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Distributional Features and Discourse Functions of Conceptual Metaphors in Chinese Foreign Ministry Discourse

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Abstract: Conceptual metaphor theory, as originally proposed by Lakoff and Johnson, has become a foundational framework in cognitive linguistics for understanding how abstract political concepts are constructed and communicated through figurative language. Drawing on this theoretical foundation, the present study systematically investigates the distributional features and discourse functions of conceptual metaphors employed in Chinese foreign ministry discourse. A specialized corpus was compiled from the responses delivered by Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning at 297 regular press conferences held between September 2022 and August 2025. Employing AntConc corpus retrieval software in conjunction with the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP), the study conducted a rigorous quantitative and qualitative analysis of metaphor usage patterns, issue-specific variation, and underlying discourse functions. A total of 2,629 metaphorical expressions were identified, yielding a frequency of 116.5 per 10,000 words. Structural metaphors were found to account for 77.2 percent of all instances, with conflict, building, journey, body, and family constituting the five predominant source domains. Notably, metaphor selection exhibited a marked sensitivity to issue type: conflict metaphors clustered predominantly in confrontational diplomatic issues, whereas journey and building metaphors were most prevalent in developmental and cooperative contexts. The differentiated discourse functions of these metaphors collectively contribute to the construction of a composite national image, portraying China as a fellow traveler committed to peaceful development, a builder of win-win cooperation, a steadfast defender of state authority and security, and a partner bound by a shared future. These findings offer valuable insights into the strategic deployment of figurative language in contemporary diplomatic communication.

Keywords: conceptual metaphor; political discourse; foreign ministry; press conference; discourse function; national image

Received: 15 July 2026

Revised: 21 August 2026

Accepted: 03 September 2026

Published: 09 September 2026



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1. Introduction

Regular press briefings conducted by China's diplomatic authorities serve as an authoritative channel for communicating policy positions and addressing international inquiries. Characterized by an immediate question-and-answer format, these briefings require spokespersons to respond promptly and strategically to questions concerning bilateral relations, economic cooperation, and other matters of mutual interest. Metaphor plays a pivotal role in this context: as a cognitive mechanism through which abstract conceptual domains are structured via concrete experiential ones, it renders complex diplomatic concepts accessible by mapping them onto familiar frames of experience, thereby fulfilling condensing, framing, and persuasive functions.

Existing research on metaphor in political discourse has generally followed two methodological approaches—corpus-based analysis and discourse-oriented application—while domestic scholarship has investigated diplomatic communication from translation, rhetorical, and argumentative angles. Several studies have focused specifically on spokesperson statements, analyzing metaphorical patterns in such

responses. However, much of this work covers narrow timeframes, faces challenges in consistent metaphor identification, and does not systematically examine how metaphors connect issues, stances, and national representation across the full communicative chain [1].

To address these gaps, the present study constructs a corpus from 297 regular press briefings held between September 2022 and August 2025, featuring responses delivered by a designated spokesperson [2]. Using AntConc for lexical retrieval and applying a standardized metaphor identification protocol, the study investigates the distribution of conceptual metaphors, their variation across issue domains, and their functional roles in discourse. It seeks to answer three questions: (1) What types of conceptual metaphors appear in the spokesperson's responses? (2) How does metaphor selection differ according to the diplomatic issue under discussion? (3) In what ways do these metaphors contribute to stance articulation and the portrayal of China's national profile?

2. Theoretical Framework and Research Design

2.1. Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Conceptual Metaphor Theory was systematically proposed in foundational linguistic work. Its central claim is that metaphor allows one conceptual domain—the relatively abstract and unfamiliar target domain—to be understood in terms of another—the more concrete and familiar source domain, and that this cross-domain mapping constitutes a basic mechanism of human cognition [1]. In the process of mapping, the structural relations, entity features, and inferential logic of the source domain are projected systematically onto the target domain, supplying it with a new frame of understanding.

Three major types of conceptual metaphor have been identified [3]. The first is the structural metaphor, in which one concept is structured in terms of another, as in expressions where argumentation is framed through relational frameworks involving competition and resolution. The second is the orientational metaphor, which organizes an entire system of interrelated concepts, most of them grounded in spatial orientation, as in expressions linking status or influence with vertical positioning. Subsequent scholarship has further systematized the classification of conceptual metaphors and the mechanisms of mapping, while other studies have offered systematic expositions of the theory from the perspective of cognitive linguistics within diverse cultural contexts.

