The Evolution of Cartoon Images of Pandas in Western Media: A Multimodal Analysis[*]

YANG Yijia

Wuhan University, Wuhan, China

Applying visual grammar theory, this study examines representational, interactive, and compositional meanings of the giant panda in Western media cartoons related to China from 1999 to the present. Distinct phases in the panda's representation were identified and illustrated by cases of cartoons in major Western media. These phases trace shift of panda cartoon image from a symbol of peace and friendliness to a politicized emblem of China's international stance. Key visual trends, such as transitivity, color symbolism, scale enlargement, and increasing compositional complexity, embody the panda's role in shaping China's global image and its function in international discourse. These trends reflect the panda's transformation into a contested symbol, which mediates between China's self-representation and Western perceptions of its geopolitical rise. By situating the analysis within the context of China's growing global influence, this study contributes to visual and media studies, demonstrating how cultural symbols are recontextualized to reflect and shape geopolitical narratives.

Keywords: multi-modal analysis, visual grammar theory, Western media, panda cartoon image

Introduction

The giant panda, a quintessential Chinese cultural symbol, has long acted as a bridge between China and the world. As China's global influence grows, the multimodal dissemination of its cultural symbols, particularly the panda, has gained importance. While its universal appeal fosters positive engagement as a symbol of peace and friendliness (Huang, 2013; Yang, 2018), its increasing politicization reflects the complexities of China's rising global influence (Benabdallah, 2015; Brown, 2016). Although existing research has explored the panda's role in "panda diplomacy" (Zhang, 2015; Zheng, 2017), there remains a gap in understanding its representation in Western media through visual narratives like cartoons (Price & Li, 2020).

This study addresses this gap by applying multimodal discourse analysis, rooted in Halliday's (1978) systemic functional linguistics and Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar theory. It analyzes panda cartoons collected from major Western media outlets and examines how panda cartoons narrate China's national image, tracing the panda's evolution from a symbol of peace to a politicized emblem of China's international stance (Buckingham, 2013; Benabdallah, 2015). By focusing on visual elements like transitivity, color symbolism, and compositional complexity, the study highlights the panda's dual role as a cultural icon and political symbol and explores how Western media's framing reflects and shapes perceptions of China's global rise (Brown, 2016; Yang, 2018).

Theoretical Framework

Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar theory, grounded in Halliday's (1978) social semiotic approach to language—specifically systemic functional linguistics (SFL)—provides the theoretical foundation for this study. SFL conceptualizes language as a resource for constructing meaning, organized around three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual (Halliday, 1978).

The ideational function represents experiences of the world through experiential and logical components. Experiential processes (material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioral, and existential) express actions, states, and relationships, while the logical function addresses connections between units of meaning, aligning with the representational meaning in visual grammar (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). The interpersonal function focuses on social relationships, enabling speakers to express attitudes, judgments, and evaluations through mood and modality systems, which convey degrees of certainty and shape interpersonal dynamics. The textual function organizes linguistic elements into coherent texts through theme and rheme systems, ensuring ideational and interpersonal meanings are contextually relevant and effectively conveyed (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004).

Visual grammar extends SFL principles to visual communication, asserting that images construct meaning through representational, interactive, and compositional levels (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Representational meaning explores how images narratively or conceptually represent the world, with narrative processes depicting actions and events through vectors and conceptual processes representing categories, structures, and symbolic meanings. Interactive meaning examines the relationship between image participants and the viewer, realized through contact (direct or indirect interaction), social distance (level of intimacy), perspective (angle of representation), and modality (credibility of information). Compositional meaning integrates representational and interactive meanings through spatial arrangement, including information value (positioning elements to convey known/new or ideal/actual information), salience (degree of attraction through size, contrast, and clarity), and framing (connecting or separating visual components to indicate relationships). Together, visual grammar and SFL provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing linguistic and visual semiotic resources.

