Furry Ambassadors: A Critical Metaphor Analysis of Panda Diplomacy in Chinese Mainstream Media

Jie Zhang[1], Mohd Azidan Bin Abdul Jabar[1], Farhana Muslim Binti Mohd Jalis[1]

[1]Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Correspondence: Jie Zhang, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Abstract

This study adopts the theoretical framework of Critical Metaphor Analysis (Charteris-Black, 2004) to systematically examine the symbolic metaphors and their discursive functions constructed in Chinese mainstream English-language media's coverage of "panda diplomacy". Through corpus coding by NVivo14.0, the study identifies five categories of positive metaphors (national and ideological symbols, personified roles, functional symbols, cultural totems and connective structures) and three categories of negative metaphors (concealment, manipulative tools and threat narratives). The results show that Chinese media construct a national identity characterized by "peaceful development", "win-win cooperation" and "non-threat" through positive metaphors such as "messenger of peace", "cultural calling card" and "bridge of friendship". Meanwhile, by quoting and rebutting negative metaphors such as "political tool" and "ideological weapon", the media form a "quotation-rebuttal" discursive structure that indirectly reinforces the legitimacy and justifiability of China's diplomacy. This study further points out that positive and negative metaphors are not equally weighted but together constitute a dual-track discursive pathway for national identity construction: on the one hand, actively constructing a national identity characterized by cultural affinity and global responsibility; on the other hand, responding to external doubts through strategic rebuttals, reflecting the media's discursive capacity and agenda-setting awareness in the international public sphere. This research provides both theoretical and empirical reference for studies on national identity, critical metaphor analysis and diplomatic discourse.

Keywords: panda diplomacy, diplomatic identity, critical metaphor analysis, media discourse, discursive strategy

1. Introduction

Within the backdrop of an increasingly restructured global communication landscape, national image has emerged as a critical strategic asset in international relations. As Buhmann (2016, p. 40-41) argues, a nation's image reflects the subjective perceptions of external stakeholders regarding its identity and international status, encompassing evaluations across functional, normative, aesthetic and affective dimensions. The perceptions are not merely the outcome of external observation but are significantly constructed by how a nation chooses to present itself and narrate its own story. National image, therefore, is not passively received but can be actively constructed and disseminated through multiple channels (Bolin & Ståhlberg, 2016). Among these, diplomacy plays a central role as the most direct form of engagement between a country and other states or international organizations (Tian, 2020). It serves as a crucial platform through which a nation articulates its political ideals, value orientations and cultural identity on the global stage (Melissen, 2005). Through the strategic design and expression of diplomatic discourse and actions, a state not only responds to external expectations but also actively constructs cognitive frameworks and emotional perceptions held by international audiences.

As a crucial component of national image, a country's diplomatic image comprises both a "hard image" grounded in its material power and international status, and a "soft image" constructed through attractiveness and affinity (Ye, 2023, p. 25). From a constructivist perspective, diplomatic image is not a static or objective entity; rather, it is dynamically produced through transnational interactions and discursive practices (Franz, 2025). Nye's (2004) theory of soft power further elucidates how nations construct the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion. In this context, cultural dissemination, value promotion and credible narratives have become essential resources for the construction of a compelling diplomatic image.

Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), the Party Central Committee, with Chinese president Xi Jinping at its core, has attached great importance to the development of national soft power, particularly

the enhancement of external communication and international discourse capacity (Lams, 2018). The strategic directive to "tell China's stories well and spread China's voice effectively" has been explicitly positioned as a central component of national development (Zhao & Zheng, 2017). The report of the 20th CPC National Congress further emphasized the need to "present a credible, lovable and respectable image of China" (Yang & Ma, 2021). Guided by this strategic vision, China has steadily expanded its repertoire of soft diplomacy practices, including initiatives such as cultural exchanges under the Belt and Road Initiative, the global promotion of Confucian values, the development of Confucius Institutes and "panda diplomacy". These efforts not only enrich the operational framework of China's soft power but also provide concrete leverage for the construction of its diplomatic image. Among them, panda diplomacy, characterized by its strong symbolic appeal, stands out as a distinctive and long-standing form of cultural engagement that has played a significant role in constructing China's foreign relations.

"Panda diplomacy" originated in the 1940s, with its earliest form marked by the Nationalist government's gift of two giant pandas to the U.S. in 1941. The gesture, made by Soong Mei-ling on behalf of the Chinese government, was intended to express gratitude for U.S. support during China's war of resistance against Japan. The practice was institutionalized in 1972, when Premier Zhou Enlai announced the gifting of pandas Ling-Ling and Hsing-Hsing to the U.S. during President Nixon's historic visit to China, formally inaugurating panda diplomacy in the era of the People's Republic. Subsequently, China sent pandas to countries including the Soviet Union, North Korea, Japan and France, where they came to symbolize friendship and goodwill. In 1982, due to growing concerns over the conservation of endangered species, China ceased gratuitous gifting of pandas and shifted to international leasing arrangements under the framework of scientific cooperation. In 1994, the giant panda made its first international appearance as an "ambassador of scientific exchange" (Zhang & Liu, 2021), marking the beginning of a new phase of panda diplomacy on research collaboration and cultural outreach. Since then, panda diplomacy has evolved into a vital medium for China's national identity construction and soft power projection on the global stage (Hyland, 2020).

Globally, many nations employ animal symbols to serve as emblematic representations of their national image, conveying collective character traits and cultural values (Zhang & Liu, 2021). For instance, the bald eagle in the U.S. symbolizes strength and freedom; the brown bear in Russia reflects resilience and a fighting spirit; the lion in the U.K. embodies monarchy and glory; and the peacock in India signifies sacredness and cultural diversity. The establishment of these animal icons is not only rooted in historical and cultural traditions but also reflects each nation's strategic efforts to construct its identity within international communication. In the formation of such symbolic systems, media discourse plays a pivotal role. Through processes of repeated representation and emotional encoding, the media transform animal imagery into vessels of national identity and communication. The symbolic narratives contribute to constructing how countries are perceived both domestically and globally, reinforcing national branding through culturally resonant metaphors.