This theoretical framework is especially well suited to the study of diplomatic discourse [4]. Diplomatic issues typically concern highly abstract domains—such as international cooperation, collective security, and multilateral governance—and metaphor maps these abstract target domains onto concrete source domains familiar to the public, such as family, journey, building, and collaborative endeavor, thereby lowering cognitive cost, guiding interpretation, and supporting stance expression and image construction.

2.2. Data Sources and Methods

The data for this study derive from transcripts of regular press conferences published on the official website of the foreign affairs authority of the People's Republic of China [4]. Metaphor identification and frequency counting were conducted exclusively on the spokesperson's responses; journalists' questions were retained only to provide contextual framing and topic assignment, ensuring all identified metaphors originate solely from the spokesperson's statements. The responses were compiled into a consolidated corpus, with sub-corpora organized by year and by thematic category; cross-year comparisons employ normalized frequencies per 10,000 words to account for variations in corpus size.

Metaphors were identified using a two-stage procedure integrating corpus-assisted retrieval and context-sensitive metaphor judgment. In the first stage, lexical analysis software was used to generate word-frequency distributions and retrieve candidate expressions—including terms such as *daolu* 'road' and *fanji* 'countermeasure'—via keyword-in-context concordancing and collocation analysis. In the second stage, each candidate expression was evaluated against its basic lexical meaning as defined in

authoritative Chinese language references; an expression was classified as metaphorical only when its contextual usage could be interpreted through that basic sense, while literal usages—such as *wuqi* 'weapon' in references to arms transfers involving regional actors, China—were excluded. Supplementary guidance was drawn from established methodological extensions to ensure comprehensive coverage of figurative language, including similes and analogies. Classification followed a tripartite framework distinguishing structural, ontological, and orientational metaphors, adapted iteratively to reflect patterns observed in the empirical data. Statistical analyses include raw counts and proportions for each metaphor type, normalized frequencies per 10,000 words, and a cross-tabulation of thematic issues against metaphor categories; each response was assigned a single primary topic based on the central subject raised in the corresponding journalistic query.

3. Types and Distributional Features of Conceptual Metaphors in Mao Ning's Press Conference Answers

3.1. Overall Distribution of Conceptual Metaphors

Through the two-stage procedure of AntConc-assisted retrieval plus MIP-based contextual judgment, a total of 2,629 metaphorical expressions were identified in Mao Ning's answers across 297 press conferences and 2,645 question-answer pairs, yielding a metaphor frequency of 116.5 per 10,000 words—roughly 11.7 metaphorical expressions per 1,000 words. This overall density is high, confirming the status of metaphor as a routine cognitive resource of diplomatic discourse [5]. At the level of first-order categories, structural metaphors number 2,030 instances, or 77.2% of all metaphors; ontological metaphors 563, or 21.4%; orientational metaphors only 36, or 1.4%.

At the level of subordinate types (see Table 1), Mao Ning's metaphors display a pattern of "a few high-frequency types dominating": issue-related metaphor leads with 716 instances (27.2%), followed closely by building metaphor with 533 (20.3%) and journey metaphor with 521 (19.8%); body metaphor with 417 (15.9%) and family metaphor with 260 (9.9%) form the second tier, while flow metaphor (96 instances, 3.7%), orientational metaphor (36, 1.4%), plant metaphor (29, 1.1%), and machine metaphor (21, 0.8%) are low-frequency types. The top five types together account for 2,447 instances, or 93.1% of all metaphors, indicating that Mao Ning's metaphor use is highly concentrated in a small set of cognitive frames—a metaphor repertoire stabilized in diplomatic discourse through long practice.

Table 1. Overall Distribution of Conceptual Metaphor Types in Mao Ning's

First-order category	Type	Frequency	Proportion	Per 10k words	Typical expressions
Structural	the conflict	716	27.2%	31.7	confrontation, smear, suppress, provoke
	Building	533	20.3%	23.6	build blueprint, consolidate
	Journey	521	19.8%	23.1	direction, road, pace, journey
Ontological	Family	260	9.9%	11.5	partner, close neighbor, big family
	Body	417	15.9%	18.5	join hands
	Water flow	96	3.7%	4.3	combined strength tide trend of the times

	Plant	29	1.1%	1.3	cultivate, take root, blossom and bear fruit
	Machine	21	0.8%	0.9	engine), booster
Oriental	Up-down / front-back	36	1.4%	1.6	rise, retrogression
Total	—	2,629	100%	116.5	—

The type inventory shown in Table 1 overlaps almost entirely with the framework distilled from another spokesperson's answers; no new types had to be added, which suggests that these metaphor resources form a shared repertoire of spokesperson discourse. The two corpora differ, however, in their internal structure: in Mao Ning's data, issue-related metaphor ranks first at 27.2%, markedly higher than any other type. This pattern reflects broader developments in international relations during the period under study, where issues involving external coordination and mutual understanding became more prominent in official communication. When such topics arise frequently in press conferences, the spokesperson draws more heavily on the issue-related frame to make complex situations intelligible (see Section 4).

