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# Corpus-Based Critical Metaphor Analysis of U. S. Media Coverage on Taiwan, China: A Case Study of CNN

TAN Qida

Ningbo University, China

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**Abstract:** This study employs Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA) and utilizes a corpus tool to construct a custom corpus of CNN's Chinese Taiwan-related news coverage spanning from 2001 to 2024, comprising 140,000 words. By examining the patterns, discourse functions, and diachronic changes of metaphor usage, this research analyzes the ideological intentions behind U. S. media coverage on Taiwan. Findings reveal that CNN uses metaphors to construct distinct images of the Chinese mainland, Chinese Taiwan, and the United States, portraying them as “the aggressor,” “the victim,” and “the defender of democracy,” respectively. This discourse model serves to influence public opinion, shape social psychological frameworks, and construct political realities. Additionally, the diachronic analysis of metaphor usage indicates that it is significantly influenced by Sino-American relations and U. S. interests, reflecting the notion that “media discourse is an extension of politics.”

**Keywords:** Critical Metaphor Analysis; Chinese Taiwan-related news coverage; Taiwan question; Corpus-based study

**Notes on the contributor:** TAN Qida, postgraduate student, research interest: cognitive linguistics and psycholinguistics.

## 1. Introduction

As a mouthpiece of political groups, news media have long served as a crucial vehicle for ideological

dissemination. News discourse is often imbued with positions and attitudes, employing discursive strategies such as metaphor to frame, embellish, or even distort objective reality. In this context, metaphor is frequently used to convey particular stances, viewpoints, and ideologies, thereby shaping public perceptions of events. According to Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory, metaphor is not merely a rhetorical device but also a fundamental mechanism through which humans understand abstract concepts. It involves a mapping from a source domain to a target domain, where the former is typically more concrete and the latter more abstract. Metaphor thus plays a vital role in the conceptualization of the world. Moreover, Lakoff (2004) argues that repeated exposure to particular metaphoric expressions encourages individuals to adopt these metaphors as habitual frameworks for thinking, while Charteris-Black (2005) highlights the strong persuasive power of metaphor.

At present, studies of news discourse within the framework of Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA) are predominantly synchronic, typically focusing on media coverage of a specific event or period. For example, Wang et al. (2022) compiled a corpus of approximately 50,000 words from U. S. media reports over a six-month period on the "U. S. withdrawal from the TPP," analyzing how metaphors guided public opinion in related discourse. Similarly, Li and Qu (2023) conducted a comparative analysis of Chinese and American media editorials on COVID-19, building corpora from *People's Daily* and *The Economist*, and identifying differences in metaphor use and communicative purposes. However, existing domestic research remains limited and exhibits several shortcomings. First, most studies rely on synchronic data, with relatively few adopting a diachronic perspective. Second, many analyses are based on small samples, often involving limited self-compiled corpora or no corpus at all. In addition, there has been little research applying the CMA framework to news discourse on the Taiwan question.

In recent years, cross-strait relations have remained tense, and the Taiwan question has become a focal point of international attention. Western media, particularly those in the United States, often incorporate narratives that distort facts in their reporting, attempting to influence public opinion, exacerbate tensions, and undermine peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. Against this backdrop, the present study adopts a diachronic approach, using reports from the U. S. mainstream media outlet CNN as a case study. It examines metaphors in news discourse on cross-strait relations since the 1990s, with the aim of uncovering shifts in American societal attitudes toward the Taiwan question and providing insights for understanding Western discursive systems as well as for constructing China's international discourse.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA), grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), conceptual metaphor theory, and corpus linguistics, investigates metaphor's influence on social cognition and power relations. CMA involves metaphor identification, classification, and context-specific interpretation to uncover embedded ideological meanings (Charteris-Black, 2004). For rigorous identification, this study adopts the Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit (MIPVU) established by Steen et al. (2010), ensuring systematic and replicable metaphor annotation.

### 3. Research Design and Methodology

Data comprising news reports containing “Taiwan AND China” were retrieved from CNN. com via a Python-based web crawler. After manual screening and Python script cleaning to remove extraneous elements, a corpus of 69 articles (142, 538 words) spanning 2001–2024 was constructed using AntConc 3. 5. 9.

Metaphor identification relied on a manual analysis of a sampled sub-corpus (28 articles, 77, 477 words) using the UAM CorpusTool under the MIPVU guidelines. Identified metaphors were categorized by *source domains* to generate search terms for the full corpus, with all automated results manually verified for metaphorical usage. Finally, *resonance* (frequency multiplied by type) was calculated to reflect diachronic distribution patterns.

