

**Hawks, beasts, and canaries: A comparative analysis of animal metaphors used to frame China during the COVID-19 pandemic**

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Although studies in the field of discourse analysis have revealed the presence of animal and violent metaphors in Sino-phobic discourses about China (Carrico, 2018; Lee, 2021), there are still no systematic studies focusing on metaphor and Sinophobia. This study aims at providing a further contribution to the studies of Sino-phobic discourses by focusing specifically on animal metaphors used to frame China during the COVID-19 pandemic in two corpora of American and Australian newspapers. The analysis combines methodologies of corpus linguistics and discourse analysis. First, a semantic domain analyses was carried out with *WMatrix 5* (Rayson, 2008), then, metaphors in the semantic field of living creatures were identified and analysed adopting cognitive and discursive approaches. The results showed how predatory and threatening animals are often associated with Chinese institutions in the newspapers analysed and this negative metaphorical representation is juxtaposed to that of Australian institutions which are framed as harmless pets.

**Keywords:** Animal Metaphors; Critical Discourse Analysis; CDA; Framing; Metaphor; Sinophobia

## **1. Introduction**

Sinophobia is defined in the *MacMillan Dictionary* (n.d.) as “a strong dislike of or prejudice against China, Chinese people and culture.” Scholars from different disciplinary fields analysed Sino-phobic discourses at different levels (e.g., Ang & Colic-Peisker, 2022; DeCook & Yoon, 2021; Lyman, 2000). More specifically, they were interested in uncovering the reasons behind the revival of the long-established metaphorical trope of “Yellow Peril” (see MacDougall, 1999; Shim, 1998), defined as the image of threat and danger associated with some Asian countries, and in particular with China. Studies in the field of discourse analysis have found that the concept of “Yellow Peril” is still persistent nowadays in Western media (Peng, 2004) and can be found also in Asian democratic countries (Urbansky, 2018).

Previous studies have shown that the idea of “Yellow Peril” had a new resurgence in Western media when SARS first spread in China (e.g., Leong, 2003). Unsurprisingly, with the spread of COVID-19, which is generally thought

to have originated in China, the “China-Threat” (Peters et al., 2022) narratives revived in recent times. As Jones (2020) noted, expressions used to describe COVID-19 as “the China Virus” and “the Wuhan Virus” can be considered “subsets of one of the classic categories of imperial racist taxonomy, the Yellow Peril” (Jones, 2020, p. 44). Scholars have also uncovered that within these hateful discourses, Asian bodies were dehumanised and considered infected, and discursively became a contagious threat to Western countries (Kimura, 2021). In a time when discriminatory discourses like those mentioned above spread around the world, the number of hate incidents against people with East-Asian appearance has increased in many Western countries (e.g., Asian Australian Alliance & Chiu, 2021; NYPD Hate Crime Reports, 2020).

The general upsurge in hate incidents against people with East-Asian appearance has raised interest within the field of critical discourse analysis in the study of Sino-phobic discourses produced during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Costello et al., 2021; Le et al., 2020). Recent investigations in the field of communication and discourse analysis have detected the presence of Sino-phobic discourses in news (Sedláková, 2021; Sun, 2021) and on social media (Lee, 2021). Additionally, scholars have shown that during the pandemic belligerent metaphors were used to frame China as an enemy (Chen & Wang, 2022; Qi et al., 2021). Although the primary aim of such studies was to analyse Sino-phobic discourses and did not specifically focus on metaphors, their results have highlighted the crucial role that metaphor plays in constructing China’s social identity.

Figurative language scholars were interested in uncovering different aspects of metaphor use during the pandemic, investigating either metaphors framing COVID-19 (e.g., Semino, 2021; Wicke & Bolognesi, 2021), or people in quarantine (Ho, 2022). However, there are still no detailed studies that specifically focus on metaphor and Sinophobia during the COVID-19 pandemic, namely what this study aims to address. More specifically, this article analyses the role of metaphors in Sino-phobic discourses by exploring animal metaphors used to frame China and Chinese people in Australian and American newspapers and seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent are animal metaphors involved when framing China in American and Australian newspapers?
2. What functions do these metaphors perform in news discourse?
3. How does the use of metaphors vary in a comparative perspective?

## **2. Metaphor in discriminatory discourse**

According to Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), metaphors are not just a matter of words but rather of thought, and they

pointed out that human thoughts are essentially metaphorical. Furthermore, linguistic metaphors (e.g., I don't want to spend my time here) are considered linguistic realisations of conceptual metaphors, conventionally written in capital letters (e.g., TIME IS MONEY). Within conceptual metaphors, a more abstract concept, the target domain (TIME), is understood in terms of a more concrete concept, the source domain (MONEY). The fact that human thoughts are believed to be essentially "metaphorical in nature" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 3) has had several implications in discourse analysis.

Scholars in the field of critical discourse analysis (CDA) observed that metaphors can serve as vehicles for certain ideologies and convey non-obvious meanings in discourse (e.g., Fairclough, 1989, 1995). Furthermore, metaphors are rarely neutral and tend to carry an evaluative stance (e.g., Liu & Li, 2022), making them insightful interpretive categories to investigate in CDA. A further aspect that interested CDA scholars is the framing effect of metaphor which inevitably "highlights some aspects of the target domain and hides others." (Semino et al., 2018, p. 628). More specifically, Entman (2004, p. 54) defines framing as selecting "some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described." Metaphors frame the target domain in such a way as to emphasise some aspects of it while downplaying others. Due to this framing effect metaphors represent a powerful rhetoric device to disseminate ideologies.

