

# Let Us Check the Way They Say China —From the Perspective of Critical Metaphor Analysis

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**Abstract.** Based on Charteris Black's critical metaphor analysis theory, this paper conducts a critical discourse analysis of the metaphors in the headlines of the Belt and Road related news in the New York Times, aiming to study how the Western mainstream media use conceptual metaphors to construct the image of China in the reports on the "Belt and Road Initiative". It is found that the mainstream Western media, represented by the New York Times, take "BRI" and "China" as the target domains in their headlines about the Belt and Road initiative, and adopt several main conceptual metaphors, such as "BRI is the battlefield", "BRI is the journey" and China is the "challenger and substitute", "troublemaker and benefit reaper", and "participant who does not obey the rules". Based on the above findings, this study makes an in-depth analysis of the subconscious metaphorical choices made by the media in news texts, which reflect that in a specific context, news creators have specific persuasive strategies, as well as ideological and value choices. A critical metaphor study of the reports on the Belt and Road Initiative in Western media, especially in English mainstream media, can help us find out how the Chinese image is described and constructed in the metaphorical choices of these media. so as to provide reference for the domestic media to fully understand the international media communication strategies and to do a good job in external publicity.

**Keywords:** Critical Metaphor Analysis, Western Mainstream Media, *The Belt and Road Initiative*, Corpus

## 1 Introduction

The study of the domestic image of the external world has always been a topic of interest for researchers. News media, especially mainstream media, have the power to influence public opinion due to their broad audience, and thus subtly shape the ideology of the readership. Researching news report texts is an effective way to understand the image construction. A critical metaphor study of the reports on *the Belt and Road Initiative* in Western media, especially in English mainstream media, can help us find out how the Chinese image is described and constructed in the metaphorical choices of these media.

## **2 Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Analysis of Critical Metaphor**

The theoretical system for critical discourse analysis of conceptual metaphors was first proposed by Charteris Black (2004) in his book *Corpus Approaches to Critical Metaphor Analysis*. He advocates integrating corpus methods and critical discourse analysis into conceptual metaphor theory, interpreting metaphors from three dimensions: semantics, pragmatics, and cognition. He pointed out that an important purpose of criticizing metaphor theory is to reveal the persuasive effect created by the discourse creator through pragmatic selection, which affects the discourse receiver's understanding of things<sup>[1]</sup>.

### **2.2 Analysis of Critical Metaphor Theory and Political Discourse**

Critical metaphor analysis in political news discourse aims to explore the role of metaphors in political news discourse, which also examines how metaphors affect people's understanding of political issues and how they arise and are used in political, cultural, or social situations.

Lakoff conducted a research on relevant discourse in the US bipartisan politics, and found that the Republican and Democratic parties respectively adopted family metaphor models that attempted to construct party identities of "strict fathers vs. nurturant parents", pointing out that metaphor has a powerful persuasive function<sup>[2]</sup>. In another work, Charteris Black conducted a statistical analysis of speech texts by renowned contemporary Western politicians and found that metaphors appear significantly more frequently in political discourse than in general contexts<sup>[3]</sup>. Feng Qun applied critical metaphor theory to study the speech texts of four US presidents since Reagan, and found that metaphors have persuasive functions such as metaphor for morality, reason, and emotion in political discourse, with different focuses in the speeches of different presidents<sup>[4]</sup>.

### **2.3 Characteristics of the Language Used in English News Headlines**

The characteristics of the language used in English news report include accuracy, brevity, and clarity, which are more concentrated in English news headlines. Zhang Jian pointed out that in a sense, the news title itself is a complete piece of news information, and its language expression should reflect the characteristics of being easy to understand and plain<sup>[5]</sup>. This coincides with the function of conceptual metaphor as an important cognitive tool, which simplifies complexity and embodies abstraction in concrete form. Chu Jun believes that from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, the narrative of news headlines is mostly metaphorical<sup>[6]</sup>. The characteristics of news headlines make them highly consistent with the entire news discourse, which account for the researchers' choosing news headlines as the research object.