From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, the essence of conceptual metaphor lies in "understanding one thing in terms of another", that is, grasping abstract concepts through concrete experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Lakoff & Johnson (2008) further argues that the repeated use of specific metaphors becomes internalized as cognitive frames, ultimately shaping individuals' ways of understanding the world. Charteris-Black (2004), in his model of Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA), emphasizes that metaphors are not merely rhetorical devices but ideological instruments that subtly guide cognition and construct political identity. Accordingly, the diplomatic metaphor embedded in the image of the panda should be seen not only as a form of cultural expression but also as a process of cognitive construction and ideological practice. The metaphorical representation of the panda in discourse plays a dual role: it functions as a soft power symbol and simultaneously reinforces particular worldviews and national narratives.

Although panda diplomacy has increasingly drawn scholarly attention in the fields of international communication and public diplomacy, the existing body of literature remains limited and relatively fragmented. Most studies to date have focused on its function as a cultural symbol or its implications in international relations, while systematic analyses from a linguistic perspective, particularly within the framework of CMA, remain scarce. To address this gap, the present study adopts Charteris-Black's (2004) CMA as its theoretical foundation and examines media discourse related to panda diplomacy in major Chinese English-language outlets. The study aims to identify symbolic metaphorical expressions embedded in these texts and interpret their discursive functions in constructing China's diplomatic identity. The research is guided by the following two questions:

RQ1: What symbolic metaphors are associated with "the panda" and "panda diplomacy" in Chinese mainstream media?
RQ2: How do these metaphors function discursively to construct China's diplomatic identity in the media?

2. Literature Review

In the field of national image studies, the construction of a country's diplomatic image increasingly reflects a dual-track process involving both "self-construction" and "others-construction". The dual perspective highlights that national image is not a static entity but a dynamic and negotiated construct formed through ongoing global communicative

interactions (Wodak, 2009). Particular attention has been paid to the self-representational strategies adopted in official state discourse. As Lo (2025) observes, China had leveraged high-profile diplomatic platforms such as the Belt and Road Forum and the China International Import Expo to systematically employ institutional, identity-based and policy-oriented narratives, thereby projecting itself as a "provider of global public goods". Jin & Jin (2024), using a corpus-assisted Critical Discourse Analysis approach, identified frequent use of discursive expressions such as "proactive", "mature and confident", "responsible", "open and inclusive" and "cooperative" in the diplomatic speeches of Chinese leaders. The rhetorical choices revealed a discursive logic aimed at constructing a rational and credible image of China. Further, Yang & Xie (2023) demonstrated that China's diplomatic discourse exhibits a high degree of strategic flexibility: it emphasizes "rationality and restraint" in ceremonial and cooperative contexts, while displaying "firmness of position and assertiveness" on sovereignty-related issues. From a macro-communication perspective, Yang & Ma (2021) proposed the "Full Process Model of Diplomatic Image Construction", advocating for "political equivalence" and "image convergence" as means to enhance the persuasiveness and discursive leadership of national communication on the global stage.

Meanwhile, "soft diplomacy" has increasingly gained scholarly attention as a cultural and humanitarian pathway through which national image is subtly projected (Al Breiki, 2025). Sterling (2018) argued that the Belt and Road Initiative reinforces regional identity through cultural dissemination, thereby enhancing China's international image and promoting the values of a harmonious society. Wang (2018), in a comparative study of Peng Liyuan and Michelle Obama's roles in "First Lady Diplomacy", suggested that China has utilized feminine and soft representations to generate greater international goodwill. From the perspective of humanitarian diplomacy, Gong (2021) found that China's foreign aid in response to natural disasters and public health crises can significantly enhance its image as a responsible global actor. However, the effectiveness of such efforts is contingent upon regional contexts and the mechanisms of media communication.

On the external construction front, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to how China's diplomatic image is constructed "through the eyes of the Other". Tang & Wang (2023), in their analysis of coverage by 17 mainstream Arab media outlets regarding the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement brokered in Beijing, identified three key pathways in the construction of China's national image: "head-of-state diplomacy leading major-power diplomacy", "mediator in conflicts" and "architect of peace". Similarly, Huang et al. (2016), through a case study of Germany's *Der Spiegel*, revealed that the magazine's sustained attention to China is closely aligned with major international events. The article was broad in scope, with particular emphasis on economic development and human rights issues, while also monitoring China's interactions with other major powers and neighboring states. In terms of linguistic style, the reporting is often subjective and direct, highlighting the consequences and global implications of Chinese policies.

Together, these studies underscore that national image is continuously negotiated and reconstructed through various communicative channels, including official discourse, public diplomacy, cultural communication and transnational media. They also illustrate that diplomacy today is not only a matter of geopolitical maneuvering but also a contested discursive arena where national identities and images are strategically produced and challenged.

As a crucial vehicle for the construction of national image, language, and particularly its metaphorical mechanisms, has attracted increasing scholarly attention. Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA), due to its capacity to uncover underlying ideologies and cognitive schemata, is becoming a key methodological approach in the study of national discourse (Musolff, 2012). Zhong et al. (2022), analyzing Xi Jinping's diplomatic speeches, found that metaphors centered around the concept of "the road" serve important discursive functions in constructing national identity. By evoking shared human experiences of "the road", such metaphors reinforce an international image of China as people-oriented, open and inclusive, committed to mutual benefit and a responsible member of the global community. Qiu & Wang (2025), in a comparative analysis of Chinese and U.S. media coverage on climate change, highlight significant differences in metaphor usage. Chinese discourse tends to adopt metaphors related to cooperation and development, while U.S. media frequently invoke metaphors of threat and war to evoke urgency and crisis. The contrasting metaphorical framings reflect deeper divergences in national stances and cognitive orientations regarding global climate issues.

