

Research on Shanghai's International Image in British New Media from the Perspective of Conceptual Metaphor

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Abstract: Shanghai, as China's most important international metropolis, plays a strategically vital role in global image construction. As an essential component of Western mainstream public opinion, British new media's discursive construction of Shanghai profoundly shapes the cognitive frameworks of international audiences. Drawing upon Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Critical Metaphor Analysis, this study takes news coverage related to Shanghai from major British new media platforms as its corpus. Using Wmatrix semantic tagging and keyword analysis, high-frequency conceptual metaphors were identified and categorized into four core metaphorical patterns: "the Global Financial Machine," "the High-Speed Organism," "the Consumerist Metropolis," and "the Chaotic Metropolis." Furthermore, the paper explores how these metaphors construct Shanghai's urban image and reflect the cognitive schemas of British media regarding Chinese modernity. The findings indicate that the construction of Shanghai's image by British new media is not unidirectional; rather, it exhibits a complex structure where global imagination, expectations of modernity, and urban anxiety coexist, revealing the inherent discursive tension within Western media when interpreting China's urbanization process.

Keywords: Conceptual Metaphor; British Media; Shanghai; Urban Image; Critical Discourse Analysis

I. Introduction

Shanghai serves as an essential window through which China is deeply embedded in the global system. As an international financial center, trade hub, and cultural nexus, Shanghai's position in the competitive landscape of global cities continues to rise. The shaping and dissemination of its international image have become a key dimension of enhancing China's international discourse power. Against this backdrop, how Western mainstream

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media present and construct Shanghai's image not only bears on the effectiveness of the city's international communication, but also reflects deeper cognitive frameworks and ideological stances.

In the Western new media environment, British mainstream media exercise undeniable influence over public opinion. Digital platforms of organizations such as The Guardian, The Daily Telegraph, and the BBC reach a global audience, exerting significant agenda-setting influence within Western public discourse on China-related reporting. Existing studies show that when reporting on Chinese topics, British media tend to employ specific discursive strategies to construct the image of the "Other" (Liang et al., 2025), and systematic differences exist in reporting stances and discursive expressions among media organizations with different political inclinations (Li & Lai, 2021).

Language is the fundamental vehicle for image construction, while metaphor is one of the cognitive mechanisms in language most capable of conveying ideological shaping functions. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) pointed out that metaphor is not just a matter of poetic imagination or rhetorical strategy, but a fundamental human thinking and cognitive process—indeed, the very way "we live by." In media discourse, metaphors embed the reporter's cognitive framework and ideological stance into the text by selectively highlighting and hiding certain dimensions of meaning, thereby profoundly influencing the audience's perception of the subject.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following three research questions: (1) What high-frequency conceptual metaphors exist in British new media coverage related to Shanghai? (2) How do these conceptual metaphors construct Shanghai's urban image? (3) What cognitive tendencies of British new media toward China do these metaphors reflect?

II. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), as its core theoretical framework. CMT posits that metaphor is not merely a rhetorical phenomenon, but a cognitive mechanism through which humans understand and organize a relatively abstract or unfamiliar target domain via a more concrete and familiar source domain. The essence of metaphor lies in the systematic mapping between different conceptual domains. Regarding urban image, media often construct meanings around a city's functions, developmental state, cultural characteristics, and social relationships by conceptualizing the city through various source domains such as machines, organisms, containers, or stages. Therefore, examining metaphors of Shanghai in British new media not only reveals features of language expression, but also enables further analysis of how media comprehend and present Shanghai as a global city through different cognitive frameworks.

Building upon CMT, this paper incorporates Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA) as an explanatory analytical approach. CMA emphasizes that metaphor is not a neutral linguistic choice; the selection of specific source domains often highlights certain features of the target object while hiding other possible modes of understanding, thereby influencing the audience's perception of social reality. (J Charteris-Black, 2004) Consequently, this study addresses not only "what Shanghai is metaphorized as" in British new media, but also "why this metaphor is chosen" and "what urban cognition this metaphor constructs." By analyzing the selection and contextualized usage

of various metaphorical source domains, this paper investigates the evaluative meanings, cognitive frameworks, and underlying ideological orientations carried by these metaphors.