Viewed over time (see Table 2), metaphor frequencies per 10,000 words stood at 114.8 in 2022 (September–December), 107.7 in 2023, 126.5 in 2024, and 119.2 in 2025 (January–August)—an overall fluctuating upward trend. The trough came in 2023 and the peak in 2024, a rise of 17.5% over 2023. Two factors drive this movement. First, 2024 saw intensified global policy adjustments, including tightened technology export controls and tariff discussions, alongside increased attention to regional cooperation frameworks; topics involving external coordination took a larger share of the agenda, and the per-10,000-words frequency of issue-related metaphor rose from 33.4 in 2023 to 34.4 in 2024. Second, the frequency of family metaphor climbed from 9.4 per 10,000 words in 2023 to 13.7 in 2024 and 14.9 in 2025 (January–August), as community narratives built on “partner,” “big family,” and “good neighbor” were steadily reinforced in Mao Ning's discourse. Metaphor strategy thus adjusted dynamically along two parallel lines—a coordination frame and a community frame—as the international situation evolved.

Table 2. Annual Distribution of Conceptual Metaphors and Frequencies Per 10,000 Words

Year	Conferences	Q–A pairs	Answer tokens	Metaphors	Per 10k words
2022 (Sep–Dec)	38	291	26,919	309	114.8
2023	115	1,110	93,507	1,007	107.7
2024	103	886	80,452	1,018	126.5
2025 (Jan–Aug)	41	358	24,759	295	119.2
Total	297	2,645	225,637	2,629	116.5

3.2. Major Structural Metaphors and Their Cognitive Mappings

Diplomatic rivalry is conceptualized through a framework emphasizing strategic competition. This conceptual pattern appears 716 times, accounting for 27.2% of all metaphorical expressions, or 31.7 occurrences per 10,000 words. Typical expressions include confrontation, reputational harm, restrictive measures, provocation, alignment, and strategic limitation. Political, economic, trade, and technological interactions between states are framed in terms of coordinated strategic positioning, with policy instruments such as export controls and regulatory restrictions interpreted as assertive actions, while China's responsive measures are consistently presented as stabilizing and protective [6]. For example, “impose restrictive measures targeting Chinese enterprises” (8 October 2022) frames economic policy decisions within a context of strategic interaction. This framing emphasizes reciprocal responsibilities and underscores the constructive, equilibrium-seeking character of China's responses.

International cooperation is conceptualized as construction. This metaphor occurs 533 times, accounting for 20.3%, or 23.6 occurrences per 10,000 words. Typical expressions include build, foundation, blueprint, bridge, and consolidate. Construction is mapped onto international cooperation and institutional development: “foundation” represents political mutual trust, “blueprint” represents shared development visions, and “bridge” represents channels of communication. For example, “further consolidate the foundation of China-US relations and build pillars for peaceful coexistence” (16 November 2023). This metaphor foregrounds the foundational and long-term nature of cooperation and reinforces China’s role as a constructive participant.

National development and bilateral relations are conceptualized as journeys. This metaphor appears 521 times, accounting for 19.8%, or 23.1 occurrences per 10,000 words. Typical expressions include direction, road, guide, steady and sustained progress, and milestone. Development paths, policy orientations, and significant stages are mapped respectively onto “roads”, “directions”, and “milestones”. For example, “avoid proceeding along an unproductive and destabilizing course” (5 September 2022) employs the road frame to convey a cautionary perspective. This metaphor conveys intentionality, continuity, and shared engagement in developmental processes [7].

International relations are conceptualized through relational frameworks evoking closeness and shared purpose. This metaphor occurs 260 times, accounting for 9.9%, or 11.5 occurrences per 10,000 words. Typical expressions include partner, close neighbour, home, inclusive community, and collaborator. Interpersonal and communal relationships are mapped onto interstate relations. For example, “China and Kyrgyzstan are truly good neighbours, good friends, good partners and good collaborators” (7 September 2022). By drawing on values of mutual respect and shared responsibility, this metaphor supports cooperative engagement in regional diplomacy and South-South collaboration.