In the realm of public discourse, the metaphorical construction of China by mainstream Western media has also emerged as a key area of scholarly inquiry. Wang et al. (2022) found that U.S. media, in their coverage of China's role following the U.S. withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), frequently employed metaphors of war, competition and threat to construct a binary image of China as both a "beneficiary" and a "menace". Such metaphorical strategies not only reinforce entrenched cognitive models among the public but also intensify discursive polarization surrounding China-U.S. strategic rivalry. Song & Wang (2024) developed a diachronic CMA model to analyze U.S. economic news coverage of China from 1979 to 2021. Their findings revealed a persistent ideological bias in U.S. media, where metaphors rooted in Cold War thinking have been systematically used to project a negative political image of China. At the same time, they observed a discursive shift in economic metaphors, from themes of "win-win

cooperation" in earlier periods to those of "strategic competition" in recent years, mirroring the evolving dynamics of China-U.S. relations. Additionally, Agbo et al. (2018), in their study of Nigerian political speeches, identified metaphor clusters such as "nation-as-person", "war" and "journey", highlighting their critical role in constructing social identity and legitimizing political discourse. The above findings further demonstrate the explanatory power and cross-cultural applicability of CMA in media contexts.

Due to its prominent symbolic and cultural projection functions, "panda diplomacy" has increasingly become a focal entry point for studies on national image construction. Wang (2024), through comparative analysis, found that U.S. media often frame the panda as a "diplomatic gift" and a "vulnerable animal" whereas Japanese media tend to present it as a "popular idol" or a member of a "beloved family", reflecting divergent expressions of cultural identity and ideological orientation across national media systems. Zhang & Liu (2021) conducted a systematic review of the semantic evolution of panda-related discourse in *People's Daily*, identifying a discursive trajectory in which the panda image shifted from a "national treasure" to a "diplomatic gift", "world treasure", "eastern celebrity" and ultimately to a "national brand ambassador". The transformation underscores the panda's role as a key symbol in China's nation branding efforts. Further, Zhao & Zheng (2017) argued that panda diplomacy not only enhances international perceptions of China but also reinforces the Chinese government's identity as a "wildlife protection expert" and a "global model for ecological conservation", thus carrying significant implications for diplomatic communication.

However, to fully understand how Chinese media construct diplomatic identity, it is necessary to consider the institutional context within which these discourses are produced. China's mainstream English-language media operate within a Party-controlled communication system, in which all major news organizations are subject to political oversight and ideological guidance (Kaplan, 2021). Outlets such as *China Daily* (*CD*), *People's Daily* (*PD*) and *Global Times* (*GT*) function as central-level newspapers supervised jointly by the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China (CCPPD) and the State Council Information Office (SCIO) (Wang et al., 2018). This dual structure embodies the "internal-external publicity" model, where domestic propaganda and international communication are strategically integrated. Unlike commercially oriented media in liberal systems, these English-language outlets prioritize political loyalty over market orientation and serve as key instruments of public diplomacy and international image projection. Their editorial practices emphasize ideological correctness, thematic positivity, and alignment with Party discourse, especially under Xi Jinping's directive to "tell China's stories well" and to project a "credible, lovable, and respectable image of China". As a result, their coverage of diplomatic affairs is not merely descriptive but deeply embedded in institutionalized mechanisms of agenda setting, discourse control, and selective framing, reflecting both the constraints and strategic intentions of state-led communication. This contextual understanding provides an essential foundation for analyzing how metaphorical representations in Chinese media function to construct and legitimize China's diplomatic identity.

Although existing scholarship has explored the construction of China's diplomatic image from diverse perspectives, such as political discourse, media representation and cultural symbolism, several gaps remain. First, there is a lack of systematic analysis of how the panda, as a cultural symbol, is metaphorically embedded within China's diplomatic discourse. Second, while panda diplomacy is widely regarded as a soft power strategy, insufficient attention has been paid to its metaphorical expressions function in identity construction and meaning negotiation. Third, current research tends to focus on textual content in isolation, without fully integrating linguistic-cognitive mechanisms with broader strategies of international communication.

3. Methodology

3.1 Theoretical Framework

Metaphor has long been regarded as a vital rhetorical device. Aristotle defined its essence as a form of "substitution" or "comparison", whereby meaning is extended through lexical transfer (Martinengo, 2024). Traditional views on metaphor primarily focus on its ornamental function at the linguistic level, emphasizing the underlying similarity between words as the basis for metaphorical expression (Lakoff, 1993).

With the development of cognitive linguistics, Lakoff & Johnson (1980) proposed the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), which shifted the study of metaphor from surface-level linguistic ornamentation to deeper cognitive structures. They argued that the essence of metaphor lies in understanding one domain (the target domain) in terms of another, more familiar one (the source domain). The cross-domain mapping constitutes a fundamental mechanism by which humans make sense of the world. Within this theoretical framework, metaphor is viewed as a cognitive tool deeply embedded in everyday thought, language and behavior, reflecting underlying conceptual structures and ways of understanding specific issues (Yang & Zhang, 2024). Lakoff & Johnson (2020) further contends that the repeated use of particular metaphors can become entrenched as habitual patterns of thought, shaping public perceptions of reality and influencing evaluative orientations toward social and political phenomena.