Given the above-mentioned implications of metaphor, it is not surprising that several critical discourse analysts were drawn to analyse metaphors. Among the various studies conducted in this field, many scholars tried to combine corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis with CMT (e.g., Charteris-Black, 2004; Koller, 2008) to examine metaphor in public discourse, gender, and migrations. Several of these studies have pinpointed the crucial role that animal metaphors have in discriminatory discourses and uncovered their dehumanising effect (e.g., Ana, 1999; Bosmajian, 1983; Hart, 2010; Musolff, 2015; Waśniewska, 2018). Kövecses (2010) observed that the PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS and PEOPLE BEHAVIOUR IS ANIMAL BEHAVIOUR metaphors seem to frame undesirable actions or people, and suggested that these metaphors could be rewritten as "OBJECTIONABLE BEHAVIOR IS ANIMAL BEHAVIOR and OBJECTIONABLE PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS" (p. 153). The negative connotations often associated with animal metaphors (Rodríguez, 2009) seem to be rooted in a hierarchical conceptual metaphor system called THE GREAT CHAIN OF BEING (Lakoff & Turner, 1989). This system was first outlined by Lakoff and Turner (1989) and then extended by Kövecses (2020). The extended version proposed by Kövecses (2020, p. 16) reads as follows:

God  
Complex systems (universe, society, mind, theories, company, friendship, etc.)  
Humans  
Animals  
Plants  
Complex Physical Objects  
Inanimate objects

According to this hierarchical metaphor system, a level of the chain is understood in terms of other levels of the chain. The highest level of the chain is represented by God, whereas the lowest entity in the chain is represented by inanimate objects. Thus, according to this system humans and human activities are considered at a higher level than animals. Hence, when humans or human activities are conceptualised in terms of lower levels of the chain, there is a high possibility that those metaphors carry a negative evaluation. Throughout the analysis, this metaphor system will be considered as a reference to interpret the data.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. The corpus**

To support the analysis, a corpus of news articles and editorials from American and Australian newspapers was created. The choice of the countries in which the newspapers were selected was driven by the strong economic relations between China and the US, and China and Australia (Observatory of Economic Complexity - OEC, n.d.). Furthermore, as mentioned in the introduction, both Australia and the US experienced issues with increased hate incidents against people with East-Asian appearance. Therefore, a focus on Australian and American newspapers was considered particularly insightful.

To investigate animal metaphors used to frame China, an ad hoc corpus was built. Despite the availability of English language corpora specifically on COVID-19—e.g., Coronavirus Corpus (Davies, 2019)—an ad hoc corpus seemed more suitable for the purpose of the analysis for several reasons. First, the already available corpora comprised articles online on COVID-19 rather than China. During the first months of 2020, articles about COVID-19 likely reported some facts about China. However, as the disease spread worldwide, these articles might have focused less on China. Thus, a purpose-built corpus whose specific goal was to detect possible Sino-phobic discourses seemed more appropriate. Furthermore, creating an ad hoc corpus made it possible to build two subcorpora that could be compared according to specific criteria.

To create the corpus, newspapers from both countries were selected based on their widespread readership and reputation for being reliable sources. Although some tabloids could have provided harsher linguistic choices when describing China, newspapers that defined themselves as broadsheets were preferred, in that they are usually considered more trustworthy voices. For the purpose of this study, selecting newspapers according to their political stance could have been a valid option. However, political stances may vary across countries, and it could have been challenging to find comparable political views in both countries. Thus, the final decision was to select the newspapers relying on readership and long-standing tradition, in order to create a solid and more objective base of comparability among the newspapers. First, the Alliance for Audited Media (AAM) (n.d.) and Enhanced Media Metrics Australia (EMMA) (n.d.) were consulted to identify the most read newspapers in each country; then the foundation year of each newspaper was used as a reference to identify their long-standing tradition. This procedure brought to the selection of two newspapers per country. In the case of the American Corpus (AmC) the *New York Times* (NYT) and the *Los Angeles Times* (LAT) were selected, whereas for the Australian Corpus (AusC) the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) and the *Daily Telegraph* (DT) were chosen.

As regards the time of collection, the first six months of 2020 were considered a fruitful time frame in that possible Sino-phobic discourses might have sparked at the beginning of the pandemic. Furthermore, the time span included the first wave of spread of COVID-19 in the two countries under inquiry. All news articles and editorials published within this period were manually collected to create two corpora. The final collection produced two corpora of respectively 1,701,511 (AmC) and 1,114,750 (AusC) tokens.

### 3.2. Tools and procedure

This study falls in the field of corpus-assisted (critical) discourse studies (Partington, 2013) as it combines corpus approaches to critical discourse analysis, focusing specifically on metaphors. The definition of metaphor adopted in this article is the one provided by Semino (2008, p. 1) who defines metaphor as the process “whereby we talk and, potentially think about something in terms of something else.”

