

Analyzing Multimodal Construction of China's Image Based on the Illustrated Articles in *The Economist*

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Abstract—The shaping of national image is a two-way process, including “self-shaping” and “shaping by others”. Magazines are one of the important channels for disseminating information. Taking *The Economist's* China-related reports in 2023 as a case, this article focuses on 195 reports on politics and diplomacy as well as economy, conducting quantitative and qualitative analyses of the visual images from the perspective of visual grammar, and further exploring the multimodal construction of China's image in *The Economist*. The research shows that the images in *The Economist* fully realize the representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning. In terms of the representational meaning, narrative representation is the major process. Images that reflect the reactional process, action process and symbolic process are used more frequently. In terms of the interactive meaning, “offer” images, long shot images and images with horizontal perspective appear more frequently. In addition, information value, salience, and framing are interrelated to achieve the compositional meaning. The political and diplomatic image of China constructed by *The Economist* is that China is a country with increasing power, which is authoritarian internally and threatening externally. In terms of economy, China is portrayed as a country with a fast growing economy which can withstand the global economic crisis, but its economic prospects are not optimistic, and the “China threat theory” still exists.

Index Terms—representational meaning, interactive meaning, compositional meaning, *The Economist*, China's image

I. INTRODUCTION

The Economist is a magazine with extensive global influence. Since its inception in 1843, *The Economist* has become a must-read for political, business, and social elites, known for its in-depth analysis, forward-looking insights, and global perspective. On January 28, 2012, it launched a special column for China, further deepening its coverage of China, which mirrors the extent of Western mainstream media's portrayal of China's advancements. In addition to providing a window for Western readers to understand China, the launch of the China column offers us a channel to analyze how China's image has evolved in the eyes of the West. When reading the articles about China in *The Economist*, readers are immediately drawn to the vivid illustrations that provide a way for magazine to portray China's image, playing a key role in shaping readers' perception and understanding of China.

Over the decades, studies on China's national image from the perspective of linguistics have been emerging, but few have studied China's national image from the perspective of multimodal discourse analysis (MDA). According to Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), “any text, if their meanings are realized by more than one social semiotic mode, can be regarded as multimodal text” (p. 183). As a multimodal discourse, *The Economist* integrates a variety of semiotic modes such as text, image and color to convey information and express meaning. Therefore, this article takes the China-related reports of *The Economist* in 2023 as a case, focusing on the illustrations as the main research object, and analyzes the multimodal construction of China's image.

The article aims to analyze the visual meaning of the images in China-related reports in *The Economist* based on the analytical framework provided by visual grammar, and then explore the construction of China's image, interpreting the general perception of modern national image of China in Western media and discussing how to eliminate China's negative image.

The shaping of national image is a two-way process, including “self-shaping” and “shaping by others”. It is significant to understand the views of Western media on China. By exploring the construction of China's image in *The Economist*, this article contributes to a more objective and comprehensive understanding of China's image, which can

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provide guidance for China's next steps. In addition, by applying the analytical framework of visual grammar to the analysis of visual images in English magazine, it also provides useful supplement and case reference for expanding the scope of multimodal research.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Previous Studies on Multimodal Discourse Analysis

With the development of science and technology and the increasingly rich social life, the single mode dominated by language in the past can no longer meet the demands of the times. MDA has emerged to provide a new perspective for people to understand the diverse and colorful semiotic systems. In the 1970s, as one of the earliest researchers of MDA, French scholar Barthes (1977) explored in his book *The Rhetoric of Images* the interaction between images and texts in expressing meaning, summarizing three relations between images and texts in multimodal discourse, namely anchoring, illustration, and relay. In the 1990s, the School of Social Semiotics was born under the influence of British linguist Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics. British scholar O'Toole (1994) proposed in his work that image systems are also one of the social symbols and provided a detailed analysis of exhibition art. American scholars Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) presented a detailed outline of the "grammar" of images in their book *Reading Images* and demonstrated how the meaning functions can be realized visually, thereby making multimodality a rapidly expanding field of research. Based on the three major meta-functions of language in systemic functional linguistics, they proposed a new framework of multimodal discourse analysis—visual grammar theory, which centers on representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning. Other scholars, such as Royce (2002), have studied the complementarity of different symbols in multimodal discourse. Jewitt and Kress (2003) and O'Halloran (2005) enriched the theoretical construction of multimodality. Baldry and Thibault (2006) argued that multimodality describes multiple different symbol resource systems, emphasizing the coordination and utilization of multiple modalities in expressing discourse meaning. In recent years, MDA based on systemic functional linguistics and social semiotics continues to be a major field in multimodal research, with an emphasis on the study of multimodal symbols, involving fields such as media and communication (Kang & Jiang, 2020).