## **3 Research Design**

### **3.1 Questions**

Through statistical analysis of the conceptual metaphors used in the headlines of reports on the Belt and Road Initiative on the New York Times website, this study is supposed to answer the

following two questions: ①What conceptual metaphors are mainly used in the headlines of reports on the the Belt and Road Initiative on the New York Times website?②Through the use of these metaphors, what images of the initiative and China are constructed?

### 3.2 Corpus Collection

The corpus used by our research institute is sourced from the website of The New York Times. The researchers entered the keyword "Belt and Road" into the website search engine, with a search time range set from January 2017 to December 2022. The search results were arranged according to "relevance", and a total of 1259 reports (including news and comments) were obtained. After screening the first 200 search results and removing the results unrelated to the "the Belt and Road" initiative, the headlines and their introductions of the first 120 reports will be pasted, collected and sorted out in order - the introductions are not used as research data, but only to help explain the headlines. The corpus consists of a total of 120 headlines.

### 3.3 Methods

Based on the three-step analysis method proposed by Charteris Black<sup>[1]</sup>, we first identified conceptual metaphors in the corpus. We used a combination of corpus software recognition and manual recognition, as there is currently no fully reliable metaphor recognition software available for use. The Antconc4.2.0 software used in this study is mainly used to assist in statistics and analysis of word frequency distribution, keyword frequency, metaphorical resonance value, etc., in order to reduce the workload of manual screening and statistics. During the operation process, researchers need to first identify the different source domains and their keywords projected on the target domain "Belt and Road" in the corpus based on the working mechanism of conceptual metaphor.

On the basis of software retrieval, researchers further identify and classify conceptual metaphors in the corpus. The metaphor recognition method adopted by researchers is based on the MIPVU tool proposed by Steen<sup>[7]</sup>, which is widely recognized in the academic community. It is a set of rules for identifying all metaphorical related vocabulary in cross domain mapping, which explains the recognition method of metaphor at the language level (metaphorical vocabulary). Considering that currently relatively reliable metaphor recognition still requires manual intervention<sup>[8]</sup>, researchers will conduct final analysis, discussion, and determination of the data.

After identifying and classifying metaphors, based on the calculation method of resonance of source domain proposed by Charteris Black<sup>[1]</sup> (i.e., resonance value=total number of source domain keywords×frequency of occurrence), we list and count the frequency and source domain resonance values of various metaphors. On the basis of metaphor recognition and statistics, we will return to the context of news discourse and conduct semantic analysis of the use of various metaphors. Then, we will summarize the role played in constructing China's national image and the selection and use of these metaphors in Western media, ultimately answering our research questions.

## 4 Results

After sorting out the metaphors in the corpus, we found that the metaphors with high frequency in the Belt and Road report titles on the New York Times website have the following types: ① metaphors with the Belt and Road initiative as the target domain; ② Metaphors targeting China; ③ The metaphor of taking the participating countries of the Belt and Road initiative as the target area; ④ Metaphor targeting the world economy; ⑤ A metaphor that targets international politics. Among them, metaphors targeting "the Belt and Road Initiative" and "China" are the most frequent. Therefore, this paper focuses on the types, specific manifestations and social construction functions of metaphors targeting "the Belt and Road Initiative" and "China". Meanwhile, this article only analyzes and discusses the representative and commonly used subcategories of implicit metaphors in the two major categories.

### 4.1 Metaphors with the the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as the Target Domain Metaphors

Metaphors with the Belt and Road Initiative (abbreviated as BRI in the following data analysis) as the target domain appear most frequently in the corpus, with a variety of source domains, mainly including: ① BRI is the battlefield; ② BRI is a journey; ③ BRI is architecture; ④ BRI is an item.