In addition, this study draws on the contextualized perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis to examine metaphors within specific social, political, and cultural contexts. Metaphorical meaning does not exist independently of context; its selection and use are jointly influenced by media discourse norms, social cognition, and specific historical-political contexts. Thus, this study combines the concrete contexts of British new media reports to analyze how different conceptual metaphors jointly participate in constructing Shanghai's urban image, further uncovering how British new media perceive Shanghai's modernity, global city identity, and Chinese urban development.

Based on the above theories, this study establishes the following analytical path: First, Wmatrix is used to perform keyword and semantic domain analysis on the corpus to identify prominent semantic fields related to Shanghai's urban image; second, the MIPVU procedure is applied to identify potential metaphorical expressions and summarize conceptual metaphor categories based on source-to-target domain mappings; finally, from the perspective of Critical Metaphor Analysis, the evaluative meanings, cognitive frameworks, and ideological connotations of different metaphors are examined in light of specific text contexts, thereby revealing the construction mechanism of Shanghai's urban image in British new media.

III. Research Design

3.1 Data Sources

This study uses coverage related to Shanghai from digital platforms of mainstream British news media as its corpus source, including three platforms: The Guardian (theguardian.com), The Daily Telegraph (telegraph.co.uk), and BBC News (bbc.com/news), covering articles published between 2018 and 2023. These three outlets were selected because, on the one hand, they possess strong influence and representativeness within the British new media ecosystem; on the other hand, The Guardian leans relatively liberal, The Daily Telegraph is generally regarded as conservative-leaning, and the BBC, as a public service broadcaster, has a distinct public media attribute. This selection aims to capture the diverse landscape of British new media discourse on Shanghai. The corpus was retrieved using keyword searches including "Shanghai" and its common contextual collocations. After final screening, a valid corpus of 203,419 tokens was obtained, forming the analytical corpus for this study.

3.2 Research Methods

This study utilizes the Wmatrix semantic tagging tool for semantic domain analysis and keyword extraction, using the tool's built-in British English 2021 dictionary as the reference corpus to identify high-frequency semantic categories and their keyness in Shanghai-related coverage. On this basis, metaphorical expressions in the corpus are systematically identified following the MIPVU (Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit) protocol to determine metaphorical usage at the lexical level. Superordinate conceptual metaphors are then

summarized according to Conceptual Metaphor Theory, forming a categorization system of metaphor types. Finally, qualitative analysis is conducted on the discursive functions and ideological implications of various metaphors within specific textual contexts, achieving an organic combination of quantitative identification and qualitative interpretation.

IV. Results and Analysis

Semantic domain analysis and keyword extraction results show that four high-frequency conceptual metaphors exist in British new media reports on Shanghai, mapping Shanghai respectively as a global financial machine, a high-speed organism, a consumerist metropolis, and a chaotic metropolis.

This study utilized Wmatrix to perform semantic tagging analysis on British new media reports concerning Shanghai. The corpus contains a total of 39,476 words, with the keyword "Shanghai" occurring 1,121 times, making it one of the highest-frequency content words in the corpus. USAS semantic tag analysis reveals that British new media construct Shanghai's international image primarily from dimensions such as economy, space, competition, and technology, forming several core conceptual metaphors below.

4.1 Global Network: "Shanghai is a Global Hub"

Item	USAS Tag	Frequency	Semantic Domain
global	W3	21	Global
international	M7	36	International relations
world	W1	62	World
port	M4	31	Transport facilities
route	M6	14	Spatial connections
flight	M5	17	Transport

Wmatrix semantic domain analysis shows that in British new media reports about Shanghai, semantic domains related to globalization and spatial connections exhibit high keyness, indicating that British media tend to understand Shanghai's international role through the cognitive frameworks of "global network" and "spatial connectivity." Specifically, terms such as "international," "world," and "global" appearing frequently in the corpus reinforce Shanghai's linkage with the global system, while terms with transport and spatial attributes such as "port," "route," and "flight" highlight Shanghai's function as a cross-regional flow node. The table below lists representative terms related to the "global hub" metaphor:

Item	Frequency	Semantic Features
world	62	Global space
international	36	International connections
port	31	Transport node
global	21	Global positioning
flight	17	Cross-regional flow
route	14	Spatial connection

The aforementioned terms together constitute a semantic field centered on "global connection" and "spatial network." Among them, words such as "world," "global," and "international" place Shanghai within the global system, highlighting its international identity; words such as "port," "flight," and "route" connect Shanghai to transport networks and the movement of people and goods, reflecting its spatial attribute as a global connection node.

Based on the MIPVU metaphor identification protocol, further analysis shows that numerous expressions involving transport networks and spatial connections in British new media coverage do not merely describe the city's geographical location, but rather structure the understanding of Shanghai's international urban functions through the source domain of "hub." From this, the conceptual metaphor can be summarized as:

SHANGHAI IS A GLOBAL NETWORK HUB

This metaphor maps the central node in a transport network onto the construction of an urban international image, allowing Shanghai to be understood as a vital node connecting different regions and facilitating global flows. Specifically, its source domain to target domain mapping relationship is as follows:

Source Domain: Transport/Spatial Network	Target Domain: Shanghai's International Image
hub	International center
route	Global connections
connection	Degree of openness

Through the above mapping, attributes of "centrality," "connectivity," and "fluidity" in transport networks are imparted to Shanghai's urban image. In other words, Shanghai is no longer merely a geographical entity, but is constructed as a critical node in global networks of economy, trade, and human flow. The central structure implied by "hub" reinforces Shanghai's key position in the global system, while concepts like "route" and "connection" further highlight its openness and capacity for international interaction.

From a discursive construction perspective, the "global hub" metaphor reflects British new media's positive construction of Shanghai's global city identity. On the one hand, this metaphor emphasizes Shanghai's tight connection with the world economic system, framing it as an open city with international radiation capacity; on the other hand, it also reflects the importance attached to "connectivity" and "network position" within global city evaluation systems—namely, that a city's value depends not only on its own scale, but even more on its node status within global networks. Therefore, through spatial network metaphors, British media position Shanghai as an essential participant in the global flow system, constructing an urban image with openness, connectivity, and internationalization as core characteristics.

4.2 Global Competition: "Shanghai is a Global Competitor"

In addition to economic and spatial semantics, British new media reports on Shanghai also display noticeable semantic fields of competition and hierarchy, where Shanghai is frequently associated with evaluative dimensions such as scale, speed, development, and achievement, reflecting its relative position within the global city competition system.

Item	USAS Tag	Frequency	Semantic Domain
top	M6	19	Rank/Position
largest	N3.2+++	12	Scale
fastest	N3.8+++	7	Speed
growth	N3.2+	9	Development
success	X9.2+	6	Success

Semantic features by frequency are as follows:

Item	Frequency	Semantic Features
top	19	Rank and leading position
largest	12	Scale advantage
fastest	7	Speed of development
growth	9	Development and growth
success	6	Development achievements

The above terms together constitute a competitive semantic field centered on "rank—speed—scale—achievement." Among them, words like "top," "largest," and "fastest" compare cities through rank, scale, and speed, implying relative competitive relations; "growth" and "success" reinforce Shanghai's growth potential and

developmental effectiveness from the dual levels of developmental process and outcome. It is evident that British new media do not merely provide static descriptions of Shanghai's economic and urban features, but place it within a comparative and competitive framework among different cities.