Methodology

To begin with, data collection was conducted using mainstream search engines such as Google and Bing, targeting cartoon images of giant pandas published in Western media reports as accompanying illustrations in news articles. The selection criteria ensured that the images were cartoon representations, reflecting the stances of Western media rather than photographic depictions or artistic creations (e.g., the *Kung Fu Panda* movie series). Subsequently, a specialized corpus was subsequently constructed, comprising 89 valid cartoon images and their associated metadata, meticulously cleaned and organized to ensure reliability and relevance to the research objectives.

Finally, drawing on Halliday's (1978) systemic functional linguistics (SFL) and Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar theory, the analysis employs a multimodal approach to examine the evolution of panda imagery in Western media across three distinct historical periods.

Results

Coverage of Cartoon Panda Images in Western Media

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of the 89 giant panda cartoon images by the country of the publishing media, revealing that the United States dominated with 37 reports, followed by Canada (20), the United Kingdom

(17), Australia (7), New Zealand (7), and Germany (1). This distribution reflects the varying levels of attention different countries pay to Chinese cultural symbols.
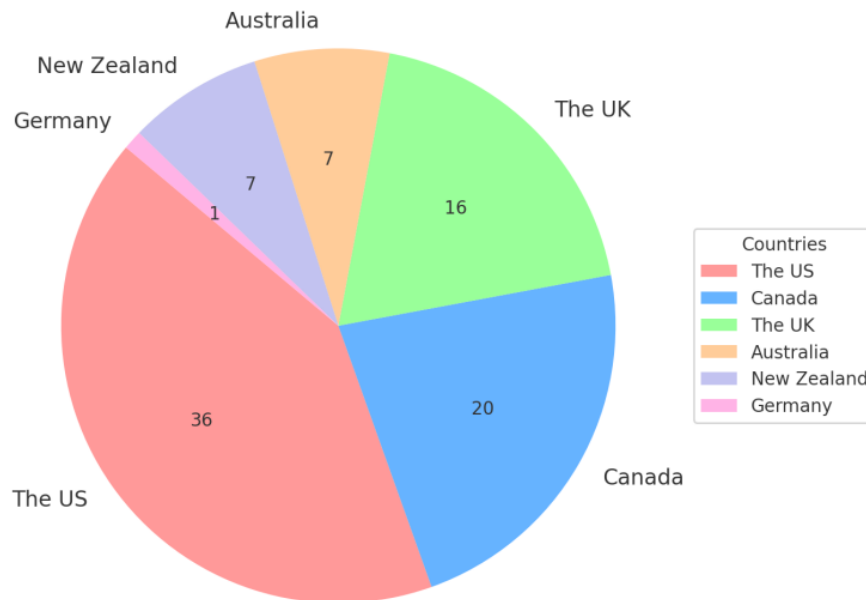

Figure 1. Coverage of cartoon panda images in Western media.