It was not until 2003 when MDA was introduced into China. Subsequently, some Chinese scholars started to evaluate the theoretical basis, research path and practical significance of multimodal research, providing macro guidance for multimodal discourse research in China. Li (2003) conducted a study on the sociosemiotic analysis of multimodal discourse, pointing out that it is of great significance for deepening the understanding of the social semiotic characteristics of language, the generation and understanding of multimodal discourse, and English teaching. Hu (2007) studied multimodality and multimodal construction of meaning from both theoretical and practical perspectives. Gu (2007) proposed to analyze multimodal discourse from two aspects: content and media, and applied his multimodal analytical framework to analyze the celebration ceremony of the 50th anniversary of Beijing Foreign Studies University. Zhang (2009) discussed in detail the grammatical structure in visual grammar and proposed that in the grammar of images, the relationship between pixels, schemas and images should be distinguished. Based on the social semiotic framework of Kress and van Leeuwen, Wei (2009) studied multimodal discourse from various aspects of visual communication and published her first monograph on multimodal discourse analysis. Feng (2015) provided a metafunctional framework for analyzing visual narratives composed of a series of pictures. He further explored visual grammar and expanded its research field. In recent years, the studies on MDA in China have not only yielded rich theoretical achievements, but also been widely applied in practice. Many Chinese scholars have conducted research on multimodal static and dynamic discourses such as movies, news, advertisements, posters, magazines, and classroom discourses. They started from the intermodal relationships at the formal level, exploring the multimodal means and symbolic resources such as text, sound and image in specific discourses, attempting to illustrate how the multimodal elements work together to make the overall meaning of the discourse (Wang & Gan, 2015; Xu & Liu, 2018; Yu & Li, 2016; Zhao, 2020; Zhou, 2020). However, comparatively speaking, Chinese scholars' research in these fields is not systematic and has not yet formed integrative outcomes.

B. Previous Studies on China's Image

American economist Boulding (1959) first proposed the concept of national image, which refers to the combination of a country's perception of itself and the perception of other actors in the international system. After Boulding, similar research spread in the field of international relations, gradually forming the Image Theory. Chinese scholar Guan (2000) pointed out: National image is a comprehensive entity, which is the total evaluation and recognition given by the external and internal public of a country to the country itself, its behavior, various activities and achievements. National image has strong influence and cohesion, and it is a reflection of the overall strength of a country. The construction of China's national image globally is multifaceted, which cannot be separated from the self-shaping of China's mainstream media and the shaping of Western mainstream media. National image is a process of continuous cognition and improvement in practice.

Some Chinese scholars have studied China's national image by analyzing the expression of China's mainstream media, focusing on the analysis of local media's portrayal of a certain policy, significant conference, event, or performance during a specific period in China (Li, 2018; Liu, 2023; Wang, 2022). Other scholars mainly study China's national image by examining the expressions of different Western mainstream media towards China. They analyzed the content, quantity and category of coverage of China by one or more media during a certain period of time (Cai, 2014; Chen, 2017; Gao, 2019; Hu, 2022).

A review of the relevant literature shows that research on “external shaping” of China’s national image tends to focus on reporting from a single foreign mainstream media or comparative analyses between foreign and domestic mainstream media. These studies approach the subject from various angles, demonstrating a rich diversity of perspectives. However, most of them concentrate on the analysis of linguistic symbols, with insufficient emphasis on visual symbols such as images.

With the diversification of semiotic expressions, visual grammar has expanded the existing approaches of multimodal discourse analysis, and gradually been applied to different types of discourse analysis (Cheng & Tu, 2021; Gong, 2016; Liu, 2016). In terms of magazines, some research focused on China’s image and Chinese character symbols in the front covers of Western mainstream magazines, while others paid attention to the image construction of themes such as economy in the front covers of domestic magazines (Liu & Zhang, 2020; Zheng & Zhao, 2012).

The existing studies of China’s national image based on visual grammar are not sufficient. Firstly, the research dimension is relatively concentrated on “self-shaping”, while the studies on the “external shaping” of China’s image in Western mainstream magazines need to be strengthened. Secondly, the research method is mainly confined to the linguistic level, with insufficient attention to visual modes such as images and colors. In fact, the construction of national image is the result of the synergistic effect of various semiotic resources, with different modes blending with each other to convey meaning together. Compared with verbal modes, visual modes are more infectious in image shaping.

III. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

A. Representational Meaning

The representational meaning pertains to the way images represent the relations between the people, places and things they depict (Qi & Hemchua, 2022). Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) divided representational meaning into narrative representation and conceptual representation. The fundamental difference between the two is that there is a “vector” between the image elements in narrative representation, while there is no “vector” in conceptual representation.

