The Deconstruction of the US Government During the COVID-19 Pandemic Using Pictorial Metaphor -- Take Wuhe Qilin CG Cartoon "*White House Painter*" as an Example

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Abstract— *The rise of social media and the advancement of digital technology have opened new avenues for the global dissemination of digital political cartoons and the construction of public opinion fields. Digital political cartoons consistently engage in the construction of ideology-laden metaphors, employing sophisticated artistic techniques and rich visual discourse to generate significant value in international communication and public opinion guidance. They also provide new perspectives and channels for the construction and expression of national image. This paper adopts a visual metaphor research approach to analyze the types of image metaphors utilized in Wuhe Qilin's digital political cartoon White House Painter. Through five distinct metaphorical categories—"text-derived visual metaphor," "metaphor of difference," "light metaphor," "color metaphor," and "multi-element interaction metaphor"—the study examines its content presentation, value orientation, and communicative effects. It further explores diverse forms of deconstructing the U.S. national image and offers new insights for the construction and expression of China's national image within social networks.*

Keywords— *digital political cartoon; White House Painter; Wuhe Qilin; visual metaphor; counter-discourse deconstruction*

I. INTRODUCTION

During the pandemic, the Trump administration of the United States repeatedly fabricated defamatory terms such as "Wuhan virus" and "Chinese virus," aiming to disseminate falsehoods and rumors through media and governmental discourse, shift blame onto the Chinese

government, and exploit the pandemic to attack and smear China in an attempt to gain international public opinion support. Such practices severely violate scientific principles and disregard basic human conscience. The World Health Organization has repeatedly stated that there is no scientific basis to support the "virus origin theory".

Facts demonstrate that in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese government and people have made all-out efforts to control the outbreak and implemented multiple measures to safeguard public health and safety. These efforts have received widespread recognition and support from the international community. In contrast, the U.S. government has been the source of disregarding basic survival needs of its people and bringing disaster to the global population. In response to the duplicitous blame-shifting tactics of the U.S. government, Chinese illustrator Wuhe Qilin created the digital political cartoon White House Painter, whose schematic imagery directly targets the U.S. government and satirizes its deliberate fabrication of lies to conceal the truth of administrative failures during the pandemic.

Metaphor serves as a core mechanism for understanding abstract and complex political themes, fully revealing and elaborating on political subjects. It provides a critical pathway for analyzing the persuasive nature of political discourse and underlying ideologies. This explains why metaphor studies in political discourse—whether from a unimodal (text-only) or multimodal perspective—have sustained enduring scholarly attention. Currently, most academic research in this direction focuses on political cartoons.

Forceville (1996) introduced "multimodal metaphor" by integrating cognitive linguistics with multimodal discourse studies to address the limitations of unimodal (purely linguistic) metaphor research in cognitive linguistics. He linked modalities to fundamental human sensory channels—auditory, visual, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile—and categorized them into five types: (1) pictorial

or visual modality; (2) auditory or sound modality; (3) olfactory modality; (4) gustatory modality; and (5) tactile modality. The representation of multimodal metaphors relies on distinct modalities corresponding to different perceptual symbols in humans, which in turn align with sensory stimuli received through perceptual channels. El Refaie (2015) used the term 'pictorial metaphor' to refer to images of specific, recognizable objects, scenes, and persons". Krstić et al. (2020) argued that visual metaphors in political cartoons make political concepts more accessible, concretizing political imagery through metaphorical representations and facilitating a comprehensive understanding of how major political processes are presented as tangible objects of interpretation. They found that metaphorical thinking is expressed not through singular, explicit metaphors but through more complex combinations of visual and linguistic elements. The use of multimodal metaphors often reflects the political stance and ideology of discourse producers. Multimodal metaphors help uncover ideologies embedded in political multimodal discourse, and multimodal metaphor theory plays a significant role in understanding the metaphorical thinking and meaning construction within such discourse.

II.   LITERATURE REVIEW

(1) Research on Image Deconstruction Through Pictorial Metaphor

The existing literature primarily unfolds across three dimensions: visual metaphor theory, multimodal semiotic analysis, and the construction of national image within crisis contexts. Pictorial metaphor, as a core rhetorical strategy in political cartoons, constructs critical narratives through the interaction of images and text. Forceville's multimodal metaphor theory is adopted to emphasize the mapping mechanism between source domains (e.g., tools, actions) and target domains (e.g., political strategies) to expose contradictions in the exercise of power.

