

# *The Construction of China's Image in American News Media from a Critical Metaphor Analysis Perspective: A Case of CNN's Report on BCI's Cotton Incident*

Yan Huifeng

*Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, China*

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**Abstract:** The construction of China's state image by American news media is an important way through which we can understand their views on China and mindset as formed. As a part of Critical Discourse Analysis on the cognitive route, Critical Metaphor Analysis combines CDA with conceptual metaphor theory in cognitive linguistics so as to reveal and criticize the ideology and power relation behind particular discourse practices. This essay analyzes under Critical Metaphor Analysis the text report on "Chinese Cotton" event by CNN; it finds that by using metaphors like struggle metaphor and containment metaphor this American news media constructs an image of China that is aggressive and manipulative.

## 1. Introduction

On March 24, 2021, a statement made by brands like "H&M" (associated with BCI, or Better Cotton Initiative) to boycott cotton produced in China trended online. Due to the inappropriate remarks concerning China in the statement, it sparked widespread opposition domestically, which led to a series of reports both at home and abroad. As early as December 2020, the Trump administration sanctioned Chinese cotton under the pretext of labor issues. The incident is not an isolated one; it not only continues the short-term sanctions imposed by the U.S. government on Chinese cotton but also highlights the long-standing U.S. attitude towards China in its coverage. Amid increasingly difficult Sino-U.S. relations, escalating tensions have further hindered China's advocacy for mutually beneficial trade relationships. In the context of both cooperation and confrontation, the portrayal of China in U.S. media serves as a barometer for bilateral relations and reflects China's "soft power" in shaping its image. Given that China has long been in a passive position within the Western-dominated discourse, where it is "constructed" by others rather than shaping its own narrative, understanding its image requires studying how Western media constructs this image. By analyzing how CNN portrays China during the "Chinese cotton" incident, we can gain insight into how China's image is represented in U.S. media, aiding efforts to promote a positive image while "telling China's story well and spreading China's voice."

## 2. Literature Review

A country's image is an important part of its "soft power," referring to the overall subjective and objective perception that people form of a country through various media channels [1]. Among these

media, news reporting plays a crucial role in shaping image [2]. The portrayal of China's image in foreign media can be analyzed from various disciplines, including linguistics, political science, and literature. Diachronic studies typically use framing theory, construction theory, and quantitative research methods to examine content changes over time, while synchronic studies tend to use critical discourse analysis (CDA) to identify issues in foreign media's portrayal of China [3].

CDA, as a means of connecting language with society, analyzes the power relations and ideologies embedded in language through discourse. CDA views discourse as a form of social practice, implying a dialectical relationship between texts and the situations, systems, and social structures that create them. Discourse both maintains and transforms social information [4]. The role of language in social activities reveals the power structures and ideologies behind it—discourse can describe social events differently, perpetuating unequal power relations among social classes. CDA generally analyzes language at two levels: the linguistic level involves linguistic analysis of texts, using theories like systemic functional grammar, corpus linguistics, and cognitive linguistics to identify text features and reveal the power distribution and ideologies behind them. The social level involves sociological analysis [5]. Thus, CDA integrates linguistic and sociological theories to form a constantly evolving synthetic theory [6]. Critical metaphor analysis, a cognitive approach within CDA, was proposed by Charteris-Black in 2004, combining conceptual metaphor theory from cognitive linguistics with CDA to analyze language used by powerful figures [7]. Ji Yuhua and Chen Yan introduced three steps for critical metaphor analysis: (1) collect metaphor examples from texts or conversations, (2) identify the conceptual metaphors they represent, and (3) deduce the patterns of thought that shape people's beliefs and behaviors [8].