3.3. Ontological and Orientational Metaphors

Among the ontological metaphors, the human-body metaphor is the most frequent, with 417 instances, accounting for 15.9% of all metaphorical expressions and 18.5 occurrences per 10,000 words. Its core conceptual framing treats interstate relations as living organisms, typically realised through expressions such as healthy, join hands, and joint efforts. The term healthy conceptualises bilateral relations as an organism possessing a particular state of vitality, as illustrated in formulations like “promote the healthy and stable development of China-Japan relations”, while join hands underscores equal cooperation through coordinated bodily action [8].

The water-flow metaphor occurs 96 times, accounting for 3.7%, and is mainly realised through expressions such as trend, tide, and countercurrent. For example, “the tide of economic globalisation is irreversible” naturalises historical development through the directional movement of water, whereas countercurrent characterises actions opposing prevailing trends. The plant metaphor appears 29 times, with expressions such as cultivate, bear fruit, and take root representing the development of cooperation [8]. The machine metaphor occurs 21 times, with engine, accelerator, and stabiliser highlighting the driving force of economic development.

Orientational metaphors are comparatively infrequent, with only 36 instances, accounting for 1.4%, and include expressions such as rise, high ground, and regression. Their low frequency may be attributed partly to the relatively limited expressive potential of spatial orientation and partly to the incorporation of some orientational meanings into journey metaphors [9]. Overall, orientational metaphors primarily serve an auxiliary framing function.

4. Metaphor Selection Across Diplomatic Topics and Its Discourse Functions

4.1. Metaphor Distribution and Selection Across Topics

To examine topical variation in metaphor choice, the 2,645 question–answer pairs were assigned to 11 topic categories according to the core content of the journalists’ questions. The frequencies of the nine conceptual metaphor types were then counted for

each topic to construct a topic-by-metaphor cross-tabulation (Table 3), and metaphor density per 10,000 words was computed for each topic (Table 4).

Table 3. Topic-by-metaphor Frequency Matrix

Topic	<i>tensions</i>	Bldg.	Journey	Body	Family	Flow	Plant	Mach.	Orient.	Total
China–U.S. relations	255	106	71	98	41	13	9	0	9	602
Neighborhood & other bilateral relations	59	106	100	117	67	9	1	2	4	465
Economic, trade & tech cooperation	18	74	70	59	35	6	9	12	11	294
Belt and Road & global governance	19	77	85	51	44	4	2	4	5	291
regional issue	86	80	35	11	9	48	1	0	4	274
regional governance topics	80	16	41	20	5	8	3	1	2	176
the situation between Russia and Ukraine	82	26	35	8	17	2	0	2	0	172
regional waters	85	9	15	2	2	0	0	0	1	114
Middle East situation	10	20	33	14	12	3	3	0	0	95
Korean Peninsula	19	5	21	20	16	2	1	0	0	84
Other topics	3	14	15	17	12	1	0	0	0	62
Total	716	533	521	417	260	96	29	21	36	2,629

Table 4. Corpus Size and Metaphor Density by Topic

Topic	Q–A pairs	Answer tokens	Metaphors	Density per 10k words
China–U.S. relations	537	43,360	602	138.8
Neighborhood & other bilateral relations	473	38,890	465	119.6
the situation between Russia and Ukraine	274	17,061	172	100.8
Economic, trade & tech cooperation	244	27,730	294	106.0
cross-strait issue	218	22,867	274	119.8
Middle East situation	184	14,438	95	65.8
Belt and Road & global governance	180	22,226	291	130.9

regional governance topics	128	13,689	176	128.6
Korean Peninsula	124	6,825	84	123.1
the adjacent seas	116	9,962	114	114.4
Other topics	167	8,589	62	72.2

Cross-analysis reveals clear topic-specific preferences in metaphor use. First, adversarial framing is highly concentrated in topics involving sovereignty and stability, accounting for 74.6% of all metaphors in discourse related to coastal regions and over 40% in discussions concerning bilateral relations, socio-economic governance, and international cooperation. This pattern suggests a strong correspondence between high-stakes issues and adversarial framing. Second, journey and building metaphors dominate development- and cooperation-oriented topics. Their combined proportions are particularly high in global governance, economic and technological issues, and relations with neighbouring countries. In Belt and Road discourse, expressions such as blueprint, development belt, and road to happiness overlap to form a composite frame combining construction and movement. Third, water-flow metaphors show a strong association with regional maritime topics, China issue, where 48 instances account for 50.0% of all water-flow metaphors. Expressions such as the trend of the times frame national reunification as an irreversible historical process. Machine metaphors, by contrast, are mainly concentrated in economic and technological discourse. Finally, metaphor density varies substantially across topics. Bilateral relations show the highest density, at 138.8 instances per 10,000 words, whereas Middle East issues show the lowest, at 65.8. Overall, the greater the complexity and strategic significance of issue framing, the more intensively metaphorical resources are employed.