Based on further MIPVU analysis of relevant contexts, it is found that certain competitive expressions apply experiential structures of "winning/losing" and "leading" from sports and contests to describe urban development. For instance, when words like win depart from concrete sports contest contexts and are used to describe cities, enterprises, or economic entities gaining advantages, a semantic contrast forms between basic and contextual meanings, establishing connections through cross-domain mapping. On this basis, the conceptual metaphor can be summarized as:

SHANGHAI IS A GLOBAL COMPETITOR

This metaphor maps concepts such as leading, winning/losing, and rankings from sports competition into the construction of Shanghai's urban development and international status, conceptualizing urban development as an ongoing process of global competition. Specifically, its source domain to target domain mapping relationship is as follows:

Source Domain: Sports/Competition	Target Domain: Urban Development and International Status
rank	International status of the city
win	Development advantage
opponent	Other international cities
competition	Global city competition
champion	Leading international city

Through the mapping above, attributes of leadership, relativity, and outcome-orientation from competitive fields are conferred upon Shanghai's urban image. Words such as "top," "largest," and "fastest" further reinforce this competitive framework, rendering Shanghai's urban development not just an isolated internal growth process, but a dynamic process that can be evaluated against other cities through scale, speed, and achievements. Consequently, Shanghai is constructed as a global city possessing strong developmental capacity and international competitiveness.

From the stance of discursive construction, the "global competitor" metaphor highlights Shanghai's growth, leadership, and competitiveness. On the one hand, relevant expressions accentuate Shanghai's advantages in economic development, industrial scale, and urban construction through comparative evaluation; on the other

hand, this metaphor reflects a prominent logic of competition in the evaluation system of global cities, where a city's international status must be measured by indicators such as rankings, scale, speed, and developmental results. Thus, British new media position Shanghai as an active participant and potential leader in the global city system through a competitive framework, constructing an urban image featuring rapid development, prominent strength, and international competitiveness.

4.3 Technology and Culture: High-Attention Non-Metaphorical Representations

Compared with the economic and spatial dimensions, although the domains of technology and culture also occupy a certain presence in British new media reports on Shanghai, identification via MIPVU reveals that conceptual metaphors do not dominate in these relevant expressions. Therefore, the technology and culture dimensions should not be simply summarized as independent core conceptual metaphors, but are better understood as important supplementary dimensions of Shanghai's international image.

Item	USAS Tag	Frequency	Semantic Domain
museum	Z3_MWE	12	Cultural facilities
restaurant	F1	12	Lifestyle
culture	C1	3	Culture
festival	K1	6	Cultural activities

Item	USAS Tag	Frequency	Semantic Domain
technology	Y1	7	Science & technology
engineering	Y1	11	Engineering
robot	O3	3	Technical equipment
electric	O3	10	Energy technology
high-speed	N3.8+	4	High-speed technology

Wmatrix word frequency and semantic domain results demonstrate that British media maintain continuous attention to Shanghai's technological and cultural attributes. For instance, in the technology domain, terms such as engineering, technology, electric, and robot appear, among which engineering appears 11 times, electric 10 times, and technology 7 times; in the cultural domain, terms such as museum, restaurant, festival, and culture appear, with museum and restaurant both appearing 12 times.

The meanings of these lexical items mostly retain their basic literal sense. For example, technology and engineering directly denote technological and engineering activities, while museum, restaurant, and festival refer

directly to cultural facilities, urban consumption, and cultural activities, respectively. Therefore, from an MIPVU perspective, the high frequency of these semantic domains primarily reflects media agenda settings and topics of interest, with low degree of metaphorization. Nevertheless, the frequent appearance of these technology and culture terms indicates that British media view Shanghai as a modern city endowed with technological development capabilities, urban lifestyle resources, and cultural assets.

In terms of image presentation, technological and cultural terms display strong neutral descriptive characteristics. Technology semantics revolve around engineering, energy, technical equipment, and innovative activities, while culture semantics mainly involve urban lifestyle resources like museums, dining, and festivals. These expressions offer basic urban features of Shanghai rather than making direct value judgments. Hence, compared with expressions containing obvious evaluative and comparative overtones like "global competitor," the technology and culture dimensions present descriptions of Shanghai's objective development status rather than explicit evaluations. Specific evaluative attitudes require further judgment in light of broader corpus data, contexts, and metaphorical expressions.