### 4. Results and Discussion

#### 4.1 Distribution of Metaphor Use in the Corpus

Following identification, metaphors were categorized by source domain. Six major types were identified: *violence*, *physical*, *journey*, *body*, *health*, and *building* metaphors, yielding 63 keywords and 680 instances (see Table 1).

**Table 1 Summary of metaphors in corpus**

Metaphors	Keywords and frequency	Resonance
Violence	defend(60), threat (36), campaign (25), incursion (24), victory (23), aggression(16), intimidate (14), provocation (14), undermine (13), protect (13), isolate (12), fight (12), renegade (11), deterrent (10), bloody (10), resist (10), impact(9), invade(8), hostile(7), violation(7), bellicose (5), champion (4), infuriate (4), offensive (4), bully (3), clash (3), encroach (2), relentless(2), malicious(2)	10527
Physical	pressure(49), ramp(15), warm(13), bolster (8), landslide (7), balance(6), bitter(6), scrutiny(4), stable(4), orbit(4), lever(3), blast (3), heat (3)	1625
Journey	move (50), step (23), path(10), forward (4), road (3), voyage(3)	558
Body	push (26), seize (9), embrace (6), muscle (3), pull (3), friendship (3), shrug (2)	364
Health	Quarantine (19), robust (5), cripple (5), pain (5)	136
Building	Build (6), door(5), pillar(1), pave(1)	52

*Violence* metaphors are most frequent (363 cases, 53.3%), indicating their dominance in CNN’s Chinese Taiwan-related reporting. Drawing on war and human aggression (e. g., “trade war,” “attack,” “fight,” “hostile”), these metaphors frame political relations as conflict. Given that the Taiwan question is China’s internal affair, such usage reflects a tendency to shape readers’ perceptions through confrontational framing.

*Physical* metaphors occur 125 times (18.3%), involving domains such as physical properties and object relations. For example, temperature terms (“warm”) describe relations, while “balance” indicates stabilization. Less frequent categories include *journey* metaphors (93, 13.6%), which conceptualize political processes as developmental paths; *body* metaphors (52, 7.6%), such as “muscle” for military power and “embrace” for cooperation; *health* metaphors (34, 5%), using terms like “pain” or “robust” to evaluate conditions; and *building* metaphors (13, 1.9%), where relations are described as being “built.”

Overall, metaphor functions as a key discursive strategy for conveying ideology. The following analysis examines specific cases and their diachronic variation.

## 4.2 Critical Metaphor Analysis of CNN’s Chinese Taiwan-Related Reporting

### 4.2.1 Construction of the Image of the Chinese Mainland in News Discourse

Due to differences in national interests and ideology, U. S. media coverage of China often carries adversarial undertones. Previous critical discourse studies (e. g. , Wang et al. , 2022; Li & Qu, 2023; Song & Wang, 2024) have shown that U. S. media frequently assign negative labels to China, portraying it as a “provoker,” “enemy,” or “disruptor,” with the aim of shaping readers’ attitudes and reinforcing ideological divisions.

Consistent with these findings, the present corpus reveals extensive use of metaphors targeting China, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Metaphorical expressions targeting China

Type	Keywords
Violence	threat, campaign, incursion, aggression, intimidate, provocation, undermine, isolate, renegade, deterrent, bloody, impact, invade, hostile, violation, bellicose, champion, infuriate, offensive, scrutiny, bully, clash, encroach, relentless, malicious, fight
Physical	pressure, bitter, stable, lever, blast, heat
Journey	move, step, forward, voyage
Body	push, seize, muscle, pull
Health	quarantine, cripple

Among these metaphorical expressions, *violence* metaphors are the most dominant and are largely negative in connotation, with *war* metaphors being particularly prevalent. War metaphor is a universal conceptual pattern across cultures and languages; notably, Lakoff and Johnson (1980), in *Metaphors We Live By*, identify ARGUMENT IS WAR as a primary example. As a domain deeply embedded in human history, war involves roles such as aggressors and victims. In CNN’s Chinese Taiwan-related reporting, however, China is frequently framed as the “aggressor.”

**Example 1:** It is said that 27 Chinese warplanes in Taiwan made **incursions** into Taiwan’s air defense identification zone, and 22 planes crossed the median line dividing the Taiwan Strait on Wednesday – an unprecedented number since Taiwan began publicly releasing information about China’s air incursions about two years ago. (*Pelosi says US will ‘not abandon’ Taiwan as China begins military drills*, 2022/08/03)

In Example 1, which report on China's military exercises following visits to Taiwan by U. S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, CNN employs the term "incursion." While such visits are widely viewed by China as provocative actions undermining regional stability, these war metaphors portray China's responses as "aggression", thereby constructing an image of China as an aggressor and legitimizing U. S. actions.