Figure 2 highlights the top five Western media outlets that published the most giant panda cartoon images: The Economist (UK) and Calgary Herald (Canada) each with 10 images, followed by RNZ (New Zealand), The Wall Street Journal (USA), and Toronto Star (Canada) with four images each. The analysis revealed the high level of attention paid by The Economist and Calgary Herald to the giant panda as a Chinese cultural symbol, the increasing intersection of economic and cultural topics in media reporting (as seen in *The Wall Street Journal*).
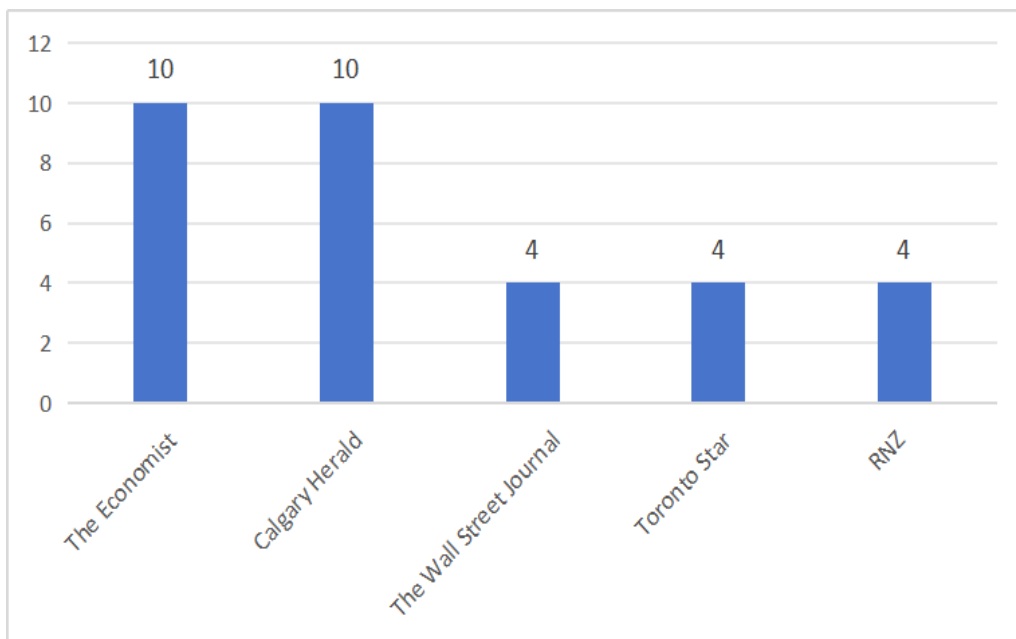

Figure 2. Top five Western media outlets publishing the most cartoon panda images.

Figure 3 reflects the changes in the number of giant panda cartoon images published by Western media from 1999 to 2023. Key observations include the low and stable numbers from 1999-2007, indicating limited use of panda imagery; a significant increase in 2008, likely linked to the Beijing Olympics; lower numbers from 2009-2012 after the initial surge; peaks in 2013 and 2016, possibly tied to geopolitical or cultural events; fluctuating but declining numbers from 2017-2020, reflecting reduced attention; a sharp increase in 2021, likely associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and related global news events; and numbers decreasing but remaining higher than pre-pandemic levels from 2022-2023. This temporal analysis highlights the fluctuating significance of the giant panda as a cultural symbol in Western media, influenced by China's evolving global role and major international events.
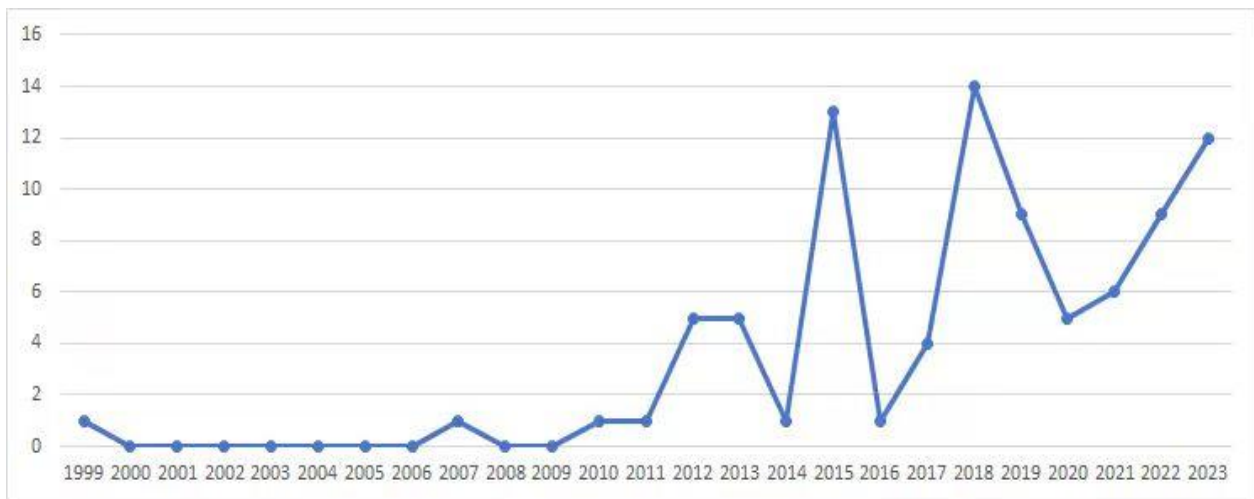