Overall, Shanghai's technological image in British new media is primarily portrayed as a modern city possessing strong technological and engineering capabilities, while its cultural image appears as an international city equipped with cultural facilities and diverse lifestyles. Both receive media attention, but their degree of metaphorization remains limited, relying more on direct representation through literal vocabulary. Therefore, technology and culture can serve as integral components of Shanghai's international image, but should not be forcibly summarized as independent core conceptual metaphors without sufficient corpus verification.

V. Discussion

British media's reporting on Shanghai predominantly employs economic and globalization metaphors, reflecting their ideological inclinations. From the perspective of the economic machine metaphor, Shanghai is viewed as the engine and fulcrum of China's economic development, highlighting efficiency and momentum; simultaneously, the global hub metaphor highlights Shanghai's openness and international connective status, aligning with literature portraying Shanghai as an "economic engine and international gateway city." The competitor metaphor reflects the logic of urban contestation under globalization, placing Shanghai within international city rankings and competition. Although the innovation lab metaphor appears with lower frequency, it highlights Shanghai's technological prowess and industrial upgrading through terms such as "technology" and "engineering," echoing research indicating that the rise of Pudong transformed Shanghai into a financial center and innovation hub. Overall, economic and technological metaphors complement each other, rendering Shanghai's image modern and high-growth (see Tables 5-3 to 5-4). This trend is consistent with the findings of Shan and Wu (2026): in international media reports, economy and trade (27%) and technological innovation (22%) constitute the primary topics, whereas topics such as culture account for a smaller proportion.

Metaphors are interconnected and hierarchically structured: economic metaphors are the most dominant, establishing Shanghai's image of global competitiveness; global hub metaphors supplement its open and interconnected attributes; competitor metaphors emphasize its ranking and speed of development within the world

city system; and innovation metaphors emphasize the modernization process. Together, these metaphors construct Shanghai's image as a "global metropolis," aligning with common Western media narratives regarding first-tier Chinese cities (just as research points out that cities are often likened to machines or ecosystems). Ideologically, these metaphors reflect perceptions of Chinese cities within capitalist and globalization frameworks: prioritizing economic strength, market mechanisms, and efficiency, while accentuating developmental achievements and international standing.

In contrast, the weakening of cultural metaphors reflects the selectivity of media reporting. Possible reasons include: Western media prefer reporting on hard news related to economic development and technological innovation, lacking sufficient attention to Shanghai's humanistic life and cultural events; additionally, differences in language and values may make Shanghai's cultural stories less appealing to Western audiences. The marginalization of the cultural dimension leaves Shanghai's image unbalanced in international communication: international audiences view Shanghai primarily as an economic center while overlooking its historical heritage and cultural diversity. Such a simplified image is unfavorable for enhancing Shanghai's cultural soft power and may affect audiences' overall perception of the city's vitality and quality of life.

VI. Conclusion

Framed by Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Critical Metaphor Analysis, this paper examines the metaphorical system and national image construction mechanism in British new media reports on Shanghai. It summarizes four core conceptual metaphors—"the Global Financial Machine," "the High-Speed Organism," "the Consumerist Metropolis," and "the Chaotic Metropolis"—and reveals how the discursive interaction among these four categories constructs a complex urban image of Shanghai.

The study indicates that British new media's image construction of Shanghai is not a simple matter of "demonization" or "beautification"; rather, through the juxtaposition and tension of diverse metaphorical frameworks, it achieves a complex cognitive construction of Chinese urban modernity. Taking Western experiences of modernity as an implicit reference and the discursive logic of global consumer capitalism as a baseline, this construction acknowledges Shanghai's status as a global city while continuously maintaining the primacy of the Western cognitive framework.

The limitations of this study lie in the fact that the corpus size and time span still need further expansion, and the operational procedure for metaphor identification can be further refined. Future research can build upon a larger corpus and a more comprehensive metaphor system by introducing a comparative discourse analysis perspective. This would allow for cross-national comparisons between British new media's construction of Shanghai and that of other European media (e.g., French or German), or contrasts with Chinese official media's external communication discourse, thereby understanding the ideological mechanisms of British media reporting on Shanghai within a broader geopolitical discursive landscape.

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