In China, the method of applying CDA to media studies to examine the country's image is well-established. For example, Cheng Jintao used Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA framework to study how the New York Times covers China-related issues. Zhang Wei used critical framing analysis, integrating corpus linguistics, cognitive linguistics, and framing theory, to analyze U.S. media coverage of the Belt and Road Initiative [9]. Regarding the "Chinese cotton" incident, some studies have focused on new media, such as Wang Yijing and Qian Qing's examination of Weibo discussions around the H&M boycott of Chinese cotton [10], while others analyzed the event from the perspective of collective identity or criticism of Western fake news. However, applying CDA to the "Chinese cotton" incident is still insufficient, so this paper uses critical metaphor analysis to examine U.S. media coverage during the event, exploring how U.S. media constructs China's image and providing a new perspective on the incident.

### 3. Research Design

This paper selects text reports related to Chinese cotton from CNN (Cable News Network) from March 23, 2021, and the following ten days, choosing more than ten representative articles closely related to the event, covering political, economic, and business themes. The reason for this selection is twofold: first, U.S. media's coverage of China often focuses on themes like "forced labor" and "genocide," which are highly repetitive, so analyzing concentrated reports on one hot event can reveal the underlying ideology and connect various aspects of the event. Second, the "Chinese cotton" incident didn't maintain high attention for long, so the selected articles span a reasonable timeframe. Due to the small number of texts, qualitative research methods are mainly employed. Within the framework of critical metaphor analysis, verbs or prepositions with metaphorical properties, such as "attack," "build," or "into," are identified, and the conceptual metaphors they imply are explained. These conceptual metaphors are then linked to social meanings.

## 4. Text Analysis

### 4.1. Struggle Metaphor

The struggle metaphor is a common way the U.S. media portrays U.S.-China relations. As China's strength has grown, the long-standing dominance of the U.S. has been challenged, and against the backdrop of increasingly difficult Sino-U.S. relations, confrontations between the two countries have become more pronounced. In the news coverage of the "Chinese cotton" incident, CNN depicted a struggle between China and the U.S.

The two sides of the struggle are portrayed as oppositional and mutually exclusive. For example, in describing the tense U.S.-China relations during this period, one report uses the phrase "pick sides": "Increased tensions between the United States and China are one major reason. Washington is confronting China on a range of economic issues including market access and trade, and it has even accused Beijing of carrying out 'genocide' against Uyghurs and other ethnic and religious minority groups in China. That's forcing other countries to pick sides." This description presents two opposing camps represented by China and the U.S., with one side accusing the other and dividing the two into mutually exclusive groups. The media used the phrase "principle or profit" to describe the irreconcilable situation facing multinational companies: "Companies that want to do business in China have long made compromises in the pursuit of success. Now an escalating diplomatic dispute over human rights is underscoring the stark choice facing Western executives: put profit or principles first."

Both sides in the struggle attack each other. On the one hand, CNN's reports on the "Chinese cotton" incident frequently used words like "unity," "join," and "all" to express the solidarity of the U.S. and its allies in standing against China. For example, "The European Union joined the United States and United Kingdom this week in punishing Chinese officials with sanctions over alleged human rights abuses in the country." Here, the U.S. and the UK are conceptualized as a unified whole, with the EU joining in, cognitively expressing solidarity against China. The use of the word "united" has a more direct effect of emphasizing unity in confrontation: "The United States and its allies are stepping up pressure on China in a unified show of force against Beijing's alleged repression of Uyghurs, a predominantly Muslim ethnic minority, in the country's western region." On the other hand, China is portrayed as aggressive in U.S. media coverage, such as in "China's so-called 'wolf warrior' diplomats and state media have attacked Western governments online, rallying against what they term 'hypocritical double standards,'" or "The potential cost for China in overplaying their hand here is relatively high," or "China's dramatic response to sanctions means the investment deal now faces an even tougher path to ratification." These descriptions use words like "attack," "overplay," or "dramatic" to attribute unjust meaning to China's countermeasures, with one headline even using "China's aggressive sanctions" to categorize China's countermeasures.