Figure 3. Temporal coverage analysis of cartoon images of giant pandas in Western media.

A Historical and Case-Based Analysis of the Three Phases of Panda Cartoon Imagery

Integration and takeoff period: Panda diplomacy and the shaping of international image (1999-2009). This period marks the stabilization and global dissemination of "panda diplomacy", as China leveraged the panda as a symbol of its soft power. During this phase, China actively promoted the panda as a cultural symbol through international cooperation, particularly through panda loan programs to various countries. Two waves of "panda fever" occurred: the first during China's bid to host the 2008 Olympic Games, where the panda-inspired mascot gained global popularity, and the second during the gifting of pandas to Taiwan region (2005-2008). These events culminated in 2008, a pivotal year for China's international communication efforts, coinciding with the release of the Kung Fu Panda movie, which further globalized the panda's image (Shi & Zhang, 2019).

Panda imagery in Western media during this period was minimal, with only two cartoon images identified in the study's database, both published by *The Economist* (UK). The pandas were depicted realistically, with black-and-white coloring and rounded features, reflecting their traditional image as gentle and harmless creatures. However, a transition in imagery was observed toward the end of this period, as seen in Figure 4 (*The Economist*, May 17, 2007), where the panda was depicted as larger compared to earlier images, foreshadowing subsequent shifts in representation (Figure 5, *The Economist*, March 18, 1999).

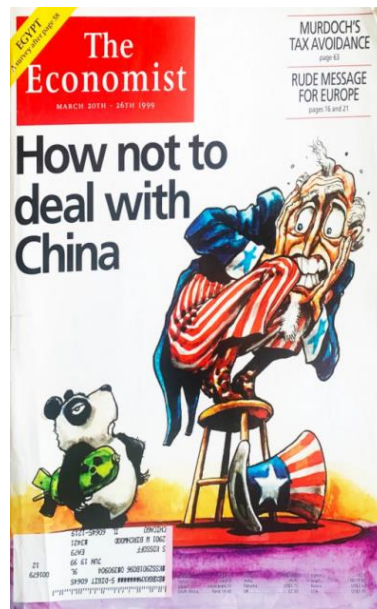*Figure 4. The Economist article: "America's Fear of China" (The Economist, 2007).*

Figure 5. The Economist article: "How Not to Deal With China" (The Economist, 1999).

Figure 5, published on March 18, 1999, critiques American overreaction to China's perceived threat. The cartoon features two characters: a panicked Uncle Sam and a giant panda holding a globe as a toy. The analysis reveals representational meaning of the panda image: The panda symbolizes China, while Uncle Sam represents the United States. The interaction between the two characters conveys tension, with Uncle Sam's exaggerated fear contrasting with the panda's calm demeanor. The missile in the panda's hand references the 1999 "Dongfeng missile incident", adding a layer of political commentary.