**Example 2:** That means that if China is absolutely determined to take the island it probably can. But there's a caveat; while China could likely **prevail**, any **victory** would come at an extremely **bloody** price for both Beijing and its adversaries. (*China has the power to take Taiwan, but it would cost an extremely bloody price*, 2022/06/01)

A similar pattern appears in Example 2, where CNN frames China's reunification efforts as inherently warlike and implying a "peace-threatening aggressor, expressions such as "prevail," "victory," and "bloody" further reinforce this framing. While "victory" and "bloody" originate from war-related domains, their use here portrays China as a militaristic and ruthless actor willing to pursue reunification at any cost, thereby distorting perceptions of its political stance.

**Example 3:** Taiwan goes to the polls Saturday for elections dominated more than ever by relations with Beijing, which has been accused of trying to **bully** voters and distort the results in its favor. (*Voters in Taiwan go to the polls amid fears of Beijing's influence and fake news*, 2020/01/11)

Beyond war metaphors, the corpus also includes metaphors based on human violent behavior. In Example 3, the term "bully" depicts China as an aggressor and Taiwan as a victim, suggesting coercion and reinforcing an image of China as domineering and oppressive.

**Example 4:** China's military could **isolate** Taiwan, **cripple** its economy, and make the democratic island **succumb** to the will of Beijing's ruling Communist Party without ever firing a shot, a prominent think tank warns. (*How China could take Taiwan without even needing to invade*, 2024/06/22)

Example 4 contains three metaphorical expressions. In addition to the violence metaphors "isolate" and "succumb," the body metaphor "cripple" invokes the notion of physical impairment to suggest harm inflicted by the Chinese mainland on Taiwan. Together, these metaphors construct a consistent image of China as violent and overbearing, further reinforcing negative perceptions among readers.

#### 4.2.2 Construction of Taiwan's Image in News Discourse

Due to its strategic location, Taiwan constitutes a key component of the U. S. Indo-Pacific strategy and the "first island chain," playing an important role in constraining China. In the corpus, CNN predominantly constructs Taiwan as a "victim," thereby eliciting readers' sympathy and reinforcing negative attitudes toward China. The distribution of metaphors targeting Taiwan is shown in Table 3.

**Table 3 Metaphorical expressions targeting Chinese Taiwan**

Type	Keywords
Violence	defend, fight, resist,
Physical	orbit, pull, balance, ramp, bolster, landslide, stable
Journey	Move, step, path
Body	embrace, friendship, shrug
Health	Robust, pain
Building	Build, door, pillar, pave

Among these, physical metaphors are most frequent and are generally positive in connotation. Violence metaphors, by contrast, largely center on the notion of “resistance.” Such metaphors imply defensive actions against external aggression and thus position the actor as a victim while implicitly framing the opposing party as an aggressor. This pattern appears frequently in CNN’s reporting.

**Example 5:** Like their counterparts in Ukraine the Taiwanese would have the advantage of home turf, knowing the ground and being highly motivated to **defend** it. (*China has the power to take Taiwan, but it would cost an extremely bloody price*, 2022/06/01)

For instance, in Example 5, Taiwan question is compared to Ukraine in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, suggesting that the Chinese mainland might similarly “invade” Taiwan. The use of “defend” frames Taiwan as a victim of potential aggression, while reinterpreting China’s reunification efforts as “invasion.”

**Example 6:** China’s authoritarian turn under Xi’s leadership and plummeting relations with Washington have **pulled** Taiwan closer into the **orbit** of the US. (*Pelosi says US will ‘not abandon’ Taiwan as China begins military drills*, 2022/08/03)

Example 6 employs a physical metaphor to depict U. S. -Taiwan relations. The United States is conceptualized as a central force, with allied regions such as Taiwan positioned in its orbit. This metaphor emphasizes Taiwan’s role as a U. S. “ally” and constructs an image of Taiwan as reliant on U. S. protection. Additionally, the use of “pull” suggests that Taiwan’s closer alignment with the United States is driven by China’s actions, reinforcing perceptions of a U. S. -Taiwan alliance while deepening negative views of China.

