%	
	The SCHOOL metaphor	18	3.49%	
	The DRAMA metaphor	15	2.91%	
	The RELATIONSHIP metaphor	14	2.71%	
	The FINANCE metaphor	12	2.33%	
Ontological Metaphor	The ENTITY metaphor	108	20.93%	269 (52.13%)
	The BODY metaphor	101	19.57%	
	The CONTAINER metaphor	46	8.91%	
	The NATURE metaphor	14	2.71%	
Sum	516			

As delineated in Table 1, based on theme extraction, identification and generalisation, structural metaphors were classified into seven subtypes in the study, namely “the JOURNAL metaphor,” “the PROJECT metaphor,” “the SPORT metaphor,” “the SCHOOL metaphor,” “the DRAMA metaphor,” “the RELATIONSHIP metaphor,” “the

FINANCE metaphor”; ontological metaphors were classified into four subtypes: “the ENTITY metaphor,” “the BODY metaphor,” “the CONTAINER metaphor,” and “the NATURE metaphor.”

Overall, ontological metaphors (52.13%) and structural metaphors (47.87%) were employed with comparable frequencies, each playing an equivalent role in the construction of the country’s image. The degree of involvement varied across subtypes. Among them, the ENTITY metaphors (20.93%) were the most frequently used, followed by the BODY metaphors (19.57%) and the JOURNAL metaphors (16.47%). Subsequently, the PROJECT metaphors (15.12%), the CONTAINER metaphors (8.91%), the SPORT metaphors (4.84%), the SCHOOL metaphors (3.49%), the DRAMA metaphors (2.91%), the NATURE metaphors (2.71%), the RELATIONSHIP metaphors (2.71%), and financial metaphors (2.33%) followed suit.

Consequently, the documentary effectively leverages both structural and ontological metaphors, and disseminates a Western perspective of China’s national image through the means of BODY metaphors, ENTITY metaphors and JOURNEY metaphors.

### *5.2 China’s National Image and Its Effect as Shaped by Different Conceptual Metaphors*

The study demonstrates that the documentary, by employing various types of conceptual metaphors, has crafted a multi-dimensional international image of China, particularly in areas concerning people’s livelihoods, scientific and technological innovation, environmental protection, political system, and diplomatic cooperation.

Regarding the political system, the documentary presents a comprehensive portrayal of China’s people-centred politics, characterized by unwavering commitment in the face of challenges. Within the framework of the SPORT metaphor, the CPC formulates a scientific development “strategy,” leading cadres to “the front line” of poverty eradication, and resolutely “eliminating” poverty as a formidable enemy in “the tough battle against poverty,” defending the people’s life. In the “war against poverty,” the CPC has resolutely “eliminated” poverty as a strong enemy, and defended the quality of life and the space for development of the people. China’s core development strategy is not based on GDP, but on people’s livelihood. In the BODY metaphor, the Chinese government “stands from” the needs of the people, “focus on” reality, and “solving” their immediate difficulties. In the SCHOOL metaphor, the Chinese government constantly “learns” and synthesizes its historical experience, deeply contemplates the direction of scientific development, faces the developmental problems of the new era, and endeavours to hand over a satisfactory “answer sheet” to the people. The use of various metaphors vividly demonstrates the high sense of responsibility of the Chinese Party and Government, their courage in facing difficulties and their scientific leadership, and China’s positive political image as a nation that prioritizes the well-being of its people.

In terms of people’s livelihood, it vividly demonstrates the spirit of the Chinese people under the leadership of the CPC, their unity and synergy, as well as the remarkable achievements they have made. The use of the CONTAINER metaphor emphasizes a “people-centered” approach and the objective to “bring people out of poverty”. “Poverty” is described as the container in which the people are confined, vividly illustrating the longstanding issue of poverty among the Chinese populace, how the CPC has guided them of China to “poverty” and its remarkable achievements. Therefore, the CPC’s determination to lead the Chinese people out of poverty is vividly portrayed. The use of the RELATIONSHIP metaphors projects the CPC as the people’s helper, emphasising that “the Party and the government will help them.” It also positions the CPC as the people’s guide, stressing the Party’s role in “teaching people to fish” by aiding them in realizing their aspirations and helping them become self-reliant, providing people with learning skills and work opportunities, and guiding them to improve their lives through labour, thus enhancing their sense of well-being, satisfaction and acquisition. Structural metaphors such as the JOURNAL metaphor show China’s relentless march towards development, ensuring that “everyone participates,” “one by one” and “no one gets left behind.”

In the realm of scientific and technological innovation, it vividly demonstrates China’s innovative vigour and outstanding achievements in fields such as aerospace, artificial intelligence and mechanical engineering. The use of the FINANCE metaphors projects “scientific and technological innovation” as an important “investment,” covering “a level of investment and long-term planning,” underscoring the state’s emphasis on the development of the science and technology industry. In terms of the PROJECT metaphor, the documentary projects China’s development as an engineering project, setting up “development goals,” clarifying “development processes,” and using the spirit of innovation as the “core driving force” to “optimize” the development process. More specifically, the documentary projects China’s development as engineering construction, sets “development goals,” specifies “development process,” and uses innovation as a “core driving force” to “optimize” the traditional industrial system, achieve “high-quality development” of China’s science and technology, and “build” an innovative scientific and technological powerhouse. By projecting the virtual online shopping platform as the

real entity of a “supermarket,” it fully demonstrates that science and technology have become an indispensable part of Chinese people’s daily lives; by “connecting people from the south and north of the world,” it depicts China’s “high-quality development of science and technology” and “building” the innovative science and technology power. By “connecting” people from the south to the north, it depicts the mature system of railway transport in China.

