Crumbing Giant, Rising Dragon? Chinese news media cartoon reflections on the Eurozone debt crisis

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Abstract
This paper explores China’s relationship with the European Union by analysing their mediated interactions during the Eurozone debt crisis. Despite different current economic situations, China and the EU form a key global alliance. In light of this, the paper considers visual framings of the Eurozone crisis in China’s leading business newspaper, focusing on meanings and evaluations rendered by political cartoons. The analysis finds the Chinese business press depicts the EU as struggling to handle its own financial affairs and asks whether this is seen as an opportunity for China to seize the title of global economic ‘heavyweight’.

Keywords: EU–China relations, foreign news, political cartoons.

Introduction
Throughout its existence, the European Union (EU) has been caricatured as an ‘economic giant’, a ‘fiscal gargantua’ (Bell 2004), ‘political Frankenstein’ (ibid.), a ‘federalising Behemoth’, (ibid.) and, rather enthusiastically, an ‘anchor of prosperity’ (Field 2004). But the dynamics of the world economy are shifting. As the former ‘giants’ of the world economy, the stable and unified economies of the Eurozone now appear to be showing signs of serious subsidence, while the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) economies are growing and strengthening. The Chinese ‘dragon’ in particular has reared its head and, with an average annual growth of almost 10 per cent (Babones 2011, p. 79), is beginning to roar. Yet, despite the ongoing euro debt crisis, the EU remains an important economic actor on the world stage, commanding considerable resources and trading strength. And despite their vastly different present economic situations, China and the EU remain important partners—a key alliance within the asymmetrically interdependent global structure (Castells 1996, p.145).

This paper contributes to knowledge and understandings of the nature of the Sino–EU relationship by undertaking a novel analysis of their interactions in times of economic crisis: specifically, this paper considers visual framings of the Eurozone crisis in China’s leading business newspaper, the International Finance News (IFN), focusing on meanings and evaluations rendered by political cartoons in particular. While visual analysis of news media remains a relatively understudied phenomenon (Greenberg 2002, p. 181), research into the construction of international relations
via visually potent political cartoons has been particularly scarce. There has been a recent shift in the literature towards addressing this dearth of political cartoon analysis, however (El Refaie 2003, 2009a; Forceville & Urios-Aparisi 2009; Yus 2009). Building on this, this paper provides an informed reflection on a key international dialogue, and makes a methodological and conceptual contribution to the field of political communication studies.

Reflecting on the euro debt crisis, China’s leading news media could arguably be torn between contradictory sentiments: on the one hand, a negative and dramatic twist is tempting for newsmakers, as it attracts readers’ attention; yet, on the other hand, too much negativity could raise questions regarding the Government’s choice of international partners. Conversely, failure to present a critical position about this major international economic crisis may lead to a dangerous situation where the severity of the problem is obscured—an unacceptable failure for the business people who comprise the readership of IFN, and especially undesirable considering that China is buying eurobonds. Yet arguably well-deserved negativity in the portrayals of the EU could also be instrumental in delivering a message of domestic (Chinese) economic successes in comparison to the failures of a ‘Western’ power. With this in mind, the research question which this study asks is: How does the media imagery in China’s leading business news media (specifically visual metaphors rendered by political cartoons in the reputable business daily) shape Chinese views on the EU as it responds to, and attempts to mitigate, the euro debt crisis?

El Refaie (2003, pp. 76–7) notes that metaphors must be explored in their own specific ‘socio-political contexts’ if they are to be useful in gauging political attitudes and responses to ongoing news events. Correspondingly, this paper first assesses Sino–EU relations against the strain of the euro debt crisis. It then turns to the theoretical understanding behind this enquiry into textual and visual framings of the internationally relevant euro debt crisis, followed by the methodology and findings. In the concluding discussion, this paper elaborates on potential impacts that visual metaphors of the euro debt crisis may have on Chinese audience perceptions and suggests avenues for future research.