In the context of the pandemic, political cartoons often deconstruct the government's authoritative image through satirical symbols and situational irony. Their effectiveness relies on the audience's consensual understanding of cultural symbols. Research on deconstructing the U.S. government's image largely focuses on logical paradoxes in its pandemic policies and the evasion of international responsibilities. Cheng Jintao (2014) used American political cartoons as case studies to analyze the construction mechanisms of pictorial metaphors. For example, the visual narrative of "an unmanned car with an American flag driving toward a fiscal cliff" metaphorically represents the blindness and crisis risks of the Obama administration's fiscal policies, while the symbol of the "White House roof" reinforces the critique of the government's decision-making incompetence. Wang Hui and Xin Bin (2019) analyzed how American media indirectly deconstruct the U.S. government's advocated multilateralist image through visual metonyms (such as a "broken chain" symbolizing the collapse of the trade system), revealing the self-contradictory logic of its policies. Such analyses often integrate cognitive framing theories and semiotic tools to reveal how images activate public awareness of issues like "democratic deficits" or "double standards."

However, existing studies still exhibit two major limitations: (1) a lack of systematic analysis of cross-cultural communication practices by Chinese creators (e.g., the works of Wuhe Qilin); (2) an absence of empirical testing on the audience reception of visual metaphors, necessitating further integration of multimodal discourse analysis and cognitive psychology frameworks to deepen the research.

(2) Research on Wuhe Qilin's Works

Existing studies on Wuhe Qilin are limited to a few publications. Hu Mengyuan (2021), grounded in Wuhe Qilin's digital news cartoon collections, employed theoretical approaches such as textual analysis and visual methodology to examine the survival forms, textual and visual connotations, and value orientations of these collections. Her work interprets the content presentation, dissemination mechanisms, and communication effects of digital news cartoons, exploring their influence on public opinion. Wei and Zhang Yukun (2021), drawing from the "encoding/decoding" theory, investigated the ideological construction and expression in political cartoons. Bao Daoguang and Wei Xing (2021), starting from the success of Wuhe Qilin's works in breaking through Western ideological containment, explored innovations in the dissemination mechanisms of socialist ideology and the re-creation of the international ideological public opinion field. Yang Dingdu (2021) analyzed the reasons behind the popularity of Wuhe Qilin's *Peaceful Army* on overseas social media platforms, revealing the potential of news cartoons for guiding public opinion under the impetus of digital technology and social media platforms in the new media era.

To date, few studies have analyzed the content of Wuhe Qilin's digital political cartoons to examine the deconstruction of the U.S. government's discursive image through pictorial metaphor. Only Xiao Chuhan and Chen Zhuo (2022), through visual metonyms like the "politicization of virus origin tracing" (e.g., combining a laboratory symbol with a dollar sign), criticized the U.S.'s stigmatization strategies and hegemonic actions. Therefore, as a representative and typical case, analyzing Wuhe Qilin's work *White House Painter* holds significant value for research on national image construction in digital political cartoons.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS, THEORY AND METHOD

1. Research Questions:

(1) What metaphors are present in Wuhe Qilin's artwork *White House Painter*?

(2) How do these metaphors function in deconstructing the U.S. national image?

(3) What implications do digital political cartoons hold for the international dissemination of the Chinese government's discourse?

2. Pictorial Metaphor Theory

Forceville (1996) introduced "multimodal metaphor" by integrating cognitive linguistics with multimodal discourse studies to address the limitations of unimodal (purely linguistic) metaphor research in cognitive linguistics. He linked modalities to fundamental human sensory channels—auditory, visual, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile—and categorized them into five types: (1) pictorial or visual modality; (2) auditory or sound modality; (3) olfactory modality; (4) gustatory modality; and (5) tactile modality.

Based on Forceville's research, Niu Hongbao (2022) conducted an in-depth exploration of pictorial metaphor. He argued that research on pictorial metaphor must integrate theories of visual semiotics, philosophy, and aesthetics, addressing four core issues: the similarities and differences between pictorial and verbal metaphor, types of pictorial metaphor, the operation of pictorial metaphor, and the relationship between pictorial metaphor and meaning. Regarding the types of pictorial metaphor, he categorized them into seven varieties: "pictorial metaphors with textual sources," "juxtaposition mapping" or "juxtaposed depictions," "juxtaposed differential tension" (i.e., "differential metaphor"), "superimposed identification" or "identification metaphor," "light metaphor," "color

metaphor," and metaphors involving "multiple interacting elements." These categories illustrate the experiential patterns of pictorial metaphor.