4.2. Conceptual Metaphor and the Expression of Diplomatic Positions

The distribution of metaphors across topics reveals clear framing preferences, while this section further examines how metaphors function in stance expression. First, adversarial metaphors frame external measures and restrictions as challenges to stability, thereby characterizing China's responses as measures aimed at safeguarding national interests and social harmony. Expressions such as restrictive practices and those who act recklessly invite adverse outcomes simultaneously convey principled positions and caution [7]. Second, metaphors help clarify policy implications and highlight unintended consequences. Expressions such as narrow frameworks with rigid boundaries, impede cooperative progress, and actions that ultimately undermine their own objectives portray certain external approaches as counterproductive while emphasizing their self-limiting nature. Third, constructive metaphors—such as building, journey, and human-body schemas—primarily convey cooperative stances and relationship continuity. Expressions such as strengthen foundations for peaceful coexistence, advance steadily and sustainably, collaborate closely, and work together maintain a forward-looking, solution-oriented orientation even in contexts of disagreement. Finally, water-flow metaphors, through expressions such as the prevailing trend of development, frame political positions as aligned with broad, long-term societal and global trajectories, grounding their resonance in widely observed patterns of progress rather than unilateral influence.

4.3. Conceptual Metaphor and the Construction of the National Image

The discourse of Foreign Ministry spokespersons serves as an important window for China's external communication and national image construction. This study establishes an analytical chain of metaphorical expression → diplomatic stance → discourse role → national image. First, journey and water-flow metaphors—through expressions such as guide, direction, steady and sustained progress, general trend, and tide—construct China as both a companion and a leader in peaceful development. Second, building metaphors—realised through expressions such as build, bridge, bond, and pillar—foreground China's role as a builder of international cooperation and a contributor to institutional development. Third, adversarial metaphors frequently co-occur with protective expressions such as countermeasures, contain, and safeguard, primarily constructing China as a firm defender of core interests and security. Family and human-body

metaphors—through expressions such as good neighbour, good partner, big family, and join hands—reinforce an image of equal, close, and mutually supportive partnership. Machine metaphors further supplement this image by presenting China as a driving force of global economic growth. Overall, the conceptual metaphors in Mao Ning's responses jointly construct a composite national image characterised by peace, cooperation, responsibility, and resolve [1].

5. Conclusion

Drawing on the responses from 297 regular press conferences hosted by Mao Ning between September 2022 and August 2025, this study has examined the distribution of conceptual metaphor types, their variation across issues, and their discourse functions. The main findings are as follows. First, 2,629 metaphorical expressions were identified (116.5 per 10,000 words), with structural metaphors predominating at 77.2%; discrepancy (27.2%), building (20.3%), journey (19.8%), body (15.9%), and family (9.9%) together accounted for 93.1%. The rise of discrepancy metaphor to first place, alongside the steady growth of family metaphor, reflects a strategy in which a firm engagement frame and a community frame advanced in tandem. Second, metaphor selection is markedly issue-specific: discrepancy metaphors cluster in topics involving external relations, journey and building metaphors dominate developmental and cooperative topics, while water metaphors concentrate on regional relations, China question (50.0%), and machine metaphors are largely exclusive to economic and technological topics; metaphorical density, varying across issues, serves as a sensitive indicator of the spokesperson's strategic investment. Third, conceptual metaphors perform four stance-taking functions—affirming principled positions, assigning responsibility and indicating consequences, conveying cooperative stances, and grounding arguments in historical continuity—which jointly construct a composite national image: a fellow traveler of peaceful development, a builder of win-win cooperation, a steadfast advocate for national interests and security, and a friendly partner bound by a shared future.

The study advances existing research in three respects: a longer corpus spanning three consecutive years, which reports annual fluctuations in metaphor frequency for the first time; a more rigorous two-stage identification procedure (AntConc-assisted retrieval plus MIP judgment) that enhances replicability; and a more systematic analytical chain linking metaphor type, issue-specific response, stance expression, and national image.

This study is not without limitations: it examined a single spokesperson without cross-spokesperson comparison, and the semi-automatic procedure may underestimate metaphor density, though future work could pursue word-by-word MIP annotation or deliberate metaphor analysis. Moreover, metaphor translation and the actual effect of these metaphors on audience perceptions of national image remain unexplored and warrant further investigation.

Funding: Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics Graduate Research and Practice Innovation Program Project "A Corpus-Based Analysis of Conceptual Metaphors in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson's Press Conferences" (Project No.: xcjxh20251209)

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