**Sino–EU relations**

Deng (2007, p. 889), citing Yahunda, notes that, during the Cold War, Europe was confined to a ‘secondary role’ in its relations with Maoist China. Since the Cold War, however, and intensified developments in economic globalisation, Europe has become a partner of key importance for China. With the Treaty on European Union and the development of a more streamlined EU foreign policy, the EU has been proactive in developing strengthened ties with the rising China (Deng 2007, p. 890). The EU’s growing role in the world has seen China happy to reciprocate Europe’s attention, and in the past decade ‘the Sino–EU relationship has witnessed presumably the most dramatic growth among great power dyads’ (ibid). China’s move away from a centrally planned economy towards a market-driven one, engaged in global commerce, has facilitated China’s rise as a power increasingly engaged in world affairs. Much like the EU, China currently seeks global political status commensurate with its economic weight (European Commission Delegation
to China). This mutual economic strength is significant and the trade between the two has increased dramatically: China is now the EU’s second-largest trading partner (behind only the USA) and its biggest source of imports. Similarly, the EU is China’s biggest trading partner (ibid). The EU and China have strengthened their political dialogue as a means of facilitating this, and the partners have a strong strategic, if not always simple, relationship. Deng (2007, p. 863) argues that, from Beijing’s perspective, this ‘strategic partnership’ is understood to indicate a mutual acceptance of the partner states’ importance to each other and to the wider world.

But, some tension remains. The failure of the EU to lift the arms embargo against China (imposed in 1988 after the violent treatment of student demonstrators in Tiananmen Square) has been a sticking point, as have issues of human rights. The embargo was set to be lifted in 2004, when the EU was seen to buckle to US pressure and retain it, and the issue has been at a stalemate since that time. There remains no consensus across the 27 EU Member States on how to proceed (Economist 1 Feb. 2010), and so the embargo remains a ‘thorn in the side’ of Sino–EU relations. Relations were also put under strain following the failure of talks at the Copenhagen Conference on Climate Change, with some commentators believing the outcome to represent a failure of the EU’s policy towards China (Falletti 2010). The EU’s anti-dumping tariffs targeted at Chinese leather footwear since 2006, as well as the EU’s failure to acknowledge China’s market economy status, are further sources of contention between these two world leaders (Lan 2011).

The issue of human rights, however, is also an area of increased cooperation that has seen increased political dialogue afforded by annual bilateral summits since 1998. Regarding human rights in particular, the meetings have resulted in a more productive understanding on the issue (Men 2011, p. 534). Despite this, Men notes that there remains more discord on human rights than there is agreement between China and the EU (ibid).

China’s reaction to the Eurozone crisis has been one of conditional support. At a recent EU–China summit in Brussels, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao stated that ‘China is firm in supporting the EU side in dealing with the debt problems … We are willing to conduct close communication and co-operation with the EU side’ (BBC News 14 Feb. 2012). Indeed, China has bought Eurozone bonds, indicating an enduring economic link between the two entities, but at present is withholding buying more ‘until certain conditions have been reached’ (Reuters 15 Feb. 2012). Further, in an interview with Chinese media, Wen noted that China had no intention of ‘buying’ Europe out of its problems (Euractiv.com 14 Feb. 2012). Despite this seeming reluctance to get its hands dirty with a European bailout, the realities of Sino–EU trade mean that the events in Europe are necessarily of concern to their Chinese partners. This concern is reinforced by the fact that Chinese national and regional governments also find themselves in massive debt.\(^1\)

As such, the discourse of financial turmoil and debt is far from an exclusively international topic for Chinese news makers and readers. Instead, for this country undergoing a fundamental economic transition towards a consumer-based economy, national debt is an issue that resonates locally and that prompts attention towards
both domestic debt limits, as well as the debt of international partners. In light of the importance of the EU–China relationship at both a political and economic level, and the growing local awareness of the gravity of the debt issues, it is interesting to explore how the ongoing Eurozone debt crisis has been represented in the Chinese news media by visual means, and it is to this specific analysis which this paper now turns.

Theorising political cartoons and conceptual metaphors

The study of cartoons and political caricatures is common in disciplines like historical studies, but in political communication scholarship, attention paid to these unique framing devices has been sporadic. The scandal surrounding the so-called ‘Mohammed cartoons’ in Denmark (and subsequent global reprinting) has seen a shift back towards a consideration of cartoons as sources of significant discursive and interpretative power. As Bigi et al. (2011, p. 153) have noted, a cartoon can ‘[expose] viewers to a point of view for or against its subject, either by presenting it as a figure worthy of sympathy or by distorting it into a figure of ridicule’. Further, Gombrich (cited in Bigi et al. 2011, p. 153) argues that the power of cartoons comes from their ability to capture both context and relationships into a single visual ‘snapshot’, which can ‘re-contextualize events and evoke reference points in ways that a photograph or even a film cannot’. Thus, cartoons can offer condensed and simplified portrayals of complex situations in order to aid audience cognition.