While CMT has significantly advanced metaphor studies through its "cognitive turn", it has been critiqued for insufficiently addressing the social context of language use, the speaker's communicative intentions, and the embedded relations of power and ideology (Gibbs Jr, 2011). To address the limitations, Charteris-Black (2004), building upon Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), integrated insights from cognitive linguistics and critical discourse studies to propose the model of Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA). As an extension of CDA, CMA emphasizes the dynamic interplay between language, cognition and society (Gibbs Jr & Cameron, 2008). It aims to uncover how metaphors, through specific linguistic choices and narrative strategies, construct, circulate and sustain ideologies and power relations within particular socio-political contexts (Musolff, 2012). The theoretical evolution of metaphor, from a rhetorical device to an ideological framework, is illustrated in Figure 1.
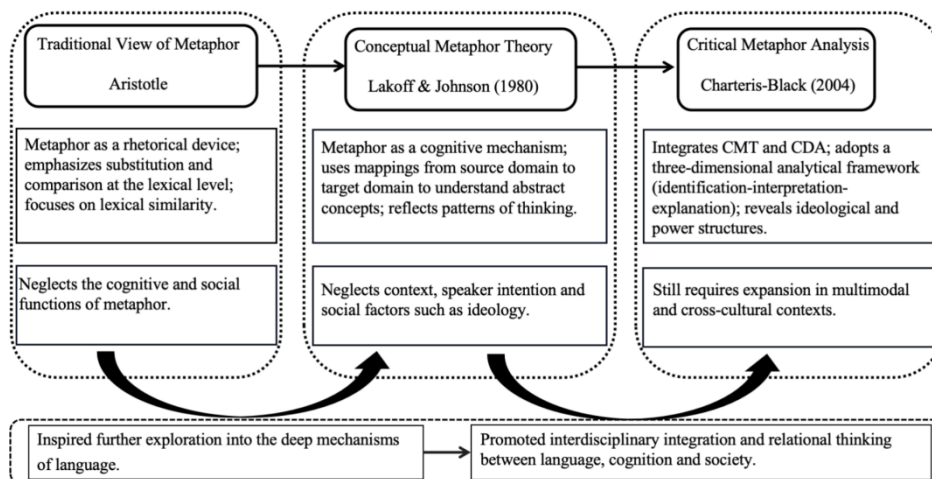

Figure 1. Theoretical Evolution of Metaphor: From Rhetorical Device to Ideological

According to Charteris-Black (2004), CMA consists of three fundamental steps. The first is metaphor identification, which involves extracting linguistic expressions from discourse that exhibit cross-domain mapping. The second is metaphor interpretation, which analyzes the structure and contextual use of metaphors to uncover their underlying cognitive schemas and pragmatic functions. The third is metaphor explanation, which links metaphorical choices to broader structures of social power and ideology, examining how metaphors are reproduced and legitimized within specific sociocultural contexts (Imani, 2022). The three-tiered analytical framework integrates linguistic form, cognitive mechanisms and social structure, bridging the gap between cognitive linguistics and CDA.

In recent years, CMA has emerged as a prominent manifestation of the "social turn" in metaphor studies and has been widely applied in discourse research across domains such as news discourse and national image construction. Its methodological orientation offers robust theoretical support for examining how China's national image is discursively constructed within the context of "panda diplomacy" in mainstream Chinese media.

3.2 Data Selection and Collection

The data for this study were collected from LexisNexis[1], a globally recognized news database, focusing on relevant reports from three major Chinese English-language media outlets. To ensure the relevance of the corpus to the theme of panda diplomacy, a keyword search was conducted using the terms: "panda diplomacy" OR "panda ambassador" OR "gift panda". A total of 55 valid news articles were retrieved, including 36 from *CD*, 10 from *PD*, and 9 from *GT*. The temporal range of the corpus spans from the earliest report dated August 5, 2011 (*CD*) to the most recent one published on October 4, 2024 (*PD*), covering a 13-year period. The time frame encompasses several key moments in China's external communication efforts and provides a representative and valuable dataset for examining the discursive construction of national image through the lens of panda diplomacy.

3.3 Data Analysis Procedures

To address two RQs, this study adopts a discourse analytical approach grounded in the framework of CMA (Charteris-Black, 2004), in combination with the qualitative data analysis software NVivo14.0 for systematic coding of the corpus.

For RQ1, the first step involved importing the corpus into NVivo14.0 to conduct metaphor identification. Based on the principle of cross-domain mapping, any expression that involved understanding the target domain "panda" through a metaphorical source

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[1]https://www.lexisnexis.com/

domain was considered a candidate for coding. An inductive coding strategy was applied, whereby metaphorical categories were initially developed and iteratively refined to ensure semantic coherence and analytical comparability. Ultimately, the identified metaphors were broadly categorized into two overarching groups: positive metaphors and negative metaphors, as shown in Figure2. For RQ2, the analysis proceeded to the second and third stages of CMA: metaphor interpretation and metaphor explanation. The phase focused on examining how the identified metaphors function cognitively and pragmatically within specific discursive contexts, contributing to the construction of China's diplomatic identity.
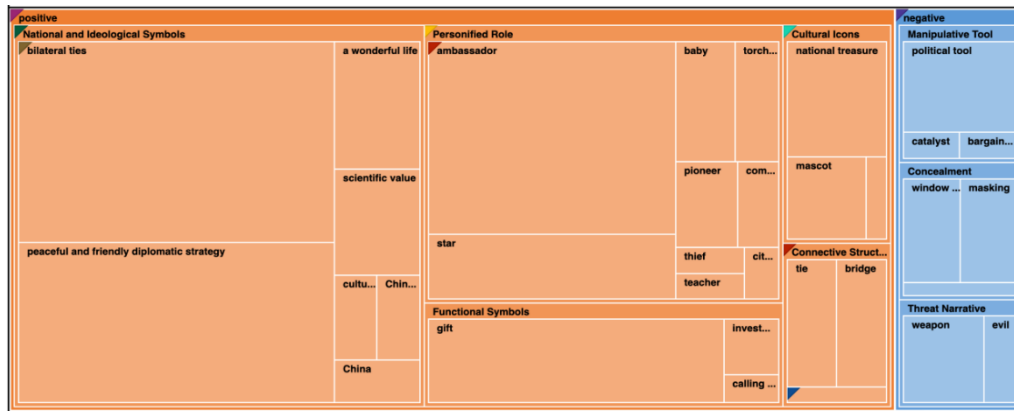