A metaphor analysis can be carried out in different ways. First, if the corpus is small enough, all its texts can be closely analysed to manually identify metaphors. A common way to conduct a corpus-assisted metaphor analysis on larger corpora implies a ‘corpus-driven’ approach (Tognini-Bonelli, 2001) and requires the researcher to closely analyse the texts to detect metaphor candidates that can be analysed through their concordances afterward (e.g., Charteris-Black, 2004). Another option is to take a more ‘corpus-based’

approach (Tognini-Bonelli, 2001), and combine a semantic domain analysis with a manual analysis. Since the previously mentioned studies on discriminatory discourses have highlighted the crucial role that animal metaphors perform in discriminatory discourses, the final decision was to take a corpus-based approach and investigate animal metaphors using a semantic annotation tool. More specifically, drawing on Koller et al. (2008), the analysis combines a semantic domain examination with a manual metaphor analysis to investigate the semantic domain of animals.

The software *WMatrix 5* (Rayson, 2008) was employed to semantically annotate the corpus. To assign semantic tags, *WMatrix 5* relies on the UCREL Semantic Analysis System (USAS tags) developed at Lancaster University. The USAS tag analysed in this dataset is L2– Living creatures, a semantic domain that comprises animal names and, as will be noted in the analysis section, includes different types of living creatures (e.g., bacteria, human beings, etc.). As Koller et al. (2008) pinpointed, *WMatrix 5* was not specifically designed to analyse metaphors. The software assigns words multiple semantic tags and, an ordinary semantic domain analysis would show only words with their primary tags. Moreover, Koller et al. (2008) noted that the secondary semantic tags of a specific lexical unit often correspond to a figurative use of that word. For these reasons, a “domain pushed” (Koller et al. 2008, p. 153) analysis was first conducted to have a more comprehensive list of words belonging to the semantic domain of living creatures.

After having carried out the domain push analysis, concordances of the given words were closely analysed to recognise metaphors. To detect linguistic metaphors, an adapted version of the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) (Pragglejaz Group, 2007) was followed. Steen et al. (2010) extended the MIP in their MIPVU (Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit) and made a crucial distinction between indirect and direct metaphors. Metaphor generally “involves some sort of comparison between largely unrelated entities” (Littlemore, 2015, p. 1). This comparison is conveyed indirectly (e.g., he is a lion) in the case of indirect metaphors, whereas it is rendered explicitly (often with metaphorical flags) with direct metaphors (e.g., he is strong like a lion).

In this study, indirect and direct metaphors were analysed by referring respectively to the MIP and MIPVU. More specifically, the MIP was applied only to content words belonging to the semantic domain of living creatures on *WMatrix 5*. These words were analysed through their concordances making sure to have enough context (150). In cases where the contextual meaning of a lexical unit could not be understood through its concordances, the whole text was read to have a better understanding of the broader context in which that word was used. To determine the basic and contextual meanings of the lexical

units, the *MacMillan Dictionary* was used. Only if a definition could not be found in the *MacMillan Dictionary*, the *Longman Dictionary* was employed. According to the MIP (Pragglejaz Group, 2007, p. 3), if the contextual meaning of a lexical unit contrasts with its basic meaning, the lexical unit can be considered metaphorical. Single words were regarded as single lexical units, and only in the case of phrasal verbs, more than just one word was considered a single lexical unit.

As regards grammar classes, when contextual and basic meanings were identified in the dictionaries, all definitions for that specific lexical unit were considered regardless of their grammar classes, as suggested in the MIP. In the MIP (Pragglejaz Group, 2007), this step is explained through the example of the verb 'to dog'. The *MacMillan Dictionary* gives only two definitions for that verb: "to cause trouble for someone over a long period of time" and "to follow someone closely in a way that annoys them." Quite intuitively, the latter definition seems to refer to a typical dog's behaviour. However, only the definitions of the noun dog explicitly refer to an animal. Thus, following the MIPVU, the verb to dog would not be regarded as metaphorical since there are no contrasting definitions given for the verb to dog, whereas according to the MIP, given the most basic definition of the noun dog, the verb to dog would be considered metaphorical. Since the main interest of this study is the framing effect of metaphor and the connotations that metaphors can convey in discourse and claiming that conventional metaphors can carry connotations that are to some extent influenced by the etymology of that metaphor, in this step, the MIP was followed.

Many researchers highlighted the limits of the CMT in discourse analysis in that it does not account for the implications of metaphors in their context of use (e.g., Kövecses, 2020). Thus, once the metaphorically used words were identified, drawing on Semino et al. (2018), a conceptual level of analysis was integrated with a discourse analysis perspective to provide an integrated approach to metaphor analysis. More specifically, once the linguistic metaphors were identified, source and target domains were recognised referring to the CMT (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Once the target domains were detected, specific social actors (Van Leeuwen, 2008) within the target domains were classified to provide an overview of who the social actors being represented through metaphors were. Van Leeuwen (2008) provides a framework to describe how social actors are represented in discourse. Since the primary aim of this study is to investigate metaphor, his framework will not be applied. However, to provide insights into how social actors are represented within the target domains of the metaphors recognised, five categories from Van Leeuwen's framework will be mentioned and briefly explained referring to examples from the corpora. Within Van Leeuwen's (2008, p. 35) category of "genericisation" can be recognised social actors

represented as generic entities (e.g., ‘Chinese authorities will continue to enforce some elements of lockdowns’), whereas within “specification” social actors represented as specific entities are collected (e.g., ‘the Chinese doctor, who reportedly discovered coronavirus’). Furthermore, social actors can be represented referring to places or things closely related to their person in the case of “objectivation” (e.g., metonymic references such as ‘China lied’) (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 46). Specified social actors can be individualised if they are represented as individuals (e.g., ‘the Chinese doctor’), whereas if they are assimilated in groups, they can be represented as a group of individuals as in the case of “collectivisation” (e.g., ‘Apps used to track Chinese citizens, who might be spreading virus’) (Van Leeuwen, 2008, pp. 37-38).