This image employs both interactive and compositional meaning to convey its satirical critique of U.S. policy toward China. In terms of interactive meaning, Uncle Sam's direct gaze invites the viewer to empathize with his emotions, fostering a sense of identification with his perspective, while the panda's lack of eye contact reinforces its perceived harmlessness and detachment. The social distance is closer with Uncle Sam, creating an

emotional connection, whereas the panda's distance emphasizes its isolation. The slightly elevated perspective places the viewer in a position of judgment or observation, further emphasizing the critical tone. Compositionally, the left-right layout positions the panda (symbolizing the known or past) on the left and Uncle Sam (representing the new or future) on the right, highlighting their ideological differences. Uncle Sam's central and upper positioning underscores his importance, while the panda's contrasting colors and placement ensure it remains equally visible. The absence of a physical boundary between the two characters creates a metaphorical separation, reinforcing their distinct identities. Together, these elements, combined with the title "How Not to Deal With China", amplify the image's critique of current U.S. policies and attitudes toward China.

Transition period: Shifting panda imagery and international perspectives (2010-2017). This period reflects China's rapid economic growth and increased global influence, leading to a shift in how Western media portrayed the panda. China's GDP growth exceeded 7% annually, solidifying its position as the world's second-largest economy. Its active diplomatic engagements, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, further elevated its global role. Panda imagery became more prominent but transformed from cute and harmless to large, fierce, and menacing. Facial expressions often included frowns and sharp eyes, reflecting Western perceptions of China as a growing threat. Figure 6 (*NBC News*, July 19, 2011) depicts a panda as a landlord demanding rent from a tenant (representing the United States).
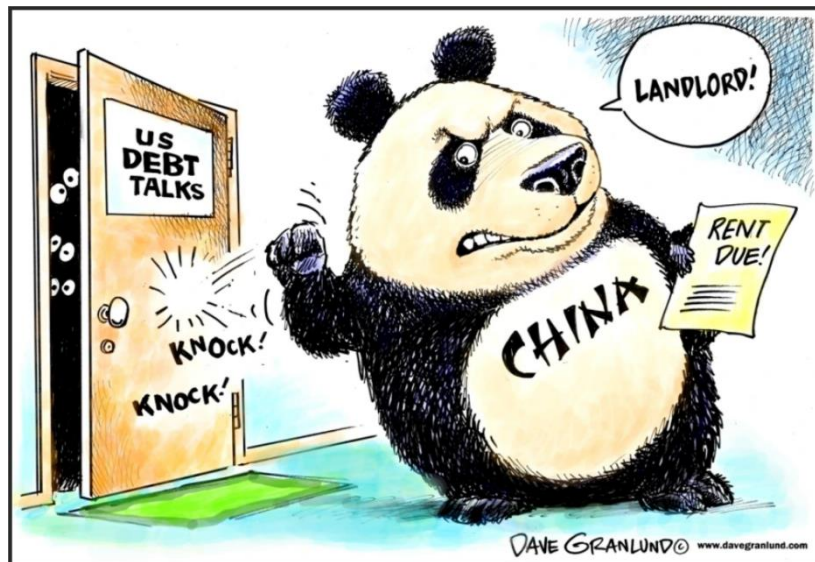

Figure 6. NBC News article: "US Debt to China" (*NBC News*, n.d.).

This picture utilizes representational, interactive, and compositional meaning to critique the economic relationship between China and the United States. Representationally, the panda symbolizes China, while the tenant embodies the U.S. debt crisis, with the narrative of "rent collection" highlighting the financial tensions between the two nations. The panda's knocking hand forms a vector, emphasizing the action and the strained dynamic. Interactively, neither the panda nor the tenant engages with the viewer, creating a sense of detachment, while the long social distance and muted color scheme enhance the tense and oppressive atmosphere. Compositionally, the left-right structure positions the tenant (past) on the left and the panda (present) on the right, symbolizing China's disruption of the U.S.'s status quo. The panda's prominent foreground placement and larger size contrast with the tenant's smaller, background position, visually underscoring the unequal power dynamic.

The half-open door acts as a physical divider, metaphorically representing the conflict of interests between the two nations. Together, these elements combine to convey a critical perspective on the economic and geopolitical relationship between China and the United States.