The total number of metaphorical keywords, total frequency of keywords, and resonance values of each source domain are shown in Table 1. According to the statistics, a total of 65 metaphorical expressions and 35 metaphorical keywords with BRI as the target domain are identified among all the 120 English titles. Among them, the battlefield metaphor is used most frequently, with a total of 14 source domain keywords, with a cumulative number of 29 times. According to the calculation method of the source domain resonance value, the above two values are multiplied, and the source domain resonance value of the metaphor is 406. The second is travel metaphor, with 10 source domain keywords appearing a total of 15 times and a resonance value of 150. The above two types of metaphors account for about 2/3 of the total, which is also the focus of this thesis.

**Table 1:** Source Domain Type, Total Number of Keywords, Frequency of Occurrence, and Source Domain Resonance Value Statistics of Metaphors with BRI as the Target Domain

Source Domain Type	Total Number of Keywords	Frequency of Keywords	Resonance Value of Source Domain
battlefield	14	29	406
journey	10	15	150
architecture	6	12	72
item	5	9	45
total	35	65	673

#### 4.1.1 BRI is the Battlefield

According to the resonance value of the source domain, this study found that among metaphors with BRI as the target domain, the source domain as the battlefield has the highest frequency of occurrence. As shown in Table 2, among all the keywords of the metaphor "BRI

is the battlefield ", ally is the most frequently used, appearing 6 times in total, accounting for about 1/5 of the total number of battlefield metaphors. While counter, blow and rival appeared three times respectively, accounting for about 1/3 of the total.

The battlefield is a place where hostile parties engage in a life to death battle. The combat process on the battlefield includes attack and retreat, and the participants in the war can include opponents, as well as allies. The Western media regard "the Belt and Road" as the battlefield of the Sino-US struggle, and a large number of battlefield/war metaphors are used in the title text.

**Table 2: Keywords and Frequency of Metaphorical "BRI is the Battlefield"**

Keywords of Metaphor	Frequency	Keywords of Metaphor	Frequency
ally	6	withdrawn	2
counter	3	take on	1
blow	3	enemy	1
rival	3	dueling	1
war	2	threat	1
defeat	2	beat	1
block	2	fight	1
Resonance Value of Source Domain: $14 \times 29 = 406$			

Example 1: U.S. to Start Trade Talks With Kenya to Counter China's Influence

Example 2: Blinken, in Indonesia, Stresses Soft Power to Counter China

The above two titles "Counter China" and "Counter China's Influence" reported the actions taken by the US in Kenya, Indonesia and other participating countries of the the Belt and Road Initiative. The purpose is to "confront" China and its geopolitical influence in the region.

The "Cold War" mindset held by Western media habitually views the East and the West as two opposing factions, and sees traditional Western countries as allies on the same front, even in the field of international economic cooperation. The independent exchanges and cooperation between these countries and China in response to the Belt and Road initiative were viewed by the Western media as splitting or betraying the alliance.

Example 3: In China, Macron Offers a Horse, and a Vision to Counter Trump

Example 4: Italy May Split With Allies and Open It Ports to China's Building Push

Example 5: Japan and China, Asian Rivals, Are Trying to Get Along

French President Macron's three-day state visit to China strengthened the strategic cooperation relationship between China and France, And reached a joint initiative with Chinese leaders to support globalization. This normal diplomatic activity has been described by Western media as providing China with powerful tools (horses) and ideas (visions) to confront Trump.

In Example 4, Italy's opening of its ports to China is seen as a betrayal of a "divided ally". In the news headline reporting on Shinzo Abe's visit to repair Japan China relations (Example 5), it is emphasized that "Japan and China are a pair of Asian rivals".

Example 6: If Trump Wants to Take On China, He Needs Allies

Example 7: Biden Tries to Rally G7 Nation to Counter China's Influence

In Example 6 and 7, both titles express the need to "challenge" or "confront" China and its influence, and US presidents convene and unite their own Western "allies". The above examples fully reflect the stubborn Cold War mentality of confrontation between the East and the West upheld by Western media and politicians.