As Greenberg (2002, p. 181) notes, ‘cartoons seize upon and reinforce common sense and thus enable the public to actively classify, organize and interpret in meaningful ways what they see or experience about the world at a given moment’. By capturing a moment in this way, cartoons are often argued to have a ‘universal’ readability and appeal (Conners 1998, cited in El Refaie 2009b, p. 182). Indeed, Conners (ibid.) claims that this stems from the use of metaphors in cartoons, which enable simplified mental processing and interpretation. While this paper acknowledges the degree to which cartoons can be said to influence public opinion is debated (Wiid, Pitt & Engstrom 2011, p. 138), they can be considered an important part of political opinion discourse itself (ibid.) and thus their inclusion in studies of news framings is warranted. The use of cartoons in post-war Chinese political discourses has a long history. Crozier (1981, p. 50) notes, for example, that ‘[s]ince 1949 political cartoons have been a regular feature of the Chinese press, supporting Party policies and attacking enemies both foreign and domestic’. Hung, too, has explored the role that political cartoonists played in the late 1940s in China, claiming that:

Chinese cartoonists were … both artists and opinion makers. When the battle for public opinion after the war became in part a struggle for mastery of images, cartoons became an essential element in the unfolding political drama in modern China. (Hung 1994, p. 123)
The political cartoon then, as a critical medium, can be seen as familiar to Chinese audiences. Our paper focuses particularly on the metaphors underlying visual representations of the Eurozone crisis in the Chinese business news media, arguing that it is these metaphorical devices which enable cartoons to be accepted and understood by Chinese news readers.

This enquiry is thus positioned within a paradigm that conceptualises metaphors as a cognitive (not only linguistic) phenomenon (Gibbs 1994; Lakoff 1991, 2005; Lakoff & Johnson 1999, 2003; Sweetser 1990; Turner 1996; Gibbs 2008; Kövecses 2010). Lakoff and Johnson (2003, p. 5) describe the essential function of metaphors as the means of ‘understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another’. Studies exploring the concept of metaphor and its use in many discourses, including political communication, are numerous, as it has become widely accepted that people use metaphors to make sense of the ever-changing global reality by contrasting one domain of experience against another (Lee 2001). The function of metaphors created and delivered by media in configuring the world has been noted by Postman (1987), who argues:

[w]hether we are experiencing the world through the lens of speech or the printed word or the television camera, our media-metaphors classify the world for us, sequence it, frame it, enlarge it, reduce it, color it, argue a case for what the world is like [sic].

Metaphorical categorisations are considered to be particularly compelling in cases where the recipients of information do not have strong opinions beforehand (Broström 1994, p. 38), which is often the case in the field of foreign affairs. Indeed, Lakoff expressly argues that metaphorical thought is most commonly used by the general public in comprehending international politics:

[T]here is an extensive, and mostly unconscious, system of metaphor that we use automatically and unreflectively to understand complexities and abstractions. Part of this system is devoted to understanding international relations … (Lakoff 1991)

Specific scholarly attention to the metaphors inherent in cartoons has been growing (see, for example, El Refaie 2003, 2009a, 2009b; Kennedy, Green & Vervaeke 1993; and Bounegru & Forceville 2011). Bounegru and Forceville’s (2011) work on the multimodal discourse of the global financial crisis is of particular importance for this paper, as it is one of the few studies which explored external readings of political cartoons—that is, considering an international issue as seen through the eyes of domestic audiences. Much of the existing literature focuses on issues of domestic relevance represented in domestic print news media and cartoons (including El Refaie’s 2009b study examining Austrian cartoons of refugee migration in the context of the EU’s Schengen Zone). Thus, our study offers a novel contribution to the field of cartoon analysis by undertaking a systematic study of the visual metaphors expressed by political cartoons commenting on the external process of the Eurozone crisis as viewed from a distance by key economic
and political partner, and growing global heavyweight, China. This novel focus also contributes to the scholarship on EU–China relations which typically ignores visual components in studies of the dialogue between these two important international actors. Thus, the paper helps to illuminate the ongoing challenges in a key global partnership, and considers how Chinese business commentators (and their readers) view Europe’s continuing economic woes.

**Methodology**

Cartoon portrayals of the Eurozone crisis were observed through content analysis of the leading Chinese business daily, the *International Finance News (IFN)*. Owned by the Chinese media giant *People’s Daily* (itself a party-run media outlet), and with a circulation of 300,000 published in Mandarin, the *IFN* is a Shanghai-based paper that has produced a daily business paper for its audience since 1994—only two years after China’s economic reform period began. As the newspaper is based in Shanghai—typically regarded as the centre of finance and trade in China—and with a specific focus on finance from an international perspective, we argue that *IFN* is thus aimed at professionals who are, or may be, inclined to interact with the EU and are intimately concerned with the euro debt crisis.