(a). Narrative Process

The narrative process presents “unfolding actions and events, process of change, transitory spatial arrangements” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 79). It can be subdivided into action process, reactional process as well as speech and mental process. In the action process, two types of participants are represented: the actor and the goal. The former is the participant from which the vector emanates, or which itself, in whole or in part, forms the vector. Transactional processes occur when both the actor and the goal are present at the same time. When there is only one depicted participant or actor, the action process is non-transactional. When the vector is formed by an eyeline instead of a motion, the process is regarded as a reactional process, in which the participants are the reactor and the phenomenon rather than the actor and the goal. Similar to the action process, the reactional process is classified as either transactional or non-transactional. When there is no phenomenon, readers cannot see what the reactor is looking at, making the image non-transactional. Speech and mental processes are led by the speaker and the senser and represent the words or thoughts that the speaker wants to express, with speech bubbles or thought bubbles as carriers.

(b). Conceptual Process

The conceptual process represents participants “in terms of class, or structure or meaning” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 79), which can be divided into classificational process, analytical process, and symbolic process. In the classificational process, there is a relation of subordinate-superordinate between the represented participants (Qi, 2024). It reflects the subordinate relationship between the subordinate and the superordinate, or the subordinate characteristic of two participants. In the analytical process, the represented participants are related in terms of a part-whole relation (Qi, 2024). It involves two types of participants: one Carrier (the whole) and any number of Possessive Attributes (the component parts). The symbolic process deals with the meaning or essence of the participants (Li, 2003). There are two kinds of participants in the symbolic process. One is the Carrier, the participant which establishes the meaning or identity in the relationship; the other is the Symbolic Attribute, the participant that represents meaning or identity itself. The analytical framework of representational meaning is presented in Figure 1.

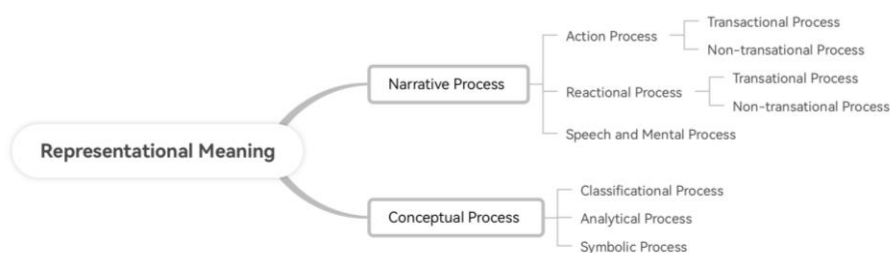


Figure 1. The Analytical Framework of Representational Meaning

B. Interactive Meaning

The interactive meaning of an image reflects the social relations between the participant and the viewer. It is realized by the subsystems of contact, social distance and perspective.

Contact refers to the interpersonal relationship between the participant in the image and the viewer of the image through “eye contact”, which is subdivided into “offer” and “demand” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). “Demand” images emphasize that participants look directly at the viewer, demanding something from the viewer through eye contact in the hope of establishing some kind of imaginary relationship with the viewer. In “offer” images, there is no eye contact between the participant and the viewer, which indicates the image is providing some information for the viewer.

Social distance reflects the close/distant relationship between the represented participants and image viewers, and different “size of frame” like close-up, medium shot and long shot suggests different social relations (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). For example, the close-up shot, which shows the participants’ head and shoulder, indicates an intimate relationship. In a medium shot, the participant’s knees and the waist are visible, indicating a social relationship. The long shot, showing the full figure or more, implies a more impersonal and distant relationship.

Perspective implies the possibility of expressing subjective attitude of the viewer towards the represented participants. It can be divided into horizontal and vertical perspectives. Horizontal perspective involves the frontal angle and the oblique angle, which indicate the involvement and detachment of the viewer respectively. If an image takes a frontal perspective, it allows the viewer to visualize the represented participant, and thus both parties are in an inclusive relationship. If the image is taken at an oblique angle, it means that the viewer is not a part of the participants in the image, implying that the two are separate (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Vertical perspective consists of low angle, eye angle and high angle. High angles give the viewer power over the participants being represented, giving an impression of superiority, exaltation and triumph, while low angles do the opposite. Eye angle indicates equality, namely, there is no power difference between the represented participant and the viewer, so that the viewer is easily integrated into the image. The analytical framework of interactive meaning is shown in Figure 2.

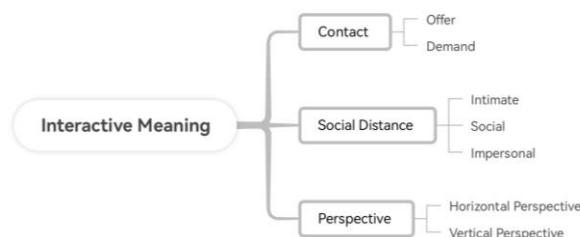


Figure 2. The Analytical Framework of Interactive Meaning

C. Compositional Meaning

The compositional meaning pertains to “the way in which the representational and interactive elements are made to relate to each other” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 176). The representational and interactive elements are integrated into a meaningful whole through informative value, salience and framing, and thereby the compositional meaning is realized.