Figure 2. Distribution of Positive and Negative Metaphorical Representations of the Panda

4. Results

A total of 55 news reports on panda diplomacy were collected from three major Chinese English-language media outlets between August 2011 and October 2024, including 36 articles (65.5%) from *CD*, 10 articles (18.2%) from *PD*, and 9 articles (16.3%) from *GT*. This distribution indicates that *China Daily*, as China's flagship international communication platform, plays a dominant role in shaping the external narratives of panda diplomacy. The overall metaphorical categorization analysis conducted with NVivo reveals a pronounced positive discursive orientation, reflecting the media's attempt to situate panda diplomacy within thematic frames of harmony, mutual understanding, and win-win cooperation. At the same time, a smaller proportion of reports incorporate quoted foreign discourses that portray panda diplomacy as "propaganda", "a political tool", or "a bargaining chip", suggesting that the symbolic meaning of the panda remains discursively contested in transnational contexts. Against this backdrop, the following sections present a detailed analysis of both positive and negative metaphorical framings and further integrate the two perspectives to elucidate how Chinese media employ metaphor to construct and defend China's diplomatic identity in the global communicative arena.

4.1 Positive Metaphorical Framings of the Panda

Table 1. Distribution of Positive Panda Metaphors by Source Domain

Source Domain	Metaphorical Expressions	Count	171
	bilateral ties	35	
	peaceful and friendly	34	
National and Ideological Symbols	scientific value	5	
	China	2	80
	China' soft power	2	
	cultural exchange	2	
	ambassador	27	
	star	9	
	baby	4	
	torchbearer	3	
Personified Role	pioneer	3	51
	commercial earner	2	
	teacher	1	
	thief	1	
	citizen	1	
	gift	16	
Functional Symbols	investment	2	19
	calling card	1	
	national treasure	7	
Cultural Icons	mascot	4	12
	logo	1	
Connective Structures	bridge	4	
	tie	4	9
	window	1	

In reports by Chinese mainstream media on "panda", the panda is not only presented as a rare animal but is also endowed with multiple layers of symbolic metaphors. Through systematic coding and analysis using NVivo14.0, this study identifies five major categories of positive metaphors. The frequency of each category is presented in Table 1 to reveal the discursive functions and metaphorical roles of the panda in constructing China's national identity.

Among these five categories, national and ideological symbols occur most frequently, 80 instances, highlighting the media's tendency to portray the panda as a representative of China's national identity, diplomatic vision and cultural soft power. Within this category, "bilateral ties" is the most frequent metaphorical expression, recorded 35 times, involving countries such as the U.S., Japan, Germany, France, the U.K., the Soviet Union, Belgium and the Czech Republic, with the U.S. being mentioned most often--23 times. For example:

> The US Ambassador to China Nicholas Burns on social media welcomed the pandas being sent to Washington, describing them as '**iconic symbols of US-China relations** since President Nixon's visit a half century ago'. (July 3, 2024, *CD*)

Such expressions use the panda as a metonym for bilateral relations, evoking collective memories of the normalization of China-US ties following Nixon's historic visit. The panda is a political totem, reflecting China's strategic use of diplomatic symbolism to sustain national narratives. In the context of China-Belgium relations, the panda's emotional and cultural symbolism is particularly emphasized. For example:

> President Xi Jinping gives his best wishes to the two pandas in Belgium that are expected to **bring long-term joy to Europeans**. (March 31, 2014, *CD*)

The panda is personified as a "messenger of happiness", whose function goes beyond ecological or diplomatic value to become a cultural medium connecting Chinese and European publics. The fact that China's top leader voiced the wish further amplifies the panda's symbolic power and reflects China's preference for non-confrontational, emotionally resonant, and publicly engaging discourse in its diplomacy with Belgium.

The use of panda equals China as a metonym is also highly representative. The comparison negates outdated or threatening stereotypes (e.g., "evil dragon", "sick man of East Asia") and replaces them with a culturally familiar and emotionally appealing image. The "Kung Fu Panda" metaphor combines strength with gentleness, representing China's effort to construct an identity of being powerful yet non-threatening in global narratives. For example:

> China in rejuvenation is neither an evil fire-breathing dragon, as some western politicians suggested, nor the "sick man of East Asia" from a century ago. I prefer to think of it as a "**Kung Fu Panda**". Since **China is a panda**, it displays an essence of kindness, so as Xi promised China's development does not pose a threat to any other country. (October 24, 2017, *CD*)

Beyond symbolic and emotional dimensions, the panda also plays a role in representing rational cooperation, reinforcing China's identity as a responsible and scientific actor. For example:

> China's panda 'on-loan' practice is not only a diplomatic tradition but also **a means of scientific cooperation across the world to preserve the common treasure**. (February 15, 2022, *GT*)

The statement highlights the panda as a medium of international scientific actor and underscores China's active role in global ecological governance. Another example states:

> The extension of the giant panda agreement also **facilitates further research in various sectors such as restoring the panda habitat and assessing the climate change impact**. (February 15, 2022, *GT*)

It demonstrates that the effects of panda diplomacy extend beyond species protection to include ecological restoration, climate governance and other global concerns, reinforcing China's role as a cooperation facilitator of global public goods.