#### 4.1.2 Conceptual Metaphor of "BRI is a Journey"

The cognitive linguistics research has long been concerned about the widespread use of metaphorical phenomena such as "Our relationship is off the track" and "I am at a crossroads in life" in language. Lakoff and Johnson successively proposed the conceptual metaphors of "Love is a journey" and "Life is a journey", and redefined the journey metaphor as a purposeful activity that travels along a road leading to a destination<sup>[9]</sup>. The use of motion verbs highlights an action, while the use of "destination" highlights goal orientation. On this basis, Charteris Black further pointed out the existence of the metaphorical phenomenon of political activity journey in political discourse, and explained it as purposeful social activities travel along a road to their destination<sup>[3]</sup>.

**Table 3** Keywords and Frequency of Metaphorical "BRI is a Journey"

Keywords of Metaphor	Frequency	Keywords of Metaphor	Frequency
road	3	take a turn	1
way/gateway	2	from...to...	1
brake	2	come	1
welcome	2	trip	1
head for	1	step into	1
Resonance Value of Source Domain: $10 \times 15 = 150$			

In the corpus of this study, compared to the "battlefield metaphor", the conceptual metaphor of "BRI is a journey" appears slightly less frequently, but still has more obvious characteristics. As is shown in Table 3, 10 various keywords of journey metaphors, which totally occurred 15 times, were found in the corpus. Typical travel metaphors used in the headlines of Western media reports on the Belt and Road are as follows:

Example 1: A Forgotten Italian Port Could Become a Chinese Gateway to Europe

Example 2: For China, a Bridge Over the Adriatic Is a Road Into Europe

Example 3: China's Belt and Road Plan in Pakistan Takes a Military Turn

Example 4: China Taps the Brakes on Its Global Push for Influence

Example 5: One African Nation Put the Brakes on Chinese Debt. But Not for Long

Example 6: A Pricey Drive Down Montenegro's Highway From Nowhere to Nowhere

Example 7: The Road to Confrontation

By analyzing the metaphor in the above titles, we can see that under the control of the inherent

Cold War mentality, the West believes that Europe, especially Western Europe, as its geopolitical allies, is a sphere of influence covered by its own influence. China carries out economic cooperation projects with some of the EU countries under the Belt and Road initiative, obtaining a gateway and pathway to enter Europe (Example 1: "a Chinese Gateway to Europe", Example 2: "a Road Into Europe"). To elevate the level of economic cooperation between China and Europe is depicted as a threat or invasion to European economic security. In Example 3, the Western media in the title imply that the cooperation between China and Pakistan under the Belt and Road framework is not economic cooperation along the established route, but cooperation with military purposes through the metaphorical expression of "take a military turn". The "Taps the Brakes" in the title of Example 4 and the "Put the Brakes" in the title of Example 5 mean that in the process of promoting the Belt and Road initiative, China and the governments of partner countries need to "step on the brakes", which implies that the rapid progress of cooperation between the two sides is not smooth, but full of crises.

Summing up the above journey metaphors used by Western media, it can be seen that they intend to portray "the Belt and Road" as a road full of crisis that cannot bring economic benefits (Example 6 "From Nowhere to Nowhere"), and even directly metaphor it as a "road of confrontation" with the West (Example 7).

## **4.2 Metaphors targeting China**

Whether in English or other languages, the conceptual metaphor of "the country is a person" in political discourse has a long history and is still prevalent<sup>[10]</sup>. Project the relatively specific and familiar image of a "person" onto a relatively large and vague "country", allowing readers to more intuitively receive the information that discourse makers shape and express about the country's image. This metaphor is more effective at the emotional level, moving the audience more than depicting inanimate objects or abstract concepts.

Out of the 120 titles in the self built corpus, "China" appears 81 times, and the vast majority can be interpreted as a metaphorical expression of personification with "China" as the target domain. Through analysis, we found that in these titles, China is portrayed as: 1) a challenger and substitute for Western global hegemony and interests, 2) a harvester and troublemaker of BRI participating countries, and 3) a participant who does not follow the rules. Below is a list and analysis of typical title examples of the above metaphors.