**Example 7:** That trend was underscored in January, when Taiwanese voters **shrugged off** warnings by China and handed the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) a historic third term by electing Lai Ching-te, who has long faced Beijing’s wrath for championing Taiwan’s sovereignty. (*China’s Xi hosts former Taiwan president in Beijing*, 2024/04/10)

The term “shrug” literally refers to the physical act of raising one’s shoulders, typically signaling indifference or dismissal toward a problem, threat, or warning. In Example 7, this body metaphor conveys that

people in Taiwan treat warnings from the Chinese mainland with indifference. It implicitly suggests antagonistic attitudes toward the Chinese mainland, thereby distorting readers' understanding of cross-strait relations.

#### 4.2.3 Construction of United States's Image in News Discourse

On June 5, 2024, a spokesperson for China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that the Taiwan question is purely China's internal affair and brooks no external interference, and that no pressure or threat can undermine China's resolve to safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity (Li & Liu, 2024). However, the United States has long maintained improper ties with Taiwan and repeatedly intervened in cross-strait affairs, framing its involvement under the banner of "democracy" and "freedom." In the corpus, CNN employs numerous metaphors targeting the United States to highlight the perceived legitimacy of its actions (see Table 4).

**Table 4 Metaphorical expressions targeting the United States and the West**

Type	Keywords
Violence	defend, protect, fight, resist
Physical	bolster
Journey	step
Body	Friendship, pull
Build	Build

**Example 8:** Such moves have included condemning China's human rights records; selling arms to Taiwan; vowing to **protect** the island against **invasion**; granting a transit visa to Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian. (*How China retreats to attack*, 2001/05/15)

**Example 9:** US President Joe Biden's warning the US would **defend** Taiwan against Chinese **aggression** has made headlines around the world – and put growing tensions between the small democratic island and its neighboring autocratic superpower back under the spotlight. (*What you need to know about China-Taiwan tensions*, 2022/05/25)

In CNN's reporting, U. S. intervention is consistently framed as "protection." Violence metaphors are frequently used to construe cross-strait relations as a "war," with the United States positioned as the protector of the "victim." For instance, in Example 8, terms such as "protect" and "invasion" portray the United States as safeguarding Taiwan from the Chinese mainland. Similarly, in Example 9, "defend" and "aggression" construct the U. S. as resisting threats alongside Taiwan. The same example further contrasts Taiwan as a "democratic island" with the Chinese mainland as an "autocratic superpower," reinforcing the image of the United States as a defender of democracy. Through such metaphorical framing, U. S. hegemonic behavior is recast as opposition to hegemony and a defense of democratic values, thereby enhancing readers' identification with its actions.

The critical analysis of metaphors reveals that CNN's Taiwan-related reporting constructs distinct images of the Chinese mainland, Taiwan, and the United States, forming a discursive pattern in which the Chinese mainland is portrayed as an aggressor, Taiwan as a victim and U. S. ally, and the United States as a protector and defender of democracy.

In international relations, all acts of narration are inherently political. Narratives provide cognitive frameworks through which people interpret the world, shaping storylines that guide perception and understanding (Liu, 2011). Metaphor, as a representational and evaluative device, simplifies complex social realities into more concrete conceptual models (Hart, 2014). As readers engage with news discourse, they construct mental models of the Taiwan question under the guidance of metaphorical framing. Van Dijk (2002) argues that repeated exposure to similar discourse, in the absence of alternative perspectives, can transform individual mental models into socially shared representations, fostering ideological bias. Likewise, the repeated use of such metaphorical frameworks in CNN's reporting reinforces and stabilizes readers' cognitive models of the Taiwan question, facilitating the broader dissemination of their ideological implications.

Moreover, news media can shape public opinion and, in turn, influence governmental decision-making in the United States (Qiao, 2001). By portraying China's reunification efforts as "aggression," emphasizing the "legitimacy" of U. S. actions, and downplaying its interference in China's internal affairs, CNN's metaphorical framing may mislead public perception and ultimately affect policy attitudes toward the Taiwan question both in the United States and beyond.

#### 4.2.4 Diachronic Variation of Metaphor Use in News Discourse

As a mouthpiece of political interests, media representations of the Taiwan question are closely tied to China-U. S. relations and shifting U. S. strategic priorities. Since 2000, changes in bilateral relations and leadership on both sides of the Taiwan Strait have been reflected in metaphor choices within the corpus.

Following China's accession to the WTO in 2001, economic ties with the United States deepened, and cooperation outweighed competition. During this period, U. S. media generally adhered to the "One China" principle and opposed Taiwan independence.