Additionally, within the category of personified roles, the metaphor "panda as ambassador" is the most frequent, with 27 instances. The panda is personified as a "friendly envoy" or "peace ambassador", symbolically responsible for emotional communication and identity representation in international relations. For example:

> For decades, the animal has never failed in its duty as **China's ambassador of friendship** and has won hearts of thousands of fans worldwide. (July 6, 2017, *CD*)

The statement attributes to the panda a diplomatic persona of "faithful service", strengthening emotional bonds between China and foreign publics. Another historically grounded reference reinforces the panda's symbolic continuity and legitimacy:

> But giant pandas have been hard at work on China's behalf for a long time, ever since the Tang Dynasty in the seventh century, when Empress Wu Zetian dispatched **a pair of black and white furry envoys** to the Japanese emperor. (August 28, 2015, *CD*)

It extends the symbolic depth of the panda and links the modern discourse to a longstanding cultural tradition, embedding the notion of "peaceful diplomacy" into a narrative of historical continuity.

Other personified metaphors, such as "panda as star", emphasize its media appeal and public emotional resonance. By highlighting crowd size and long queues, the account constructs the panda as a global phenomenon and cultural icon. It contributes to the depoliticization, emotionalization and visual mediation of China's national identity. For example:

> The following Sunday, **75,000 people** went to the National Zoo and **waited in a line going back hundreds of meters** to **catch a glimpse of the bears**. (February 21, 2022, *PD*)

The panda also appears as a "commercial earner", revealing its economic function in soft power strategies. The following examples, from both macroeconomic and microeconomic perspectives, illustrate the panda's capital logic and return-on-investment potential in diplomatic contexts.

> Katsuhiro Miyamoto, ... took Xiang Xiang, a giant panda born in 2017, for an example and estimated that **the female had brought a 26.7 billion yen (181 million U.S. dollars) economic effect to Ueno Park and its surrounding stores**. (October 31, 2022, *PD*)

> **It's good for the economy, it's good for South Australian jobs, it's good for tourism**... (July 3, 2024, *CD*)

Moreover, in the category of functional symbols, the metaphor "gift" is both traditional and frequent, with 16 instances. The "gift" metaphor emphasizes the transmission of goodwill and cultural identification between nations, representing China's tradition of benevolent diplomacy. For example:

> Panda diplomacy got started in the late 1950s when **China sent two pandas to the Moscow Zoo as a symbol of the close ties between China and the Soviet Union**. (November 17, 2014, *CD*)

Furthermore, as a cultural icon, the metaphor "mascot" signifies the panda's role. The panda has served as a mascot in numerous major international events. It becomes a fusion of cultural affinity and national brand identity, visualizing China's "gentle power" on the global stage.

> **Giant panda images are more and more appearing in major events**, from **the 1990 Asian Games panda mascot Pan Pan**, **to Jingjing, one of the mascots of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games**. (July 14, 2023, *PD*)

> **The China International Import Expo**, **the Beijing 2022 Olympic Winter Games** and the **Chengdu 2021 FISU Summer World University Games** also used **panda as their mascots**. (July 14, 2023, *PD*)

Lastly, the connective structures emphasizes the panda's mediating function in cultural diplomacy and interpersonal relations. Metaphor "bridge" highlight it's role in connecting nations and peoples emotionally, serving as a strategic tool in cross-cultural communication that "moves people through sentiment". For example:

> Pandas are being called to duty to **strengthen the bridge of friendship between China and the Czech Republic**, albeit in cartoon form. (March 25, 2016, *CD*)

> Xiang Xiang... has made unique contributions to enhancing the friendship between the Chinese and Japanese people, **serving as a bridge of affection**. (April 10, 2024, *PD*)

In summary, Chinese mainstream media, through the reporting on "panda diplomacy", has constructed a system of positive symbolic metaphors centered on peace, goodwill, cooperation and science. Through the strategic deployment of symbolic politics, the panda emerges as a soft yet multifunctional narrative vehicle--blending historical memory, contemporary perception and future aspirations. However, it is important to note that the symbolic meaning of the panda in international communication is not always framed in a positive light. In some Chinese media reports, quotations and references to negative portrayals from Western media or foreign political figures reveal contested interpretations of panda diplomacy in the global context. Therefore, the following section will turn to a systematic analysis of the negative metaphors associated with the panda, examining how foreign media discursively construct alternative or alienating readings of panda diplomacy.

4.2 Negative Metaphorical Framings of the Panda

According to the coding results, a total of 25 instances of negative symbolic representations related to "panda diplomacy" were identified, as shown in Table 2. Through discourses of "masking", "political manipulation" and

"security threat", the metaphors reframe the panda from a symbol of peace into a potential strategic instrument or political emblem.

Table 2. Distribution of Negative Panda Metaphors by Source Domain

Source Domain	Metaphorical Expressions	Count	25
Concealment	masking	4	
	window dressing	4	9
	shield	1	
Manipulative Tool	political tool	7	
	bargaining chip	1	9
	catalyst	1	
Threat Narrative	weapon	5	7
	evil	2	

In the category of "concealment" metaphors, the panda is primarily depicted as a facade of friendliness, used to obscure China's institutional and human rights issues. Among them, the metaphor "window dressing" appears 4 times and is used to imply that the panda, while seemingly peaceful, serves as a tool of "propaganda decoration" to divert international attention. For example:

> The New York Times published an article... questioning the value of China-US 'panda diplomacy', **calling giant pandas a propaganda 'window dressing' for China's diplomacy with the US**. (March 10, 2023, *GT*)

> Was the overseas trip of the giant panda as a symbol of peace and friendship really just **a bit of flashy window dressing**? (February 24, 2022, *CD*)

Although the reports superficially acknowledge the panda's symbolic power as a "messenger of peace", their sarcastic tone and rhetorical stance serve to weaken the panda's positive image by placing it under a discourse of "diplomatic camouflage" or "political beautification". Furthermore, the metaphor "shield" is also frequently employed to imply that the panda acts as a defensive mechanism for human rights discourse in international communication:

> **Pandas come to serve more of a shield** for China's human rights abuses and **a tool** to project soft power. (February 15, 2022, *PD*)

Such discourse employs structural metonymy to transform the panda from a "friendly envoy" into an "ideological umbrella", thereby casting doubt on whether panda diplomacy stems from genuine cultural exchange or the intentional construction of "symbolic justice" to conceal real-world problems.