### **4.2.1 Challengers and Substitutes for Western Global Hegemony and Interests**

Though self-portrayed as leader of the West, the US upholds the "America First" policy, relies on strong military and economic advantages, insists on maintaining its global hegemonic position, and maintains its dominant position in international affairs. At the strategic level, the West, especially the US, views other rising powers as a threat to its global hegemonic position, and Western media use the metaphor of "challengers" to hype up the challenges China's rise poses to the West, creating a public opinion atmosphere of "China threat theory".

The continuous promotion of the Belt and Road initiative has been described by Western media as a major challenge to Western hegemony at the economic and geopolitical levels in a national, regional and even global scale. Especially when the relative strength of the West weakens and it is insufficient to fully control every corner of the world, China, which engages

in local interaction and exchanges, is seen as a substitute for "taking advantage of the situation":

Example 1: In Afghanistan, China Is Ready to Step Into the Void

Example 2: As the U.S. Pulls Back From the Mideast, China Leans In

Example 3: U.S. Faces Tough 'Great Game' Against China in Central Asia and Beyond

The above three titles depict the image of China taking the opportunity to enter as a "substitute" during the Western withdrawal from the Middle East, but Western media deliberately overlook the differences from the war, turmoil, and plunder brought by the West to the Middle East, where China brings investment, trade, and peace.

Example 4: Italy's Deal With China Signals a Shift as U.S. Influence Recedes

Example 5: China Enlarges Its Circle in Europe, and Tries to Convince Europeans It Comes in Peace

Example 6: China Extends Reach in the Caribbean, Unsettling the U.S.

Example 7: To Influence El Salvador, China Dangled Money. The U.S. Made Threats.

Western Europe is seen by the US as a natural ally to counter the "China threat", while Latin America is seen as the backyard of the US. The portrayal of China's role in expanding its influence around the world (Enlarges Its Circle, Example 5) as US influence fades (Example 4) makes the US very uneasy (Unsettling the U.S., Example 6). The fact that was only avoided was that Uncle Tom, who adhered to the principle of "America First" diplomacy, would not come out to rescue allies in deep economic crisis, but also threaten his Latin American brothers (The U.S. Made Threats. Example 7).

Example 8: At Davos, the Real Star May Have Been China, Not Trump

Example 9: Eyewitnesses to America's Greatest International Competitor

Example 10: China's Trillion-Dollar Foreign Policy (President Xi Jinping is building his way across continents as American influence recedes. OPINION)

Example 11: Is China a Colonial Power?

Furthermore, through the metaphorical image in the above title, China's economic cooperation with countries along the Belt and Road has been portrayed by Western media as "China Dangled Money" (Example 7). The image of the "New Colonial Power" (Example 11), which relied on the "China's Trillion Dollar Foreign Policy" (Example 10) to seize the position of the "stage protagonist" of Westerners (Example 8), has been portrayed and deeply ingrained in people's hearts. By using this systematic conceptual metaphor to depict the image, and citing some more examples, it is natural to dress up China as the "America's Greatest International Competitor" (Example 9). Through the conceptual metaphor of shaping China as a challenger and status substitute for Western hegemony, the Western media try to exaggerate the threat of "the Belt and Road" international economic cooperation to the West, with the intention of creating public opinion at home, misleading the Western people, and thus affecting their internal and diplomatic decisions. In the international context, Western media create the image of the initiator of "the Belt and Road Initiative" as "a reaper of interests and a troublemaker"



and "an irregular participant", so as to provoke friendly relations between China and partner countries.

#### **4.2.2 Stakeholders and Troublemakers of BRI Participating Countries**

Example 1: In Global Slowdown, China Holds Sway Over Countries' Fates

Example 2: China's Belt and Road Plan in Pakistan Takes a Military Turn

Example 3: China Is Playing Hardball with Troubled Debtors. That's Dangerous for All of Us

Example 4: A Pricey Drive Down Montenegro's Highway "From Nowhere to Nowhere"

Example 5: China Retools Vast Global Building Push Criticized as Bloated and Predatory

Example 6: The troubles of Kenya's China-funded train

Example 7: Bill Shorten Wants Australia to Embrace China. But at What Cost?