Escalation period: Panda imagery and deteriorating international relations (2018-present). Recent years have seen the panda transformed into a highly politicized symbol in Western media, reflecting global tensions and China's increasingly assertive diplomacy. The COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine war, and deteriorating U.S.-China relations have significantly altered the perception of panda diplomacy, with Western media framing panda loans as politically motivated rather than conservation-driven. Representations often depict pandas as enormous and imposing, with expressions ranging from confused to fierce, and frequently associate them with authoritarianism—evident in portrayals of pandas wearing military caps or clothing in Chinese flag colors. However, amidst these predominantly negative depictions, some media outlets, such as the *Calgary Herald* (Figure 7, 2018), offer counterpoints by presenting positive images of pandas coexisting harmoniously with society. These contrasting portrayals highlight the complex and shifting role of the panda as a cultural and political emblem in the context of contemporary geopolitical dynamics.

Figure 7. Calgary Herald article: "Eats Shoots and Leaves: How 10 Illustrators Interpret the Pandas' Extended Visit to Calgary" (*Calgary Herald*, n.d.).

In contrast, through the metaphor of a game and the skillful integration of visual elements, Figure 8 uses a game metaphor to depict China's strategic advantage in global politics. It poses a critical question: Amid the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, can China continue to maintain its strategic advantage in global political and economic affairs and sustain the dominant position it demonstrated in 2020?

Figure 8. The Wall Street Journal article: "China Played Its Hand Well in 2020. Will It Keep Winning?" (*The Wall Street Journal*, 2021).

This image conveys the evolving power dynamics between China and the United States through its use of representational, interactive, and compositional meaning. Representationally, the panda symbolizes China, while Uncle Sam represents the United States, with the panda's higher stack of chips signifying its strategic advantage in 2020. The narrative of a strategic game is subtly conveyed as the panda pulls chips toward itself, symbolizing China's growing influence. Interactively, neither the panda nor Uncle Sam engages with the viewer, creating a sense of detachment, while the panda's larger size and central position establish a closer social distance, emphasizing its dominance. The slightly elevated perspective places the viewer in a position of judgment, and the color contrast between the panda's black-and-white fur and Uncle Sam's red-and-blue hat reinforces the visual clash of two cultures or powers. Compositionally, the vertical structure positions the panda at the top, symbolizing its idealized or symbolic significance, while Uncle Sam and the game elements at the bottom represent the "real" or ongoing actions. This layout underscores the panda's dominant position and the strategic nature of the interaction, effectively capturing the shifting power dynamics between the two nations.

Discussion

Transitivity Perspective: The Giant Panda as a Proxy for China's Agency

From the perspective of visual grammar's representational meaning, narrative representation serves as a primary tool through which Western media construct the image of the Chinese giant panda, positioning it as a dynamic symbol of China's global actions and influence. This is achieved through the consistent emphasis on transitivity, which encompasses both material action processes (e.g., climbing, playing, eating) and reaction processes (e.g., sadness, bewilderment, defiance). For instance, animated GIFs and static cartoons frequently depict the panda engaging in activities that metaphorically reflect China's strategic agency, such as climbing the Empire State Building or defying political directives. By attributing deliberate actions and intentionality to the

panda, Western media frame China as a goal-driven global actor, amplifying perceptions of its strategic ambitions and expanding influence. The juxtaposition of the panda's dynamic movements against static or passive elements further reinforces this narrative, transforming the giant panda into a potent visual metaphor for China's evolving role in international affairs. Through these representational strategies, Western media articulate a nuanced yet critical perspective on China's growing presence on the global stage.

Color Perspective: The Emotional and Cultural Significance of Visual Strategies

The use of vibrant colors and high-contrast designs in panda cartoons enhances their visual appeal and emotional resonance, capturing audience attention and facilitating broader dissemination of news content. Among these colors, "China red" stands out as the most frequently used, appearing in the form of flags, backgrounds, and clothing. This choice aligns with traditional Chinese cultural symbolism, reinforcing the panda's association with China's national identity. However, the extensive use of red also carries potential ideological implications. While it reinforces China's cultural characteristics, it may inadvertently evoke associations with the "China Threat Theory", reflecting underlying biases in Western media narratives. This strategic use of color exemplifies the dual role of visual elements in news reporting: enhancing aesthetic appeal while embedding cultural and political signifiers.