In terms of environmental protection, the documentary highlights China’s determination and achievements in building a beautiful China, resolutely tackling environmental pollution and effectively safeguarding ecological and environmental security. Through the CONTAINET metaphor, the documentary likens environmental protection to a “bottom line,” highlighting China’s commitment to this cause. The use of the FINANCE metaphor shapes “green development” as a process of “accumulating ecological wealth,” weighing “mountains of gold and silver” against “beautiful mountains and green rivers,” accentuating China’s resolute prioritization of and adherence to environmental preservation. The film demonstrates China’s determination to put environmental protection at the forefront of its development strategy. The documentary makes extensive use of the BODY metaphors, and through the use of cities as metaphors for human beings, it demonstrates the CPC’s deep understanding and determination to address “urban diseases” such as haze. In addition, the documentary employs the SPORT metaphors and PROJECT metaphors, such as “eliminating” and “establishing” to describe the treatment of soil erosion and the establishment of sponge cities, showcasing China’s resolve to combat the environmental pollution problem and promote environmentally friendly development.

In terms of diplomatic cooperation, it presents the country as a friendly and powerful nation that promotes the implementation of cooperation projects under multilateral and bilateral frameworks in international cooperation and actively provides assistance in response to emergencies such as epidemics and natural disasters. The use of the FINANCE metaphors compares international cooperation to an “investment” and advocates for a new cooperative approach “to benefit the world,” emphasising our country’s active participation and contribution to international cooperation. The use of the DRAMA metaphors, the PROJECT metaphors and the ENTITY metaphors conveys that China is not “singing a solo show” or acting alone, but is willing to “build a community of human destiny” with the people of the “world village” with an open and tolerant mindset. It is willing to collaborate with the people of the “world village” to achieve win-win cooperation and common development, and exemplify China’s image as a major power in solidarity with the global community.

## 6. Result

From the perspective of conceptual metaphor, this study scrutinizes the discourse within the Western authoritative media documentary China: Time of Xi. The analysis reveals a nuanced portrayal of China as a dynamic, just, and stable nation across various dimensions. It highlights China’s political system as people-centred, emphasizing efforts towards enhancing livelihoods, elevating living standards, and fostering social equity and harmony. Furthermore, the documentary depicts China as a nation valiant in exploration, championing innovation for industrial advancement and economic growth, while also showcasing a strong commitment to environmentally friendly practices for sustainable development. In terms of diplomatic cooperation, China is characterized as open, tolerant, friendly, and neighborly. The narrative presented in the documentary underscores China’s boldness in scientific and technological innovation, promoting industrial progress and economic prosperity. It underscores China’s dedication to green and sustainable development in environmental protection and its goodwill in international cooperation. This depiction signifies the acknowledgment by Western scholars, particularly those from Britain and the United States, of China’s advancements in the contemporary era and its substantial impact on the global stage.

Nevertheless, this study is not without limitations. Firstly, in the process of corpus construction, inherent subjectivity may have influenced the researcher’s perspective, potentially resulting in a biased interpretation of the content. Secondly, the lack of a refined and objective metaphor annotation mechanism renders manual annotation susceptible to subjective inclinations, thereby affecting the qualitative analysis. Future research endeavors could enhance the understanding of how the West portrays China’s national image by expanding the corpus size, incorporating diverse perspectives, and integrating a more systematic approach to labeling conceptual metaphors.

## 7. Implication

Since the 18th Party Congress, socialism with Chinese characteristics has ushered in a new era, marked by

unprecedented changes within the Party, the country, the people, the army, and the Chinese nation (Qi, 2023). Contrary to the earlier portrayal of China as an “oppressor” and “sluggish economic growth” (Liang, 2018) by the British and American media, this documentary reflects a more favorable representation of China’s national image by Western mainstream media, particularly from the perspectives of Britain and the United States. This shift signifies that China has gained a certain degree of recognition and commendation on the global stage. Political ideologies such as the “One Belt, One Road” initiative the “war against poverty” and the “people-centred” development strategy have been effectively implemented, garnering substantial attention and acclaim domestically and internationally. On the one hand, China’s domestic economy and cultural landscape are flourishing, bolstering its international prominence significantly; on the other hand, China’s international status has made a leap forward, and China is standing at the centre of the world stage, playing a leading and helpful role, and continuously contributing to the development of the world’s humanity.

By analysing the conceptual metaphor of the American documentary *China: Time of Xi*, the study explores China’s international image shaped from the perspective of the “other” by Western countries represented by the United Kingdom and the United States, which to a certain extent offers insights into China’s image in the international arena. At the same time, the study reaffirms that conceptual metaphors serve as cognitive tools elucidating underlying ideologies and modes of thought embedded in language. Future interdisciplinary collaborations encompassing cognitive linguistics, communication, sociology, and others can enhance international dialogue. By leveraging diverse platforms and channels, a more authentic, comprehensive, and multifaceted portrayal of China can be presented to foster greater global understanding and appreciation of the nation.

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