Example 8: How China Got Sri Lanka to Cough Up a Port

Example 9: Who Is Playing Politics With the Port of Piraeus?

Example 10: One African Nation Put the Brakes on Chinese Debt. But Not for Long.

Example 11: Imran Khan's First Test: Pakistan's Troubled Economy

Example 12: "We Cannot Afford This": Malaysia Pushes Back Against China's Vision

As shown in the titles of "Troubled Debtors" (Example 3), "The troubles of Kenya's China funded train" (Example 6) and "Pakistan's Troubled Economy" (Example 11), the high-frequency word trouble/troubled links China with other "the Belt and Road" partner countries, accusing him of being a "troublemaker".

Words such as "Pricey Drive" and "From Nowhere to Nowhere" in Example 4, "But at What Cost?" in Example 8, and "We Cannot Afford This" in Example 12 all imply a high price to pay for wanting to cooperate with China and embrace China (Example 7). China will gradually press its partners who cannot afford loans (Example 3), using international political means (Playing Politics With, Example 9) to reap benefits and ultimately achieve the goal of manipulating the fate of partner countries (Example 1). Through the conceptual metaphors used in the above series of news headlines, Western media shaped the shameful image of China as a selfish victimizer by implementing the Belt and Road initiative, creating economic difficulties and social problems for its partners while reaping geopolitical and economic interests in the international community.

#### **4.2.3 Non compliant participants**

At the same time, Western media also focus on portraying China as a non compliant participant in international economic and trade activities, as well as a shaker of the existing international economic order (Shake Up the Economic Order in Example 7).

Example 1: Kenya Discloses Part of Secret Railway Contract With China

Example 2: China Proceeds With Belt and Road Push, but Does It More Quietly

Example 3: Jewel in the Crown of Corruption: The Troubles of Kenya's China-Funded Train

Example 4: Did China Just Bribe Trump to Undermine National Security?

Example 5: Australia's Prime Minister "Surprised" by State's Secret Deal With China

Example 6: Behind China's \$1 Trillion Plan to Shake Up the Economic Order

In the above news headlines, Western media use expressions such as "Secret Railway Contract With China" (Example 1), "Secret Deal With China" (Example 5), and "Does It More Quietly" (Example 2) to deliberately imply that China has won investment project contracts through opaque means such as bribery (Example 4) and corruption (Example 3), which brought them nothing good but "endangering their national security" (Example 7).

## 5 Conclusion

To sum up, we can draw the following conclusions and answer the research questions. In the headlines of the English report about "Belt and Road Initiative" on the website of the New York Times, taking "BRI" and "China" as the target domain, several main conceptual metaphors are adopted, such as "BRI is the battlefield", "BRI is the journey" and China is the "challenger and substitute", "troublemaker" and "participant who does not obey the rules".

The Western mainstream media, represented by the New York Times, intend to portray "Belt and Road Initiative" as a battlefield for China to challenge Western hegemony and a path and gateway for China to the Western sphere of influence through the metaphorical expressions in these headlines. As the sponsor of the initiative, China is portrayed in these reports as a challenger trying to threaten Western hegemony and as an international rule-breaker who will only bring debt and trouble to the economies of the participating countries.

Through such negative coverage and evaluation of an international economic cooperation initiative, there is almost no mention of the fact that it brings international multilateral trade promotion, economic and employment environment improvement to the participating countries, let alone fair and impartial reporting. It can be seen that the Western mainstream media do not have their self-proclaimed independent and impartial reporting position, but deliberately shape the negative image of China and exaggerate the threat of China through manipulating discourse, so as to influence and control domestic and international public opinion.

As a tool and means of media propaganda, political metaphor has its unique function, which is limited to criticizing the false reports of Western media that ignore the facts. On the basis of rational analysis, we should form targeted external publicity strategies and use different metaphorical perspectives to publicize the achievements of the Belt and Road Initiative initiative more objectively and create a responsible international image of China.

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