IV.   METHODOLOGY

Through a detailed analysis of the types of pictorial metaphors and image schemas in *White House Painter*—including "text-derived pictorial metaphors," "metaphors of difference," "light metaphors," "color metaphors," and "metaphors of multi-element interaction"—along with specific image schemas such as "disinfectant," "dog," "Maneki-neko (fortune cat)," "books," "Chinese characters," and "five-pointed stars," this study elucidates the role of digital political cartoons in deconstructing the U.S. national image and offers insights for the construction of China's international image.

V.   DISCUSSIONS OF PICTORIAL METAPHOR TYPES AND IMAGE SCHEMAS IN *WHITE HOUSE PAINTER*

As shown in the following CG cartoon (Fig 1), *White House Painter* was composed by Wuhe Qilin to depict the image of the government of The United States during the epidemic time. Through five dimensions of pictorial metaphors developed by Niu Hongbao (2022), we analyze the images present in this CG cartoon, the mechanisms of government image deconstruction, and Chinese discourse strategies of international dissemination.

-Come on, Mike! I'm losing control!-   @乌合麒麟

Fig. 1 The House Painted composed by Wuhe Qilin

4.1 "Text-Derived Pictorial Metaphors" Reflect Chinese Public's Critical Awareness of the U.S. Government

"Text-derived pictorial metaphors" refer to visual metaphors constructed based on pre-existing textual metaphors. *White House Painter* is set against the backdrop of the U.S. government's use of media discourse to stigmatize China and propagate anti-China rhetoric during the COVID-19 pandemic. Wuhe Qilin stated on Weibo that the cartoon was inspired by a private message from a netizen. After its release, it garnered extensive views, discussions, and endorsements from Chinese netizens, reflecting the public's acute awareness of the U.S. government's duplicitous practices.

4.2 "Metaphors of Difference" Expose the Hypocrisy of the U.S. Government's Duplicity

In this type of pictorial metaphor, two distinct graphical elements are juxtaposed within the visual space. However, they do not form a direct depiction or mapping of one onto the other, nor do they achieve a fusion of source and target domains. Instead, they maintain difference and tension, generating ambiguity or irony through this relational dynamic.

White House Painter features two central figures: then-U.S. President Donald Trump engaged in a media interview, and U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo vigorously painting within the White House office. This juxtaposition creates a tension of non-identification through difference. When disparate elements are placed together, a semantic relationship emerges—its specific meaning shaped by the constructed context. By employing the fundamental structure of "metaphors of difference," Wuhe Qilin vividly portrays the U.S. government's prioritization of smearing China over protecting its own citizens' health and safety during the pandemic, effectively conveying its hypocrisy and dereliction of duty to every viewer.

4.3 "Light Metaphor" Reflects That the U.S. Fabrication of Discourses to Smear China Cannot Evade the Scrutiny of Truth

The realization of visibility in "light metaphor" is achieved through color effects, which strictly fall under the category of color metaphor. By the Italian Renaissance, perspective technique, as a technology for the present viewer, rationalized vision by mathematizing visual observation. On one hand, it introduced natural light as a

condition for observation into painting; on the other hand, it transformed the light as a condition of visibility for the present viewer into a rational light manifested through chiaroscuro order. Thus, light appears in painting in three identities: as natural light—the condition of visibility in perspective; as the bearer of divine light; or as the bearer of rational light.

In *White House Painter*, the primary light sources include the media spotlight and sunlight streaming through the window. The media spotlight illuminates the U.S. government's image of fabricating false information, while the sunlight from the window represents the light of truth, illuminating the table covered with words such as "China," "Chinese," and "five-pointed stars cut by scissors." This signifies that the U.S. actions are not upright and are exposed under the light of truth—i.e., the consensus of international cognition—and are destined to fail.

4.4 "Color Metaphor" in Shaping the Image of the U.S. Government

Like "light metaphor," "color metaphor" specifically belongs to the domain of visibility in images. Genuine color metaphor primarily builds upon the form or shape of the image to express internal emotions and moods, endowing the work with a holistic emotional relationship. According to Goodman's view, it is untenable to claim that a painting or a certain color "expresses" sadness or joy. Neither colors nor images inherently possess sadness or joy. In a strict semiotic sense, any expression is merely exemplification or labeling. To say that a certain color is sad is to use that color to exemplify or label the emotion of sadness, much like traffic lights label "prohibition" or "permission"—red and green themselves carry no inherent meaning of "stop" or "go".

Wuhe Qilin's portrayal of Western national images is filled with absurd elements, exhibiting strong aggressiveness, provocation, and threat, reflecting an imbalanced national image fraught with power conflicts. The painting constructs and displays the true negative image of Western countries through oppressive and gloomy tones such as dark and somber colors. In *White House Painter*, the color palette is highly destructive and aggressive. The contrasting colors of deep red and dark blue evoke discomfort in viewers. The blood-red paint brushed onto blue, spiked "viruses" metaphorically exemplify the U.S. government's internal emotional attitude of using China as a "scapegoat" and "shield."