In the category of "manipulative tool", the panda is associated with metaphors such as "political tool", "bargaining chip" and "catalyst," appearing a total of 9 times, reflecting the Western media's strong tendency to politicize panda diplomacy. In reports, the panda is recontextualized to an instrument of diplomatic discourse, implying China's strategic manipulation and issue framing. Among these, "political tool" is the most frequently used metaphor, appearing 7 times. For example:

> Some politicians in the US have been politicizing the matter by trying to snuff out China's panda diplomacy, claiming that **Beijing uses pandas as a tool of 'subversive' soft power**. (January 18, 2024, *CD*)

In this context, the panda is seen as a symbol of China's "subversive soft power", clearly reflecting an over-politicized interpretation of panda diplomacy within Western discourse. The framing places a cultural symbol into the structure of ideological confrontation, revealing deep-seated vigilance and even hostility toward China's soft power strategy. Additionally, the panda is constructed as a "public opinion tool" of ideological manipulation, further amplifying suspicion of the motivations behind panda diplomacy. For example:

> CNN... claimed that the **Chinese media uses pandas to fan anti-US sentiment**. (April 28, 2023, *GT*)

Even in reports by Belgian media, a domestic linguistic dispute triggered by pandas was referred to as "Pandagate," suggesting that the panda unintentionally served as a "catalyst" for political sensitivities:

> The Belgian media dubbed the spat "Pandagate" and in one fell swoop the animals ..., **exacerbated Belgium's deep-rooted linguistic divide** and caused a major furore... (December 5, 2013, *CD*)

In addition, some Western media further interpret panda diplomacy as a "bargaining chip" in China's diplomatic negotiations. For instance, Chinese media refuted this view:

> China has never used, given, or loaned pandas simply as some sort of **a bargaining chip**, as some Western media outlets have claimed. (February 24, 2022, *GT*)

In the metaphorical category of "threat narrative," the panda is assigned negative symbolic terms such as "weapon" and "evil", appearing 7 times in total. It is marked by strong ideological projection. Through symbolism of militarization and moral stigmatization, it reinforces the hostile discourse environment surrounding China's soft power projection. For example, the sentence directly characterizes the panda as a "hostile presence", semantically reversing its traditional image as a cultural ambassador of peace and friendliness.

> Giant panda **new 'evil'** to US anti-China lawmakers. (February 15, 2022, *GT*)

By employing the semantic operation of "demonizing", hostile intent in Western political discourse is externalized onto China's cultural symbols, reflecting a trend of antagonism under ideological confrontation. For example:

> Some short-sighted American politicians are **demonizing the giant panda and China's friendly gesture**... (February 15, 2022, *PD*)

Moreover, multiple excerpts interpret panda diplomacy as an extension of the "ideological battlefield". For example:

> Western media... **turns it (panda) into a weapon to demonize China's image**. ... CNN discusses Chinese people's concerns about giant pandas from the perspective of nationalism... inciting **the unhealthy mood and atmosphere towards China**. (April 28, 2023, *GT*)

The core of three negative metaphorical frameworks lies in semantic reconstruction and symbolic re-encoding, which assign the panda a political instrumentalism and ideological coloring that go beyond its natural attributes. In the category of "concealment", the panda is shaped as a "surface decoration" to cover up institutional contradictions and human rights disputes, and rhetorical strategies such as "beautification" and "camouflage" are used to weaken its positive image. In the "manipulative tool" frame, the panda is depicted as a "diplomatic pawn" in China's strategic games and agenda-setting efforts, with metaphorical expressions such as "bargaining", "manipulation" and "inducement" used to construct its political intention. In the "threat narrative", the panda is further alienated into an "ideological weapon" or a "symbol of evil", using extreme language to intensify public fear and cognitive confrontation. The framings not only dissolve the panda's affinity-based cultural imagery, but also project the Western discourse sphere's alertness, suspicion and even hostility toward China's soft power expansion.

4.3 Metaphorical Construction of China's Diplomatic Identity

In the construction of national identity and diplomatic discourse, metaphor functions not only as a linguistic rhetorical device but also as a representational mechanism of ideology (Van Dijk, 2001). This study finds that through a CMA of the panda diplomacy, the metaphors semantically complete the transformation from a natural animal to a national symbol, and functionally serve China's communicative goals of projecting a "peaceful rise", "win-win cooperation" and a "non-threatening" national identity.

In the positive metaphors, the media frequently compares the panda to a "national calling card", "cultural envoy", "bridge of peace" and "symbol of friendship", assigning it the functional roles of promoting bilateral relations, facilitating people-to-people exchange, and showcasing China's soft power. It not only establishes a "friendly" and "non-militarized" national identity, but also responds to the attention and expectations in contemporary international opinion regarding China's path of peaceful development. In particular, the "Kung Fu Panda" metaphor ingeniously integrates cultural identity with political rhetoric, achieving a de-ideologized expression of national identity.