After this step of the analysis, metaphors were analysed by referring to Musolff’s scenarios (2006). Musolff (2006, p. 24) defines scenarios as “sub-domains” that refer to specific knowledge of the source domain which is shared among a discourse community. More specifically, scenarios can be defined as “a set of assumptions made by competent members of a discourse community about the prototypical elements of a concept” (Musolff, 2016, p. 30). To cite an example provided by Musolff (2006), within the MARRIAGE/LOVE source domain, different scenarios can be identified such as END-OF-HONEYMOON. Thus, in this case, members of a specific discourse community relate the more general concept of LOVE and MARRIAGE to other consequent sub-situations such as END-OF-HONEYMOON. The concept of scenarios is quite convenient in discourse analysis because it allows the researcher to analyse different linguistic metaphors within the same scenario. At this level of analysis, also the implications and functions that metaphors perform in discourse will be explored. In this section of the analysis, when more context about the use of a specific lexical item in news discourse was needed, a larger news corpus, the News on the Web corpus (Davies, 2016) was consulted.

#### **4. Conceptual domains and social actors**

As previously mentioned, the adapted MIP was applied to content words to identify metaphors in the concordances provided by *Wmatrix 5*. Two rounds of analysis were conducted to extract metaphors within the semantic domain of living creatures. In the next sections, the numbers of occurrences in brackets show the number of occurrences normalised per 10,000 words. In the first round of analysis, source and target domains were identified, then target domains that specifically involved China and Chinese social actors were analysed at a discourse level. More specifically, the AusC produced 7,568 (67.88) words belonging to the semantic domain of L2- Living creatures, whereas the AmC produced 10,589 (62.23) words. Among these words, 325 (2.91) and 432 (2.53) were recognised as metaphorically used words in respectively the AusC and the AmC. The relatively low number of metaphors



identified could be explained by the fact that *WMatrix 5* also considered the word virus as a living creature, although viruses are not generally considered to be alive. Unsurprisingly, the word virus occurred quite frequently in the two corpora and was primarily used with its basic meaning.

Musolff (2016) defined semantic domains as linguistic realisations of source domains. However, since the semantic domain of living creatures did not comprise only animals, different types of source domains were identified in the dataset. The most frequent one was that of ANIMAL which produced respectively 264 (2.36) and 324 (1.90) metaphors in the AusC and the AmC. Other source domains recognised included PEOPLE and PLANTS, although metaphors from these source domains were less frequent. In this paper, only metaphors belonging to the source domain of ANIMAL were presented.

Once the target and source domains were identified, it was possible to categorise social actors involved within the target domains. At a very general level, target domains involved concepts like PEOPLE, NATIONS, INSTITUTIONS, and POLITICAL STRATEGIES. Since the target concepts were quite general, a more specific categorisation was provided to classify the specific types of social actors implicated within the target domains. Several types of social actors have been framed through the use of similar animal metaphors that could be summarised into three macro-categories of social actors: Chinese institutions, political actors outside China, and Chinese Civilians.

For summarising purposes, within the category of Chinese institutions were gathered all social actors working for Chinese institutions. Thus, this category compiles individuals and collectivised (Van Leeuwen, 2008) groups of people working for Chinese institutions (e.g., individualised Chinese diplomats and members of the CCP, the CCP, censors, police, and Xi Jinping). Additionally, it gathered metaphors that referred to metonymically used words like China and Beijing. Considering the context in which those metonymies were produced, they all seemed metonymical references to the Chinese government, whose members were objectivised (Van Leeuwen, 2008) through the use of such metonymies. Referring to Radden & Kövecses' (1999) framework for metonymy, China and Beijing in the texts were interpreted as PART FOR PART, and specifically, PLACE FOR INSTITUTION metonymies, that stood mainly for the Chinese government or Chinese institutions. Furthermore, metonymically used words aimed at collectivising groups of people working in Chinese institutions (e.g., government, party, etc.) were considered WHOLE FOR PART and CATEGORY FOR MEMBER OF THE CATEGORY metonymies, and therefore, were included in the macro-classification of Chinese institutions.

The category named political actors outside China, referred to Australian and American politicians, whose representation was often juxtaposed to those of Chinese politicians and institutions. This classification was added because

according to Van Dijk's (1998) ideological square, out-groups are often discursively constructed through the positive representation of an in-group. Specifically, in this case, the positive representation of Western politicians and institutions might have contributed to the negative framing of Chinese politicians and institutions.

A last category was dedicated to Chinese civilians. This label comprises a wide variety of different social actors that tended to be specified (Van Leeuwen, 2008) in discourse and involved Chinese civilians living in China and abroad. More specifically, quarantined people in Wuhan or Chinese people affected with COVID-19, or people who died from COVID-19 tended to be collectivised social actors, whereas other types of actors such as Chinese expats, students living abroad, and in rare cases, American and Australian people of Chinese descent, were more commonly individualised.

#### **4.1. Chinese institutions as threatening creatures**

People working in Chinese institutions were often represented as different types of threatening creatures. More specifically, they have been frequently portrayed as predators or other dangerous beings. The most basic definition of a predator in the *MacMillan Dictionary* is "an animal that kills and eats other animals." Thus, predators tend to be associated with aggressive behaviours and regard other animals as food to be eaten. Therefore, predator metaphors can be integrated into a HUNTING scenario which has several implications in discourse. First, predators develop hunting abilities and are generally considered powerful. Furthermore, within a HUNTING scenario, weaker animals are usually considered preys of predators that can be discursively constructed as victims.