The information value of an image is achieved by the placement of the elements: top and bottom, left and right, center and margin (Qi & Hemchua, 2022). The elements placed on the left are presented as given information, while the elements on the right presented as information possibly unknown for the viewer. The elements placed in the upper part of an image are presented as ideal or general, and the real or detailed information is placed at the bottom. The element placed in the center is presented as the nucleus of the information to which all the other elements around it are in some sense subservient.

By prioritizing certain compositional elements over others, a hierarchy of importance among the elements can be created by salience. There are a few techniques to implement salience, such as size, foregrounding/backgrounding, color, etc. (Forceville, 1999). The different sizes and proportions of the elements in the composition have different degrees of attraction to the viewer, and the elements with the larger proportions tend to attract more attention.

The framing of the image mainly reflects the framing range and attribution relationship of the elements in the image, which concerns connection and disconnection of the elements in the image. Through such framing devices as boxes, lines, space, colors, etc., the elements are visually connected or separated from other elements in the image (Qi, 2024). Figure 3 presents the analytical framework of compositional meaning.

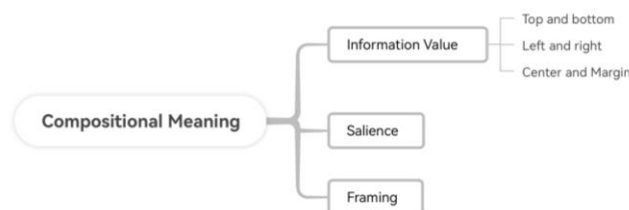


Figure 3. The Analytical Framework of Compositional Meaning

IV. RESEARCH DESIGN

A. Research Questions

To achieve the research objectives, the following two research questions are put forward and answered respectively.

(1) How do the images in China-related reports in *The Economist* realize the representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning?

(2) What kind of national image of China does China-related reports present in *The Economist*?

B. Research Methods

Taking visual grammar as the analytical framework, this article aims to explore the construction of China's image in *The Economist* in terms of representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning. To guarantee the reliability of the research findings, both quantitative and qualitative methods are adopted to analyze the data.

In the stage of quantitative analysis, firstly, the number and proportion of various theme reports related to China in *The Economist* in 2023 are calculated to provide an overall picture of China's national image. Moreover, the statistics and distribution of images in terms of three dimensions as well as their sub-dimensions are calculated and presented based on visual grammar. In addition, the proportions of images with positive meaning and negative meaning are also analyzed respectively.

The quantitative analysis could lay a foundation for the following qualitative analysis. In the stage of qualitative analysis, some typical examples are selected and analyzed in detail to show how the representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning of images are realized in *The Economist*, and the construction of China's image in selected fields is further analyzed by combining the visual and linguistic elements together.

C. Research Procedures

Firstly, the reports from the China column in all 50 issues of *The Economist* from 2023 are taken as the research data. Additionally, to ensure a more comprehensive analysis, reports from other columns of *The Economist* in 2023 with titles that include "China" or "Chinese" are also considered as research data. A statistical analysis of the number of China-related reports and their theme distribution is conducted so as to select the two major themes with the highest proportion, thereby determining the research subjects.

Secondly, based on visual grammar, the number and distribution of illustrations in *The Economist* are statistically analyzed from three dimensions and their sub-dimensions of image meaning. Typical cases are selected to analyze how illustrations in political and diplomatic reports as well as economic reports realize representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning, and also to explore China's image in the China-related reports. Subsequently, the relevant reports are divided into two major categories, namely positive and negative reports, for an in-depth analysis of the national image of China as constructed by *The Economist*.

Based on the research results, the article tends to interpret the Western media's perception of China's national image and offer some suggestions on how to eliminate the negative portrayal of China's image.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Distribution of the Number and Topic of China-Related Reports in the Economist

In 2023, *The Economist* published a total of 50 issues, with 3305 reports, of which 286 were related to China, accounting for 8.7%. The topics of China-related reports can be roughly divided into five categories: politics and diplomacy, economy and business, culture, technology and society. Figure 4 shows the distribution of number and topic of China-related reports in *The Economist* (2023).

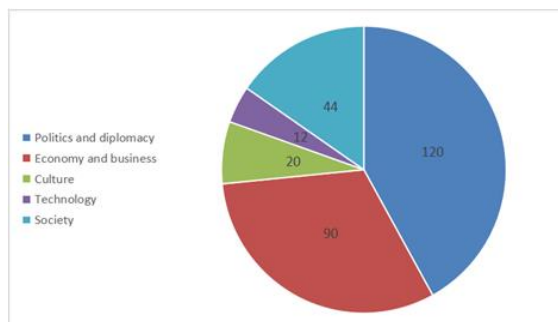


Figure 4. The Distribution of Number and Topic of China-Related Reports

Out of the 286 samples, the majority are reports related to politics and diplomacy, comprising 41.96% of the total. Economic and business reports come in second, representing 31.47%. Social issues are the focus of 15.38% of the reports. The cultural sector occupies approximately 6.99% of the reports. The remaining 4.2% covers topics in the science and technology domain.