### 4.2 Container Metaphor

U.S. media often employs the container metaphor to depict China's image in various contexts. In human cognitive systems, a container is conceptualized as an isolated space consisting of included (or excluded) areas, objects inside (or outside) the space, and the isolation itself. CNN conceptualizes China as a container, referring to the government's introduction of Han Chinese, implicitly suggesting an invasion. "The central government has made a concerted effort to develop the region's economy – prompting a large-scale influx of China's ethnic majority Han population in recent decades." In this metaphor, the region is viewed as an independent container, and Han Chinese, with the support of the central government, can cross the container's boundaries from the outside to the inside.

In contrast, when describing the Chinese market, the media often emphasizes the strict isolation

of this "container." Phrases like "But breaking into China also means winning over notoriously strict regulators who wield vast control over who gets to enter and what they get to do" or "Other companies have been locked out altogether because of a refusal to adhere to rules" highlight the stringent boundaries. Foreign companies, outside the container, wish to enter, but the container's isolation either subjects them to regulation or outright exclusion.

U.S. media also pays attention to domestic "nationalist" sentiment. Nationalism is similarly conceptualized as a container, as seen in phrases like "Just as China has whipped its citizens into a nationalist frenzy over China, customers, lawmakers, and investors are stepping up the pressure on Western companies to scrutinize their supply chains for evidence of human rights abuses." The term "nationalist frenzy" categorizes the domestic sentiment, implying that under China's "whipping," citizens outside the container are being pushed into a nationalist fervor.

### 4.3 Social Significance Analysis

The "Chinese cotton" incident occurred shortly after the heated diplomatic confrontation between China and the U.S. at the Alaska summit, which took place after Joe Biden's inauguration. On one hand, the change in U.S. administrations did not alter the overall trend of a hardline approach towards China established by the Trump administration. On the other hand, the diplomatic talks at the Alaska summit ended in discord, intensifying the adversarial relationship between the two nations. In this context of mutual antagonism, U.S. media portrayed the sanctions imposed by the U.S. and its allies using terms like "united against" and "join," emphasizing their solidarity on human rights issues while idealizing their actions. Conversely, China, as the adversarial force, was depicted as aggressive, with CNN labeling China's counteractions against countries and individuals fueling the "Chinese cotton" controversy with terms like "overplay" and "attack," which carry implicit connotations of injustice.

Under the conflict metaphor, both sides engage in attacks. However, when describing China's reciprocal responses, the media used more combative and conflict-laden language, revealing that CNN did not adopt a neutral or fact-based stance. Instead, it utilized the conflict metaphor to portray China as the aggressor. During the "Chinese cotton" incident, CNN also frequently employed the container metaphor. It conceptualized the country's western region, markets, and domestic nationalist sentiment as containers, with different aspects highlighted: China's economic policies were depicted as allowing Han Chinese to enter the "container" of the country's western region; China's control over foreign corporations was portrayed as preventing these companies from accessing the Chinese market; and China was described as leading its citizens into a "nationalist frenzy." These container metaphors reinforced the image of China as a strict manipulator, a stereotype long promoted by Western media. The use and extension of these metaphors illustrate how U.S. media, influenced by its ideological biases, distorts China's image.

## 5. Conclusion

Through critical metaphor analysis of CNN's reports on the "Chinese cotton" incident, this paper identifies two main metaphors used by U.S. media to construct China's image: the struggle metaphor and the container metaphor. These metaphors not only reflect the tension between China and the U.S. but also contribute to the shaping of China's image in a negative light, emphasizing struggle, repression, and control. By framing China in this way, U.S. media reinforces Western ideological positions, shaping international perceptions of China and contributing to the broader discourse surrounding Sino-U.S. relations.

The findings from this analysis suggest that U.S. media plays a significant role in constructing China's image through metaphorical language. By portraying China as both aggressive and repressive, the media reinforces a negative perception of the country, aligning with the political interests of

Western governments. This has important implications for how China is viewed globally and highlights the need for China to actively engage in shaping its own image through strategic communication efforts. Understanding the role of metaphor in media discourse is crucial for China to effectively counter negative portrayals and promote a more balanced narrative in the international arena.

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