The most frequent lexical unit that was initially considered a predator metaphor was wolf, respectively with a frequency of 0.06 and 0.17 in the AmC and AusC. In the newspapers analysed, this linguistic metaphor was often used to frame Chinese diplomats and their diplomatic actions or strategies. Although this metaphor did refer to wolves as predators, it also had a further meaning, in that it referred to the Chinese film named *Wolf Warriors*, a film in which a soldier in the Chinese special force army must defend himself against a group of foreign mercenaries. The metaphor was first used in the title of the film to attribute characteristics of wolves (e.g., tough and solitary) to these soldiers, and then these characteristics were transferred to Chinese diplomats in news discourse. The expressions 'wolf warrior' and 'wolf warrior' diplomacy in the two corpora were often used to indirectly indicate a perceived change in Chinese diplomats' attitudes toward foreign relations which were represented as hostile. Thus, with this metaphor, Chinese diplomats were represented as tough as the 'wolf warriors'. It should be noted that this metaphor first

occurred in April 2020 in both corpora, when China received several accusations concerning the origins of COVID-19 by the countries under inquiry, and the diplomatic relations among these countries seemed to have worsened. Thus, this metaphor could be considered an indirect way of criticising the Chinese government and frame Chinese diplomats' international attitudes as hostile. Nonetheless, the broadsheets under inquiry claimed that Chinese newspapers first used the wolf metaphors to describe their own diplomats as strong and well-respected.

People working in Chinese institutions were also metaphorically represented using the following lexical units: watchdog, dog, bark, and hound. The most frequent lexical unit in both corpora was watchdog which occurred with a normalised frequency of 0.05 in the AusC and 0.03 in the AmC, followed by respectively hound (AusC, 0.03; AmC, 0.01), dog (AusC, 0.02; AmC, 0.03), and bark (AusC, 0.02; AmC, 0.01). Watchdog and dog were used similarly in both corpora in that they framed members of the CCP and Chinese diplomats as domestic dogs in both corpora. Example (1) shows a typical use of these metaphors.

- (1) And while Xi hasn't been so inflammatory, he has let slip the dogs of propaganda war. (SMH, May 2020)

As can be noted from the example, Xi Jinping was represented as the pet owner of Chinese diplomats, here called dogs of propaganda war. The diplomats were hence represented as animals Xi Jinping could maneuver as he preferred. Through this dehumanising metaphor, Chinese diplomats, and more generally, members of the CCP, who were framed as Xi Jinping's dogs, were also represented as incapable of rational human thoughts. Thus, this metaphor discursively removed agency from the social actors involved within the frame in that they were described as being subdued to Xi Jinping's influence.

A further linguistic metaphor that occurred quite frequently especially in the AusC was hound which is defined in the MacMillan dictionary as "a dog used for hunting other animals or for racing." In both corpora, this lexical unit was mostly used in its verb form. In the AmC, the verb to hound was used to refer to Xi Jinping (0.01) and a Chinese Civilian (0.01), both being hounded by respectively the CCP (in Xi Jinping's childhood), and Chinese parents. Thus, the two social actors were represented as passive agents of the verb. Nonetheless, in the AusC, hound was mostly used as a verb (0.03), and Chinese institutions were active agents performing the action of hounding as in Example (2):

- (2) Pro-China trolls fake accounts to hound foreign media over coronavirus. (SMH, April 2020)

In the AusC, a further macro-category of predators used to frame Chinese institutions could be identified, that of sea predators. No occurrences of these metaphors could be found in the AmC. In the AusC, Xi Jinping's behaviour has been directly compared to that of a shark (0.01). As Example (3) shows, Xi's continuous attempts to pressure democratic territories in Asia were directly compared to the behaviour of a shark, which cannot stop moving forward, the same way Xi was not willing to step back in his pressure campaigns.

- (3) Now that he (Xi Jinping) has mobilised his presidency in its name, he is like the great white shark – he cannot stop moving forward or he will die. (SMH, May 2020)

The noun tentacle has also been quite frequently used in the AusC (0.03) to frame the political and economic influence of Chinese institutions in the world. The noun tentacle seemed to recall the image of an octopus and is defined in the *MacMillan Dictionary* as “one of the long thin arms of an octopus that it uses for feeling things or for moving.” The connotation of this word was not clear-cut and for this reason, an analysis of the word tentacle on the News on the Web (NOW) corpus was conducted. The analysis revealed that the metaphorical use of the word tentacle seemed to be associated with negative concepts (e.g., war), and hence, seemed to have a negative discourse prosody (Stubbs, 2001). Examples (4) and (5) show two instances of how ‘tentacles’ was used in the AusC.