In the politics and diplomacy sector, the reports primarily cover China's internal affairs and its interactions with foreign countries. There's a keen focus on China's Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan regions, as well as ethnic minority regions including Tibet and Xinjiang. As for China's diplomacy, China-US relations have always attracted close attention. In addition, China's relations with neighboring countries in the Pacific Ocean and the South China Sea are also under close scrutiny. Since the Russia-Ukraine War erupted in 2022, China's position in the conflict has also drawn intense global attention. Economic and business reports highlight China's tangible assets and digital economy. Besides, after China's zero-COVID policy, topics such as housing prices, economic reforms, foreign trade, regional economies and finance securities are particularly mentioned. Cultural sector encompasses China's education, values, food, sports, language, fashion and media. However, few reports address the topic of science and technology alone. As for society, reports touch various aspects of Chinese people's lives, such as healthcare, public safety, agriculture, sex and family.

Since reports on politics and diplomacy as well as economy and business account for a relatively high proportion, this article mainly focuses on these two categories of topics. Out of a total of 210 reports on the two topics, some are pure-text reports without illustrations. Consequently, the total amount of the images collected and analyzed in the following part is 195.

B. Analysis of Representational Meaning

Kress and van Leeuwen proposed the representational meaning of visual images, indicating that “visual image, like language, can faithfully represent the relations between the people, places and things and the complex set of relations that can exist between images and their viewers.” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 192). Table 1 shows the statistics of representational meaning of images in China-related reports in *The Economist* (2023).

TABLE 1
THE STATISTICS OF REPRESENTATIONAL MEANING OF IMAGES IN CHINA-RELATED REPORTS

Representational Meaning		Number	Percentage	Total Percentage
Narrative Representation	Action Process	56	28.7%	72.8%
	Reactional Process	86	44.1%	
Conceptual Representation	Analytical Process	9	4.6%	27.2%
	Symbolic Process	44	22.6%	

(a). Narrative Process

The narrative process can be subdivided into action process, reactional process, and speech and mental process. According to Table 1, in terms of narrative process, reactional process occupies the highest proportion (44.1%), action process ranks the second (28.7%), while there is no speech and mental process.

1. Action Process

In the action process, the participant who emits the vector is the actor, and the participant pointed by the vector is the goal. Figure 5 shows a typical example of a transactional action process.

Joe Biden's China policies stop short of full containment, but are intolerable to China anyway



Figure 5. Defanging the Tiger (20230401)

defensive tone. The strategy talks of managing competition with the People's Republic responsibly, while working with allies and friends to defend shared interests and values. It then continues: "Our objective is not to change the PRC but to shape the strategic environment in which it operates."

Former hopes have been replaced by fears. China is called a threat to peace in Asia, as it seeks to intimidate the democratic island of Taiwan into submitting to rule from Beijing. China's growing economic and diplomatic clout in Africa, Asia or Latin America is seen as empowering autocrats and undermining liberal democracy. Put in tigerish terms, a bipartisan consensus in Washington now sees China as a predatory power, whose menacing nature will not be altered by pious sermons.

To Communist Party leaders, America's shift in strategy is an attack. Speaking to Chinese business representatives in March, the supreme leader, President Xi Jinping, accused Western countries led by America of containing and suppressing China "on all fronts". For good measure, his newly elevated foreign minister, Qin Gang, denounced even American talk of competing responsibly as a trick. Throwing Mr Biden's words back at him, Mr Qin said that the American president's call to establish "guardrails" in the

Figure 5 was taken from *The Economist* published on April 1, 2023. In this figure, the image of the "tiger" is vividly depicted. The vector in this transactional action process is represented by the treading motion formed by the leg of the tiger in the image. This image includes two participants, with the tiger being the actor and the ball of yarn being the goal. The tiger here stands for the strong-but-unthreatening China that America once sought as a partner, and the ball of yarn symbolizes the whole earth. The image shows to the viewer that the ball of yarn was under the tiger's feet like a toy ball and seemed to be in danger of being crushed at any moment, which corresponds to the title "Defanging the tiger", implying that not only America should beware of the rising China, but also other western countries on the earth are under the risk of being hurt. The image intends to convey that China's development have made other countries in the world, especially America, feel uncomfortable. What America wants is a big cat rather than a fierce tiger. As is written at the end of the report: After all, no tiger chooses to be neutered. This also reflects the current opinion of Western media. They believe that as China's strength and ambition grow, a ferocious contest of strength between China and America seems inevitable in the coming. And to make themselves safer, they would like to see the competition happen.

2. Reactional Process

When a vector is formed by an eyeline, by the gaze of the participant in the image, a reactional process is formed. Figure 6 presents a typical example of transactional reactional process.