Enlarged Representation: The Political Symbolism of the Growing Panda

A noticeable trend in Western media's depictions is the increasing physical size of the cartoon panda over time. From its early portrayal as a small, docile figure to its current dominance in visual compositions, this enlargement mirrors China's growing economic and political influence on the global stage. While the magnified panda symbolizes China's rising power, it also reflects Western media's ambivalence, framing China as both a source of fascination and a potential hegemonic threat. This visual transformation underscores the political and cultural dimensions of the panda's representation, raising questions about the balance between aesthetic choices and ideological biases. The exaggerated size of the panda risks oversimplifying China's global engagement, neglecting its emphasis on peaceful cooperation and mutual development.

Image Deterioration: The Shift From Peace to Aggression

From an interactional perspective, the cartoon representation of the giant panda has increasingly deteriorated since the second historical phase (2010-2017). The panda's expressions have become more menacing, and its actions more destructive, reflecting Western media's growing anxieties about China's rise. For example, the panda's forced smile after winning an Olympic gold medal contrasts sharply with its earlier depictions of natural joy, while its aggressive stance in later cartoons reinforces negative stereotypes about China's intentions. This deterioration highlights the challenges of maintaining a balanced global discourse in the face of rising geopolitical tensions. By distorting the panda's image, Western media risk perpetuating misunderstandings and biases, hindering efforts to foster mutual understanding and cooperation.

Conclusion

This study examines cartoon representations of giant pandas in Western media's China-related news reports, many of which are political cartoons. These images often use metaphors to convey ideological perspectives, which can mislead audiences unfamiliar with China or the creators's political stance (Zhao & Feng, 2017). Under visual grammar theory, semiotic elements form a unified system of symbolic resources, constructing meaning as part of a socially significant multimodal communication process (Li & Song, 2010). This framework enables the

analysis of ideological content in panda cartoons, linking visual imagery to real-world experiences, while fostering an interdisciplinary research approach.

However, visual grammar theory has limitations. Its three metafunctions—representational, interactive, and compositional—do not always seamlessly complement each other, potentially introducing subjective bias in interpretation. Additionally, the concepts of "modality" and "information value" require further refinement, particularly when analyzing cartoons with diverse artistic styles, as these constructs may occasionally conflict with the social and intrinsic attributes of the images (Zhang & Jia, 2012). In summary, while visual grammar theory offers valuable tools for decoding multimodal texts, its limitations call for a more nuanced and context-sensitive application, especially in the analysis of culturally and politically charged imagery.

Despite limitations, the findings of this study hold significant implications for China's international communication strategies. First, China must adopt a precise, multi-dimensional positioning strategy, recognizing the three distinct phases of the panda's representation discussed earlier. As its global influence surged in the second phase, fostering international recognition and acceptance became critical. China should project an image of a civilized, peaceful, and responsible socialist power, balancing its core values with global expectations. Second, culturally sensitive and multimodal communication is essential to resonate with diverse audiences. While traditional strategies highlight China's historical heritage, they often misalign with foreign sociocultural contexts. For instance, the overuse of "China red" reinforces its rising power but risks fueling the "China Threat Theory". Strategies should thus prioritize adaptability and human-centered storytelling, creating a "shared space of meaning" that bridges cultural divides. Finally, strengthening cultural confidence and narrative strategy is vital. The panda's evolution into a recognized national brand mirrors China's socio-political shifts. To promote its cultural elements globally, China must craft compelling, authentic narratives, leveraging diverse media and technology to foster cross-cultural understanding and diversity.

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