- (4) The Chinese fired the first shot with their outrageous behaviour in the South China Sea. Their tentacles are spreading throughout the South Pacific. (SMH, May 2020)
- (5) [...] the United Front, which Chinese President Xi Jinping once described as his “magic weapon,” whose tentacles already spread through our universities, corporations and parliaments. (DT, June 2020)

In the first example, the social actors involved were the Chinese, whereas in the second one the United Front. These two social actors were conceptualised in terms of an octopus whose tentacles spread respectively in the South Pacific and in Australian institutions like universities. Considering the negative discourse prosody of the word tentacle and the dehumanising nature of this metaphor, the use of the tentacle metaphor seemed to reveal underlying negative views toward the social actors represented, especially in the first example which referred to collectivised Chinese people. This negative aura of meaning surrounding the word tentacle seemed to reveal the broadsheets' negative attitudes toward China's influence around the world which was hence

represented as a negative threatening danger. Additionally, it should be observed that the use of the personal pronouns *our* and *'their'* in the examples contributed to creating a dichotomy between Australian institutions and Chinese social actors, reinforcing the negative portrayal of Chinese actors achieved through the use of negatively connotated metaphors. This tendency to use negative metaphors to juxtapose Western and Chinese social actors could be found throughout the corpora and is shown also in other sections of the analysis.

Probably the most negatively connotated words employed in both corpora to frame China were *beast* and *monster*. In the first case, China under Xi's administration was conceptualised in terms of a *beast* as example (6) shows. Within this metaphorical frame, China under Xi was represented as dangerous and unpredictable as a *beast*.

(6) But China under Xi is a different beast. (*LAT*, January 2020)

No occurrences of the word *beast* being used metaphorically could be registered in the AusC. *Monster* was used metaphorically to frame China in both the AmC (0.01) and the AusC (0.05). Quite interestingly, in the AmC, Trump's foreign diplomacy was highly criticised and its blame rhetoric toward China was compared to the action of "going abroad in search for monsters to destroy" (*NYT*, May 2020). In this example, China was ironically framed as one of the monsters that Trump was trying to destroy. However, given the ironic purpose of this metaphor, China was represented as one of Trump's victims. In the AusC, the metaphorically used word *monster* was more recurrent and was used in various contexts. More specifically, it was used both as a noun and as a verb. First, the United Front was represented as a "powerful monster" in the *DT* in June 2020. Furthermore, China's control system has been framed as a "totalitarian monster" in the following example:

(7) The coronavirus has exposed China for the totalitarian monster it is [. . .]  
(*DT*, February 2020)

In Example (7), it was claimed that coronavirus had revealed the true nature of the Chinese government, which was that of a totalitarian monster. *Monster* has also been used as a verb to refer to China's threatening international behaviours towards smaller countries, as can be seen in Example (8).

(8) If the world stage were a schoolyard, China would be the oafish bully monsterring smaller kids for their lunch money. (*DT*, April 2020)

Example (8) shows a direct metaphor in which China was personified in terms of an oafish bully tormenting smaller kids. This metaphor referred to a SCHOOLYARD scenario in which there were aggressive kids that monstereed smaller children to obtain what they want. Within this frame, China and countries considered less powerful, like Australia itself, were respectively compared to aggressive and smaller vulnerable kids. Thus, China was presented as the bully tormenting other nations personified in terms of smaller kids. This scenario seemed to convey an idea of danger and threat that was associated with Chinese institutions that was also confirmed and emphasised by the use of the monster metaphor which discursively constructed the Chinese government and its actions as dreadful and threatening.

#### 4.2. Political actors outside China as both harmless pets and predators

As could be noted in the previous sections, within a HUNTING or SCHOOLYARD scenario, where a predator, monster, or bully tormented other animals or kids, it was particularly crucial, at least from a critical perspective, to explore who the victims were. This section gathers metaphors used to frame political actors outside China who were integrated into a HUNTING scenario, either as pets to be hunted or as tormenters themselves.

One of the main differences between the two corpora laid in how their respective countries and politicians were represented in discourse. In the AusC, Australian politicians and diplomats were mainly framed as harmless domestic pets that either fell prey to the predator or were maneuvered by their pet owner. Although they were portrayed as victims, the metaphors were still negatively connotated as can be noted in Example (9).

- (9) Once again we look like diplomatic amateurs with only one international personality: not a roaring lion, but a puppy rolling over to have our tummy tickled by our great ally, after being sent yapping around the yard to return the rubber bone. (*SMH*, May 2020)

Example (9) reports a direct metaphor in which Australian diplomats' personality has been compared to that of a puppy (0.01). As regards animal metaphors, Kövecses (2010, p. 152) observed that human characteristics, such as personality traits, were first applied to animals and then reapplied to humans, creating "human-based animal characteristics" that can be used to understand human behaviour. Thus, the puppy metaphor described Australian diplomats by attributing to them personality traits considered typical of a puppy behaviour (e.g., silliness, weakness, and faithfulness). With the puppy metaphor, Australian diplomats were indirectly criticised for not having a strong international personality like that of a roaring lion. Furthermore, their

personality was compared to that of a puppy being cuddled and maneuvered by its owner, an ironically named great ally. The great ally stood for China, which within this metaphoric scenario was personified as the owner of the puppy. According to the GREAT CHAIN OF BEING, a pet is conceptually positioned at a lower level than a pet owner. Thus, such metaphor framed China as a pet owner that influenced Australian diplomats' who were instead described as China's pets.

Australia has often been represented in the corpus as a harmless pet threatened by China. Such metaphor was linguistically realised throughout the corpus with the following lexical units: cow (0.08), canary (0.05), and quarry (0.01). Example (10) shows a direct metaphor that compared Australia and its democracy to a canary in the coalmine.