In a correlated world, China's peculiarity is a strength



Figure 6. The Chinese Haven (20230401)

Figure 6 was taken from *The Economist* published on April 1, 2023. In this image, the dragon which serves as the reactor is gazing at the money which is the phenomenon here. The vector is formed by the eyeline of the dragon. The whole image is separated by the great wall into two different worlds. The red world outside the great wall is a dangerous and chaotic ocean full of big waves. According to the text, this is a microcosm of how the Western world is affected by the collapse of the American economy. At the moment, the western media turned their attention to China. Although they pointed out China's vulnerabilities, such as the campaign of the Communist Party of China against inequality and China's zero-COVID policy, they still acknowledged that China is the only large economy that is growing faster than last year, and China has been an attractive window for investors. As shown in the image, the yellow world inside the great wall is a much safer place protected by the dragon, and the risks with China's peculiarity could offer some respite from risks with global characteristics. Therefore, it contributes to shaping a positive image of China's economy.

(b). Conceptual Process

The conceptual process can be further divided into classificational process, analytical process and symbolic process. According to Table 1, in terms of conceptual process, the analytical process and symbolic process respectively account for

4.6% and 22.6%, but there is no classificational process among the samples.

1. Analytical Process

In the analytical process, the participants in the images are interconnected through a part-whole structure. Take Figure 7 as an example of analytical process.



Figure 7. China and the World (20230325)

Figure 7 was taken from *The Economist* published on March 25, 2023. In this image, the world serves as the Carrier, which stands for the whole. And different countries in the world serve as Possessive Attributes, which can be regarded as the component parts. It is obvious that in the image China is the largest part and locates at the center of the network of countries, with other countries spinning around it. China's prominent status conflicts with the long-standing Western centrism. The image intends to draw readers' attention and vigilance towards the prominence of China. According to the text, China's solutions to the world problems such as "Global Security Initiative", "Global Development Initiative" and "Global Civilization Initiative" are described as threatening and colonial plans. China is depicted as a fake peacemaker with the ambition to reshape a new world order where China has the greatest say. The report implies that other countries should beware of China, so as not to be harmed.

2. Symbolic Process

Symbolic process focuses on "what participants are or what they mean" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 105). The symbolic process includes the Carrier, a symbol, and Symbolic Attributes, the identity and meaning carried by the symbol. Take Figure 8 as an example of symbolic process.

A slowing economy saps public enthusiasm for megaprojects far from home



Figure 8. The Belt and Road, Seen From China (20230909)

transporters. More prosperous provincial capitals, such as Chengdu, Zhengzhou and Xi'an, have fared far better as BRI transport hubs. Indeed, total foreign trade each year to and from Gansu, a poor province, has actually fallen since 2013.

The party can take some comfort in public opinion. Locals strolling near the rail yard talk without prompting of China's generosity. Ms Luo, a retired scientific technician, calls the BRI a sign of China's strength. "It's good that China is helping others," she says, loyally noting that local youngsters have found work with logistics companies building warehouses nearby.

Just beyond the Dongchuan depot lies Hekou, an old Silk Road town restored as a tourist site. Its Qing-dynasty customs hall and street market are a bit forlorn, truth be told, and a nearby highway is loud. Still, a local driver, Mr Su, has brought a few out-of-town Chinese tourists there. Mr Su sees China as exceptionally benevolent, and grumbles about foreigners who accuse the BRI of advancing "aggressive goals". China is different, he asserts: "Western people think about how things will affect them, but Chinese people have a spirit of sacrifice." That said, Mr Su concedes that Lanzhou has not gained as he had expected from the BRI, and that state media sometimes exaggerate China's good deeds. National leaders

Figure 8 was taken from *The Economist* published on September 9, 2023. In this image, the black dragon is the Carrier, which symbolizes China. The body of the dragon is made up of winding roads, implying that China is the builder of these roads. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a global infrastructure program launched by China a decade ago, was introduced in this report. However, it intends to indicate the gloomy future of the BRI by depicting that BRI is suffering the discontent of some places where the locals' hopes of BRI-fuelled boom have faded. Even worse, China is depicted as shifting away from big new investments that only have long-term returns and toward "small and beautiful" projects that can benefit quickly. The black dragon is often considered as a powerful, cold and evil creature. In the image, the black dragon seems casting a greedy eye on its prey. Although *The Economist* points out that China has actually helped some of its "Belt and Road" partners develop infrastructure, it yet defines China as a greedy country which has a strong desire for control.

C. Analysis of Interactive Meaning

Interactive meaning involves the representation of the social relationship between the image and the viewer, which is realized through three subsystems: contact, social distance and perspective. Table 2 shows the statistics of interactive

meaning of images in China-related reports in *The Economist* (2023).