Meanwhile, the citation and refutation of negative metaphors also demonstrate Chinese media's reverse construction strategy in constructing diplomatic identity. Although negative metaphors such as "political tool" and "ideological weapon" are consciously embedded into the reporting structure as quoted views from "the West", they ultimately serve to define what China's diplomacy is not, namely, not manipulation, not a threat and not hypocrisy. This type of negative discourse equally plays a crucial role in identity construction, as it essentially constructs the legitimacy of the "self" by demarcating it from the "other".

Further speaking, the positive and negative metaphors jointly constitute a multi-dimensional pathway for constructing China's diplomatic identity: they contain symbolic implications of cultural affinity as well as discursive self-defense of institutional legitimacy; they also respond to global calls for "soft diplomacy", while simultaneously demonstrating China's growing communicative awareness in proactively setting the agenda in a complex international media environment.

5. Discussion

A Critical Metaphor Analysis of Chinese mainstream media's coverage of "panda diplomacy" reveals a typical pattern characterized by dominant positive metaphors and responsive negative metaphors presented through quotation, reflecting the increasingly sophisticated communication strategies and symbolic coordination capacity of Chinese media.

First, the widespread use of positive metaphors is closely related to China's long-standing diplomatic principles of "peaceful development" and "mutual benefit". Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the U.S. in 1972 and the dispatch of pandas Ling-Ling and Hsing-Hsing to the U.S., "panda diplomacy" has become an important cultural symbol of China's friendly exchanges with the world (Reed, 2022). Entering the 21st century, as China's awareness of international discursive power grows (Zhao, 2016), Chinese media increasingly tend to construct the "panda" as a national symbol carrying cultural identity, value resonance and emotional empathy. Positive metaphors identified in this study, such as "friendly ambassador", "emotional bond", "messenger of peace" and "cultural bridge", demonstrate China's logic of communication that emphasizes cultural affinity over ideological confrontation in its soft power construction. To some extent, this discursive strategy responds to the international community's expectations for China's "non-threatening rise" and reflects the enhancement of Chinese media's capacity for self-identity management and national narrative in the global communication landscape.

However, the study also finds a limited but structurally coherent system of negative metaphors. The negative metaphors do not express the stance of Chinese media itself, but are presented through the quotation of Western media and political figures, forming a "quotation-rebuttal" discursive structure. Such quotations mainly appear in reports related to countries such as the U.S. and Belgium, and their core function is to reveal Western public opinion's strategic suspicion and ideologized interpretations of "panda diplomacy". Metaphors such as "window dressing", "political tool" and "weapon" reflect the vigilance and hostility in certain Western discursive spheres toward the expansion of China's soft power, especially in the context of escalating China-U.S. tensions and intensified geopolitical competition (Zubair, 2023), where cultural diplomacy is endowed with increasingly complex political attributes.

From a historical perspective, the negative coding of the panda by Western media can be understood as a narrative operation of demystifying the "symbol of peace". The discursive practice essentially reflects an anxiety in Western countries over the growing cultural influence of emerging powers in the context of global power shifts (Kappel, 2015). For instance, after the 2018 China-U.S. trade war, the transformation of the panda's discourse in the U.S. from a "messenger of friendship" to a "political bargaining chip" can be seen as a symbolic projection of the structural contradictions in China-U.S. relations. The emergence of such symbolic conflict is not only the result of ideological divergence but also reflects the power competition over "who defines the symbol" in global communication.

Therefore, the coexistence of positive and negative metaphors is not equally balanced but instead reflects the dual construction of dominant-narrative and counter-narrative by Chinese media: on the one hand, constructing a peaceful, rational, friendly and globally responsible national identity; on the other hand, quoting and rebutting negative discourses to exhibit a responsive discursive capacity toward external criticism. The "dual-track metaphor system" not only highlights the symbolic operation skills of Chinese media in the construction of national identity, but also demonstrates its active participation in meaning production and narrative reconstruction in the international discursive arena.

6. Conclusion

This study adopts the theoretical framework of CMA (Charteris-Black, 2004) to systematically examine the metaphor types and their discursive functions in Chinese mainstream media's coverage of "panda diplomacy". Through NVivo14.0-assisted textual coding, the findings indicate that positive metaphors dominate Chinese media narratives. Through multiple roles such as "panda as a messenger of peace", "cultural envoy," and even "economic creator", these metaphors reinforce the principles of peaceful coexistence, cultural exchange, and win-win cooperation advocated by China. Such metaphorical framings not only enhance audience emotional identification with a "non-threatening China", but also help elevate China as a responsible global power. In contrast, negative metaphors mainly originate from the quotation of Western media, reflecting a strategic response from Chinese media in the face of international public opinion challenges. The quotations aim to clarify China's diplomatic intentions through the voices of others and to safeguard the interpretive and communicative authority over its national identity.

The study not only reveals the symbolic operational mechanisms of the "panda" as a cultural image but also demonstrates the increasingly sophisticated discursive strategies and communicative awareness of Chinese media. Through the dual discursive path of positive metaphors and oppositional quotations, Chinese media effectively realize both self-construction of national identity and integrative responses to external skepticism, reflecting China's proactive role construction and strategic expression in the context of post-globalization.

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the corpus consists solely of English-language Chinese media, which mainly represent the government's external communication perspective rather than diverse domestic voices. Second, the sample size restricts generalizability and quantitative inference. Third, the analysis focuses on textual metaphors, excluding visual and multimodal representations that may co-construct diplomatic meanings. Future research may further explore the cross-cultural similarities and differences of panda diplomacy metaphors in various national or linguistic contexts, as well as assess the reception and effectiveness of such symbolic communication among global

audiences. In addition, multimodal analysis methods may be introduced to examine how pictures, videos and other non-verbal symbols coordinate with linguistic metaphors to jointly construct a multidimensional national identity, thereby expanding the understanding of diplomatic discourse, critical metaphor analysis, and the mechanisms of cultural-political interaction.

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