**Example 10:** U. S. President George W. Bush has bluntly served notice that he opposes plans for a referendum in Taiwan which his administration views as a means of **stoking** pro-independence **sentiment**. (*Blunt Bush message for Taiwan*, 2003/12/09)

For example, in 2003, amid pro-independence rhetoric from the Taiwan authorities, the Bush administration expressed opposition to maintain stable relations with China. Example 10 uses the metaphor of "fanning the flames" to warn against escalating tensions. Overall, the United States maintained strategic ambiguity, neither fully committing to defend Taiwan nor supporting independence.

**Example 11:** The first regular charter flights between China's mainland and Taiwan began Friday in a sign of warming relations between Beijing and Taipei. (*Historic China-Taiwan flights begin*, 2008/07/04)

**Example 12:** He added that the risk to the United States of a conflict between China and Taiwan is the lowest in 60 years as a result of his government's efforts to **build** a rapprochement with Beijing. (*Ma Taiwan won't ask U. S. to fight China*, 2010/04/30)

**Example 13:** With regards to the economic development of both sides, this treaty will act as a **foundation** for the peaceful development of our relationship. (*Taiwan, China sign historic trade deal*, 2010/06/29)

From 2008 to 2016, cross-strait relations improved under the Ma Ying-jeou authorities, while China-U. S. relations remained broadly cooperative. Media discourse during this period reflects this trend. For instance, Example 11 uses the physical metaphor “warming” to describe improving cross-strait ties. Building metaphors such as “build” (Example 12) highlight efforts to strengthen relations, while “foundation” (Example 13) frames the ECFA agreement as a basis for peaceful development. Compared to later periods, violence metaphors were less frequent, with physical and constructive metaphors more prominent.

After 2016, however, China-U. S. relations deteriorated sharply amid the Trump administration’s trade policies, while cross-strait relations worsened under the Tsai Ing-wen authorities. During this period, CNN increasingly employed violence metaphors to promote a “China threat” narrative, portraying the Chinese mainland as an aggressor, Taiwan as a victim, and emphasizing U. S. -Taiwan alignment. As shown in Table 5, the resonance of violence metaphors between 2016 and 2024 is significantly higher than in 2001–2015, indicating that such metaphors are concentrated in recent reporting. These findings underscore the strong influence of political relations on media discourse. Metaphor use in Taiwan-related reporting is not neutral but serves specific political interests.

**Table 5 Diachronic Variation of Violence Metaphors in the Corpus**

Period	Keywords of violent metaphors and frequency	Resonance
2001—2015	defend (11), threat (7), campaign (6), victory (6), intimidate (2), provocation (1), undermine (2), protect (4), renegade (5), impact (2), hostile (2), violation (2), infuriate (1)	663
2016—2024	defend (49), threat (29), campaign (19), incursion (24), victory (17), aggression (16), intimidate (12), provocation (13), undermine (11), protect (9), isolate (12), fight (12), renegade (6), deterrent (10), bloody (10), resist (10), impact (7), invade (8), hostile (5), violation (5), bellicose (5), champion (4), infuriate (3), offensive (4), bully (3), clash(3), encroach (2), relentless (2), malicious (2)	9048

## 5. Conclusion

Although news reporting aspires to represent reality objectively, media outlets often convey their stances and ideologies through linguistic choices and selective framing. Metaphor serves as a key tool in this process. Discourse is not a neutral medium; rather, news reporting is shaped by specific ideological positions and contributes to their reproduction (Fowler, 1991). As Charteris-Black (2004) argues, metaphor is central to the conceptualization of political issues and the construction of worldviews.

Drawing on Critical Metaphor Analysis and corpus-based methods, this study examined CNN’s Taiwan-related reporting since 2000. By analyzing patterns and functions of metaphor use in relation to their socio-historical context, the study identified underlying ideological tendencies and traced their diachronic development. The findings show that, through metaphor, CNN constructs distinct images of the Chinese mainland, Taiwan,

and the United States, forming a discursive model in which the Chinese mainland is portrayed as an aggressor, Taiwan as a victim, and the United States as a defender of democracy. Such metaphorical framing legitimizes specific viewpoints, shapes public perception, and contributes to the construction of social and political realities. Moreover, the diachronic analysis indicates that metaphor use is closely influenced by China-U. S. relations and U. S. strategic interests, highlighting the political nature of media discourse.

In light of these findings, critical awareness is essential when engaging with foreign media coverage. At the same time, Chinese media should strengthen their capacity to present China's perspective, clarify the nature of the Taiwan question, and challenge misleading narratives, thereby enhancing China's international discourse and public image.

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