TABLE 2
THE STATISTICS OF INTERACTIVE MEANING OF IMAGES IN CHINA-RELATED REPORTS

Interactive Meaning	Contact		Social Distance			Perspective	
	Demand	Offer	Intimate	Social	Impersonal	Horizontal	Vertical
Number	38	157	25	48	122	163	32
Percentage	19.5%	80.5%	12.8%	24.6%	62.6%	83.6%	16.4%

(a). *Contact*

According to Table 2, the “offer” images are frequently used, accounting for 80.5%, while the “demand” images only occupy 19.5%. Figure 9 serves as a typical example of “offer” image.



Figure 9. Clamping Down on Dissent in Hong Kong (20230812)

Obviously, there is no eye contact between the represented participants in the image and the viewer. As an “offer” image, it offers the represented participants to the viewer as items of information, objects of contemplation. In this image, the represented participants are two protesters and a few local policemen. The report shows the “soft resistance” which happened in Hong Kong. Two protesters were surrounded by the policemen, with red “X”s taped over their mouths, indicating that they cannot freely express their thoughts in Hong Kong. They stood silently, expressing their dissatisfaction with the intervention from the Chinese mainland. At the same time, a conspicuous red cordon appeared in the scene, creating an atmosphere of suppression. As a result, China is depicted as a negative image of an authoritarian regime that suppresses the freedom of its people.

(b). *Social Distance*

As mentioned before, social distance between the represented participants and the viewer can be described as intimate, social and impersonal, depending on the different “size of frame” used in the image. According to Table 2, impersonal relations occupy the largest proportion, accounting for 62.6%, followed by social relations which occupy the proportion of 24.6%. Images showing intimate relationships were rare, accounting for only 12.8%. Figure 10 is an example of social relationship.



Figure 10. Clothes and Diplomacy (20230624)

Figure 10 displays a typical medium shot, which shows the woman’s knees and the waist, thus establishing a social relationship. The image shows Xiomara Castro, the president of Honduras, was on a visit to Beijing. The medium shot focused on this key figure, reflecting her expression and clothes in an objective way, contributing to establish a social relation between the participant and the viewer. She was dressed in a bright red suit, wearing a flowing red tie, and smiling towards the parade. For Chinese people, red symbolizes prosperity and good fortune. Her wearing red clothes indicates that the country she stands for has a favor for China and hopes to develop friendship with China. What is displayed in the

image echoes the subtitle “Clothes and Diplomacy”. Therefore, the image reflects China’s popularity and its continuously rising positive image in international communication.

(c). *Perspective*

There are two types of perspectives, namely horizontal and vertical. According to Table 2, horizontal perspective is in dominant position, accounting for 83.6%, while vertical perspective takes up only 16.4%. Take Figure 11 as an example of horizontal perspective.



Figure 11. America V China (20230401)

This image takes a horizontal frontal perspective, which allows the viewer to visualize the represented participants. It brings about a feeling of involvement to the viewers, making them feel like they are experiencing what is happening in the image. In this case, the viewers will observe the Chinese panda from the perspective of America. What they saw is not a normal cute giant panda, but a vicious panda which is biting boxing gloves and showing its sharp claws, conveying to the viewers a sense of danger. The image shows the tense relationship between China and the United States. Besides, the text even suggests three principles for America to resist China, which clearly shows that the West is willing to see a confrontation between the two countries. As a result, this report constructs a constantly developing but threatening image of China.

D. *Analysis of Compositional Meaning*

Compositional meaning refers to “the way in which the representational and interactive elements are made to relate to each other, the way they are integrated into a whole” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 176). It is mainly realized through information value, salience and framing. Take Figure 12 as an example to display the realization of compositional meaning.

Does China face a lost decade?



Figure 12. China’s Bleak Future (20230916)

First, Figure 12 shows an image of center-margin structure, in which the red deflated balloon in the center is highlighted. In addition, salience is achieved not only by the dominant size of the balloon, but also by the color contrast. Bright red color of the balloon stands out against the dark orange background, which can easily draw the viewers’ attention to the important participant. In terms of framing, the irregular edge of the balloon serves as framing device, separating the balloon from the background in the image. In this way, all the elements are integrated into a whole and thus the compositional meaning is achieved. It is not hard to find that the red deflated balloon features a pattern of China’s five-star red flag, which implies the core information of the report. Associated with the subtitle, this deflated and wrinkled balloon symbolizes a bleak future for China, as Chinese enterprises accumulate more debt and China’s falling housing prices are

damaging the balance-sheets of households and property firms. This image corresponds to the prediction of the report that China risks slipping into a prolonged recession, reflecting that the West is not optimistic about China's economic situation in the future.