- (10) Australia has been likened, more than once, to the "canary in the coalmine" for democracies that are under assault from Chinese government pressure campaigns. (*SMH*, June 2020)

This metaphor referred to a MINE scenario, in which a canary used to be brought into mines to detect possible deadly gas leaks. If the canary died after a specific amount of time, this meant that there was a gas leak in the mine, and miners were in danger. Thus, the image of the canary in the coalmine is generally associated with the idea of danger. In this specific scenario, the gas leak that could endanger democracy was embodied by the Chinese government pressure campaigns. A further example of Australia being represented as China's prey can be seen in Example (11), in which Australia was represented as China's quarry.

- (11) The Chinese don't have another quarry, either at home, or overseas, that can easily replace Australia's. (*SMH*, May 2020)

As previously mentioned, the AmC and AusC portrayed their politicians and institutions quite differently. In the AmC, no occurrences of prey metaphors used to frame American politicians could be found. The AmC presented their political figures mainly as hawks (0.28), hence, as flying predators. In a HUNTING scenario, they were represented as aggressive predators verbally hunting China. Additionally, this tendency was signaled by the frequent use of the word 'China' as a pre-modifier (0.18) of hawks to specify that American politicians were verbally attacking China and Chinese institutions over coronavirus. This suggested that the newspapers were in contrast with the American politicians who were frequently represented in the articles (e.g., Donald Trump). Quite

interestingly, the term 'hawks' was widely used also in the AusC (0.16) to refer to American politicians, even though it occurred less frequently.

### 4.3. Quarantined people as caged animals

Chinese civilians have been portrayed quite differently in the two corpora and could be divided into two sub-categories that shared similar metaphorical choices: Chinese expats and Australians or Americans of Chinese descent, and quarantined people in Wuhan. Furthermore, quarantined people in Wuhan were more frequently represented in the AmC rather than in the AusC as will be discussed shortly.

In the case of Chinese expats and Australians and Americans of Chinese descent, newspapers mainly reported hateful language used in real-life situations to offend Chinese people and people with East-Asian appearance during the pandemic. With these metaphors, Chinese people were framed as different kinds of animals (e.g., 'You Wuhan dog!'; Chinese people are "f---ing filthy animals who eat bats") and the main function of these metaphors was to insult Chinese and East-Asian-looking people and regard them as 'less' than human. These kinds of metaphors did not occur frequently and were mainly reported metaphors of hate incidents that people with East-Asian descent who live in the countries under inquiry have experienced during the pandemic.

As regards the second sub-category of Chinese civilians, quarantined people in Wuhan have been represented as animals in both corpora. More specifically, they both used the lexical unit 'herd' respectively with a normalised frequency of 0.03 in the AmC and 0.01 in the AusC to describe how sick people were transported to hospitals by Chinese authorities like groups of animals. The most basic definition of herd in the *MacMillan Dictionary* is "a large group of animals of the same type that live and move about together." In this scenario, Chinese officials were transporting sick people to hospitals in a way that according to the newspapers was dehumanising. In the AmC, this metaphor was used to describe also Hong Kong protesters who were herded onto police buses. Thus, on the one hand, herd metaphors seemed to recall the idea of a numerous and hence, dangerous amount of Chinese people potentially affected by COVID-19, which would recall Sino-phobic imageries. On the other hand, the herd metaphor could have been used to indirectly criticise the Chinese government for treating people like animals. This last interpretation of the data appeared to be the most plausible one, given that Chinese civilians were often victimised for not having enough freedom during the pandemic, and being subjected to government restrictions that undermined their individual liberties.

A set of metaphors found in the AmC compared quarantined people's lack of freedom to that of caged animals. For instance, in Example (12) quarantined



people have been compared to guinea pigs which are usually animals kept in cages and often used to conduct experiments.

- (12) [...] the people left in Wuhan and other cities are still likely to “feel like they’re kind of being left as guinea pigs.” (*LAT*, January 2020)

In this specific case, the guinea pig metaphor seemed an indirect critic to the Chinese government which reduced individual liberties to limit the spread of COVID-19. At the beginning of 2020, these restrictive measures were not adopted in the US and hence, they seemed to be negatively framed in the AmC, especially in the first months of 2020. In the AusC, the caged animal metaphor occurred with a frequency of 0.03 but was used to represent quarantined people in Christmas Island, and thus, did not really address Chinese authorities.

In the AmC, quarantined people have been represented also as animals waiting to be killed. Such metaphors were realised by means of the following lexical units: lamb (0.01), and duck (0.02). Chinese people locked down in Wuhan portrayed themselves as lambs waiting to be slaughtered as in Example (13), which reports an interview with a quarantined person.

- (13) Now we are lambs who will still be slaughtered, and we can only leave our fates to the heavens. (*NYT*, January 2020)

In this SLAUGHTERHOUSE scenario, quarantined people were compared to lambs waiting to be slaughtered, which metaphorically represented contracting COVID-19. In the last example (14), an American expat locked down in China defined quarantined people as ducks.

- (14) A pampered sitting duck is still a sitting duck, and I no longer have any illusions about everything turning out fine. (*NYT*, February 2020)

The expression sitting duck evoked once again a HUNTING scenario in which the duck was an easy target to hit, not by a real bullet but by COVID-19. These instances seemed to indirectly criticise the Chinese government for not protecting people during the pandemic.