4.5 "Multi-Element Interaction" Metaphor: Exploring the Deconstruction of the U.S. Image in Digital Political Cartoons

In this type of metaphor, unlike in "metaphors of difference," it is not possible to clearly distinguish dominant vehicles and tenors, source domains and target domains, nor the cross-domain interactive mappings or blends between these dominant tenors and vehicles, source and target domains. Instead, it involves a collection of metaphors formed through the juxtaposition, superposition, and interaction of multiple schematic images.

White House Painter contains numerous schematic images, including: invading blue monsters, a Chinese flag being painted with blood-red pigment, cut-out five-pointed stars, crumpled five-pointed stars, a Maneki-neko (fortune cat) on the desk, golf clubs by the door, toilet paper on the table, disinfectant, drafts covered with "China" and "Chinese," *the Bible*, U.S. dollars, *the Declaration of Independence*, a shepherd dog, and a diary, among others. Each has its own complex iconographic origins. However, when juxtaposed and superimposed within a new interactive relationship, they forge a new contextual order, and each image unit acquires new contextual meanings. Compared to the aforementioned six types of pictorial metaphors, the "multi-element interaction" type requires the creation and construction of complex schematic associative clues or logic for interaction.

The cartoon scene is set in the U.S. White House Oval Office, representing the U.S. government's fabrication of facts to smear China. The invading blue monsters

represent the COVID-19 pandemic; the blood-red pigment symbolizes the U.S. government's disregard for its people's lives and health, akin to "profiting from human blood"; the cut-out five-pointed stars represent China, with Pompeo busy painting the blue monsters with the Chinese flag, metaphorizing his actions of framing, slandering, and defaming China. Pompeo steps on a chair, whose three legs press down on *the Bible*, the U.S. Constitution's *Declaration of Independence*, and U.S. dollars, indicating that the U.S. government is willing to use faith, rule of law, and economy as stepping stones to make its framing appear more credible. A shepherd dog holding a diary in its mouth metaphorically represents Chinese writer Fang and her *Wuhan Lockdown Diary* during the pandemic. The diary, filled with subjective and fabricated false statements, became a tool for the U.S. to stigmatize China. In 2020, its English edition was published by U.S. publisher HarperCollins and listed on Amazon, becoming a bestseller promoted by U.S. publishers, with editions in multiple languages including German. It even made the front page of the *Los Angeles Times*. The remaining four shepherd dogs metaphorize the other members of the "Five Eyes" alliance besides the U.S.—the UK, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. The collars around their necks are derived from the "Alliance flag," representing "white supremacy," hinting at the U.S. manipulation and utilization of these four countries and their subservience to the U.S. Among the six five-pointed stars cut from the cardboard, one is already pasted on the blue monster, three are scattered on the ground, and two are crumpled into balls. The crumpled stars represent previous U.S. attempts to smear China that failed to achieve their goals, while the missing star metaphorizes that the U.S. government's attempts to stigmatize China are futile and ultimately doomed to failure. The toilet paper on the table metaphorizes the U.S. hoarding of toilet paper in the early stages of the pandemic, and the disinfectant alludes to Trump's tweet suggesting "injecting disinfectant" as a treatment for COVID-19. The Maneki-neko subtly

references the Trump administration's business-oriented nature, prioritizing economic interests over the value of people's lives and health. The entire image is rich with interconnected elements, forming a complete logical system for deconstructing the image.

VI.   CONCLUSION

The rapid dissemination of Wuhe Qilin's work can be attributed not only to its unofficial stance, which vividly exposes the hypocrisy of Western nations while highlighting China's peace and sincerity through caricature, but also to the rise of social media and advancements in digital technology. Digital content now exhibits characteristics of communication, resonance, interaction, and regeneration during its dissemination. As a medium, digital technology successfully transcends the constraints of traditional national image construction and propaganda, enabling the deconstruction and subversion of national images through a highly aggressive and radical approach. Behind the exaggeration, metaphor, and satire in Wuhe Qilin's work lies a successful exploitation of the social dissemination attributes of digital political cartoons, breaking through conservative forms of external communication and Western ideological barriers.

This insight suggests that we should leverage social media platforms and digital political cartoons to enable nations to reconstruct their images via the internet, thereby becoming a crucial means of expressing national discourse and countering ideological hegemony.

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