E. The Construction of China's Image in *The Economist*

Quantitative and qualitative analyses show that the images in China-related reports in *The Economist* realize the representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning. Narrative process is the major process to realize the representational meaning, and reactional process and symbolic process are dominant in narrative representation and conceptual representation respectively. In terms of the representational meaning, the high percentage of reactional process and action process shows that the reports tend to introduce China to the viewers by unfolding actions and events. Additionally, *The Economist* prefers to use symbolic process. Symbols like giant tiger, black dragon and the Five-Starred Red Flag are used to represent images of China in a negative way. In terms of the interactive meaning, "offer" images are absolutely dominant, while there are few images of "demand". The "offer" images play a crucial role in conveying China's information to Western countries. As for "social distance" images, most of them are "impersonal" and "social" images, which expresses the alienated attitude of the West towards China. As for perspectives, images with horizontal perspective are used more frequently to bring about a feeling of involvement to the viewers. In terms of the compositional meaning, information value, salience, framing are used together to remind the westerners of the negative image of China.

The table below shows the statistics of positive and negative images of China constructed in China-related reports of politics & diplomacy and that of economy & business. After analyzing the relevant reports, the images can be classified into two kinds, namely positive images which reveal China's positive national image, and negative images which reveal China's negative national image.

TABLE 3
THE STATISTICS OF POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE IMAGES OF CHINA

Reports Theme Image Number	The Number of Positive Image	The Number of Negative Image
Politics and Diplomacy	6	106
Economy and Business	16	67

In terms of political and diplomatic coverage, the negative image of China far outweighs the positive image. China's national image has always been portrayed as authoritarian internally and threatening externally. *The Economist* has repeatedly disregarded the "One-China Principle" and the "One Country, Two Systems Policy" when reporting China's internal affairs. For instance, much of its coverage of Hong Kong emphasizes the loss of freedom by Hong Kong people, Chinese government's oppression, and the public's sense of frustration. Regarding China's diplomacy, China is portrayed as an increasingly powerful but ambitious and threatening power. Most coverage focuses specifically on Sino-American relations. It generally adopts the perspective of an observer, hoping that the two nations can balance each other, or it is more inclined to support the United States in confronting China. The situation is roughly the same when it comes to economic and business-themed reporting. *The Economist* rarely praises China's secure economic environment. Although it acknowledges the rapid development of China's economy, it expresses pessimism about China's economic prospects and believes that China has a strong desire to control other countries economically.

VI. CONCLUSION

Taking *The Economist's* China-related reports in 2023 as a case, this article conducts quantitative and qualitative analyses of the visual images from the perspective of visual grammar, and further explores the construction of China's image in *The Economist*. Some major findings can be summarized as follows.

Firstly, the images in China-related reports in *The Economist* fully realize the representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning, serving as a good complement to the texts. In terms of the representational meaning, narrative representation is the major process, which helps to introduce China to the viewers by unfolding actions and events. In addition, reactional process and symbolic process are dominant in narrative representation and conceptual representation respectively. In terms of the interactive meaning, "offer" images are absolutely dominant, playing a crucial role in conveying China's information to Western countries. Long shot and medium shot are frequently used to generate "impersonal" and "social" images, expressing the alienated attitude of the West towards China. And images with horizontal perspective are used more frequently to bring about a feeling of involvement to the viewers. In terms of the compositional meaning, information value, salience, framing are correlated together to present the national image of China.

Secondly, the analyses show that China's national image is mainly portrayed negatively in *The Economist*, both in the political and diplomatic fields as well as the economic and business fields. In terms of politics and diplomacy, China's national image is always portrayed as authoritarian internally and threatening externally. In addition, China is portrayed as an increasingly powerful but ambitious and threatening power. In terms of economy and business, China's national image is portrayed as a country with a fast growing economy which can withstand the global economic crisis. However, China is mainly depicted as a country with a strong desire to control other countries economically, and its economic prospects are not optimistic.

To eliminate China's negative national image, some suggestions are put forward as follows. First of all, regarding Western media's criticism of China's internal affairs, China should use its own media, such as *China Daily* and TikTok, to timely and comprehensively disclose the real fact of the event, narrow the cognitive gap of Western people, and thus break the discourse hegemony of Western media on China. At the same time, China should actively encourage international organizations or foreign media to tell Chinese stories in a positive way. Secondly, in terms of diplomacy, China should further strengthen exchanges and interactions with other countries, adhere to win-win cooperation, and avoid "The Belt and Road Initiative" from falling into the so-called "colonial trap" by the West. In addition, in terms of economy, the reporting of China's economic recession by Western media has logical flaws. Therefore, China should not only face up to the problem and respond appropriately, but also need to explore innovative ways to empower the economy.

In this article, only China-related reports on politics and diplomacy as well as economy and business are selected as the research objects, and thus the sample size is relatively small. In future research, the research object can be expanded to include China-related reports on all topics, and the image-text relations of the reports can be analyzed in more depth.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was supported by a grant from "Jiangsu Provincial Social Science Fund of China" (Grant No.: 22ZWD001). It was also supported by the Linguistic Semiotics and Intercultural Research Team (Team No.: ZJSRT2023006).

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