All the examples of metaphors mentioned above showed a general tendency of the two American newspapers to victimise Chinese civilians to indirectly criticise the Chinese government for having restricted civilians’ individual freedom to slow the contagion. This might suggest that individual freedom was highly valued by the American newspapers, which did not represent restrictions as a way to prevent contagion, but just as an invasive and worrying limitation of personal freedom.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

This paper aimed at analysing animal metaphors used to frame China in American and Australian newspapers. Animal metaphors seemed to have a crucial role in the construction of Sino-phobic discourses in that they strengthened the dichotomy between Western countries, like the US and Australia, and China. Animal metaphors contributed to the discursive construction of a more positive in-group that was juxtaposed with a threatening and aggressive out-group, which is a typical discursive strategy in discriminatory discourses (Van Dijk, 1991). The study showed that “otherness” was often realised by means of animal metaphors, so as to emphasise the inappropriateness of the behaviour of the out-group (Rodríguez, 2009). In particular, the results confirmed that metaphors can contribute significantly to the construction of social identities (e.g., Fairclough, 1989; Hart, 2010; Musolff, 2015). As regards the first research question, the results showed that animal metaphors were used quite extensively to frame China and more generally, national identities and they discursively shaped diplomatic relations among countries in news discourse.

From a cognitive perspective, different source domains were identified such as ANIMAL, PERSON, and PLANT. Furthermore, within the target domains (e.g., INSTITUTIONS, NATIONS, and PEOPLE) different social actors could be identified. More specifically, three types of social actors were frequently framed by means of animal metaphors, namely Chinese institutions, political actors outside China, and quarantined people.

From a discursive perspective, people working in Chinese institutions were framed as predators in both corpora. More specifically, they were predominantly framed as threatening and dangerous animals. These metaphors were used to represent Chinese institutions as hostile, emphasising perceived aggressive attitudes toward Western countries, and comparing those attitudes to predatory behaviours. This metaphor category seemed to be used to indirectly criticise the Chinese government and its handling of relations with other countries, especially when those metaphors referred to Chinese diplomats. On the one hand, such predatory metaphors discursively highlighted the political tensions that were occurring in that period between both countries under inquiry and China, specifically emphasising the hostile behaviour of China. On the other hand, they downplayed the fact that China was coping with several accusations by American and Australian politicians and newspapers concerning the origins of COVID-19. More specifically, Chinese institutions have been represented as predators or monsters that were integrated into a HUNTING scenario, in which China was the threatening creature ready to attack and eat other smaller animals, which were mainly smaller countries. Since these negatively connotated metaphors occurred in

the corpora in contexts in which socio-economics relations with China were discussed, it seemed that their use was driven more by ideological and economic divergences (e.g., Del Visco, 2019) rather than by the fear of contagion (e.g., Kimura, 2021). Nonetheless, the latter motivation cannot be entirely excluded given that these metaphors were produced during a pandemic that is generally thought to have originated in China.

One of the major differences between the two corpora was how they represented social actors outside China. Specifically, in the case of the AusC, the HUNTING scenario was reinforced by the portrayal of Australian politicians and diplomats as harmless pets that were often described as being hunted by the aggressive predator China. The victimisation of these social actors created a sharp dichotomy between Australia and China, whose diplomatic relations seemed to have faced tensions at the time of collection of the articles (e.g., tariffs on Australian barley). Australian politicians and diplomats were mainly presented as weak and powerless animals. Such metaphors seemed to have discursively removed Australian politicians' agency by portraying them as subdued to their aggressive and dreadful ally, China. Thus, Australia itself was represented as a social actor without agency that could only endure China's aggressive attacks. This tendency could not be found in the AmC which instead represented American politicians as predators themselves (e.g., China hawks), continuously attacking China and its institutions. In this perspective, the AmC seemed to be more neutral in showing the responsibilities of American politicians in worsening the diplomatic relations with China. Nonetheless, the overall metaphorical image of China seemed to be associated with negative imageries also in the AmC (e.g., the beast metaphor used to represent Chinese institutions).

Chinese civilians were represented in a quite heterogeneous way in both corpora. The most frequent pattern concerned quarantined people. Ho (2022) found that quarantined people had often been dehumanised through the use of animal metaphors (e.g., pigs) on *Weibo*, mainly for having violated their quarantine status. This study also found that quarantined people were frequently dehumanised in news discourse using animal metaphors, although for reasons that were different from the ones described in her study. The dehumanising metaphors recognised in this analysis seemed to be used mainly to highlight the conditions in which people lived during their quarantine status. In particular, in the case of the AmC, quarantined people were metaphorically compared to caged animals as a way to indirectly criticise the Chinese government measures that restricted individual liberties in an attempt to contain the spread of COVID-19. Thus, the function of these metaphors was to underline the quarantined people's lack of freedom and compare it to that of caged animals.

Although the results from only two newspapers per country did not allow for wide generalisations, the results showed that the newspapers analysed seemed to share a common tendency to represent China as a threatening 'Other' (Lyman, 2000). The repetition of these discriminatory messages might negatively influence people's views not only on China but also on Chinese people living in different countries. However, this study did not explore the effects that animal metaphors might have had on readership, and this could be an aspect to be expanded in the future.

In addition to the representativeness limits, while *WMatrix 5* was a quite helpful tool to carry out the semantic domain analysis in such large corpora, not all words belonging to the semantic field of animals were recognised by *WMatrix 5* (e.g., tame, dragon) and hence, a close-reading analysis of a smaller sample of texts could be conducted in the future to expand this study. A further aspect to be explored could be a micro-diachronic perspective that can possibly add more insights into how metaphors for quarantined people can change over time, considering the spread of COVID-19 in the countries under inquiry, and whether this can be related to how newspapers framed restrictions of personal freedom.

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