The analysis undertaken for this project involved qualitative reading of the cartoons, using critical discourse analysis tools. Critical discourse analysis has long been used in visual analysis, and is generally understood to refer to analysis that explores the ‘communicative interaction’ between the semiotic and linguistic features of a text, and the socially embedded meanings and context of that interaction (Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999 cited in Bahaa-Eddin & Mazid 2008).

Importantly, in this paper, the cartoon visual imagery is assessed in relation to the text of the newspaper story, not by itself—cartoons entered our sample only when attached to news items referring to the Eurozone debt crisis. As Saraceni (2003, p. 36) notes, ‘cartoons are like single sentences: in order to understand them you need to have some extra-textual information’, further elaborating that in order to fully comprehend cartoons, a reader requires both ‘textual context … the language that surrounds a portion of text’, and ‘extra-textual context, your knowledge of the world’ (ibid., emphasis in original). Thus, while a direct comparison between textual and visual metaphors was not made in this analysis, the content of the cartoons was broadly compared to the content of the accompanying news text. In this light, the cartoons were identified as ‘generic’ illustrations to the text itself—often, they were only tenuously linked to the actors or concrete scenarios covered in the article. Despite limited cognitive information rendered by the cartoon in terms of its ‘match’ with the text, the two modes were assumed to ‘work together’ to tell the whole story (especially when the text was written by a local (Chinese) author and the cartoon was authored by a Western cartoonist (discussed in depth below)).

The data for this analysis comes from the transnational comparative research project *The EU in the Eyes of Asia Pacific: Media, Public and Elite Perceptions of the EU*. Since 2002, it has involved 22 locations, including China. This analysis focuses on the media data collected between 1 January 2011 and 30 June 2011—a
period marked by intense discussions on the euro debt crisis. All newspapers (including IFN in this study) were analysed by trained native-language speaker researchers. The papers were monitored daily, using PDF e-copies of the printed hard copies, accessed via subscription to the papers (thus warranting high precision in the data search by avoiding problems dealing with differences between hard copies and internet editions of the papers). This form of sampling enabled our team to avoid the problem of losing the ‘discursive context’, which Bounegru and Forceville (2011, p. 211) claim to be an important consideration in designing a semiotic study of news cartoons. All sections of the paper were observed. Irrespective of the intensity of EU reportage, the news item entered the database if it referenced the keywords: the European Union/EU or its institutions (European Commission/EC, European Parliament/EP, European Central Bank/ECB, euro, Eurozone and European Court of Justice/ECJ).

The sampling unit was a news article (including text with or without accompanying visual images (photograph(s), cartoon(s), etc.)). In total, 403 news items referencing the EU and its political institutions were collected in the IFN during our sampling period and 32 per cent (n=129 items) of that coverage was devoted to the euro debt crisis, making this topic the most reported about the EU in the first half of 2011. A high share of the euro debt crisis reportage in a business daily is predictable due to its targeted readership, the business community. The 129 euro debt news items were accompanied by cartoons in 29 per cent of the sample, and it is the analysis of these images on which this paper focuses. The cartoon sample included 23 cartoons of unattributed origin, but a closer examination of the cartoonists’ signatures and an online search suggested that all but one cartoon were drawn by non-Chinese (presumably European) cartoonists. The issue of cartoon syndication is itself worth mentioning. As an affiliate of People’s Daily—China’s largest newspaper, owned by the communist party—IFN arguably has access to syndicated materials, which might otherwise be inaccessible to a local newspaper. This could account for the high proportion of European-sourced cartoons identified. Despite the Western perspective of the cartoons, however, the key issue for us was the resulting images of the cartoons. The cartoons could be syndicated or original, but they were visible and thus had the potential to influence the business public’s perceptions of the EU as China’s business partner. Further, it is notable that IFN appears to place a high value on the impact of the cartoons, frequently placing the same cartoon in a single issue twice, typically once on the front cover, next to its title, and once accompanying the news item. This placement prominence further enhances the salience of cartoons with an external perspective.

**Operationalising metaphors in cartoon analysis**

Conceptualising metaphors as a cognitive phenomenon, this study follows an assumption that ‘any form of communication can be seen as an instance of metaphor, if it is able to induce a metaphoric thought or concept’ (El Refaie 2003, p. 76). Respectively, this study aims to identify visual metaphors in cartoons attached to news items in the Chinese business press relating to the euro debt crisis. The definition of a visual metaphor used in this analysis is informed by Kennedy, Green
and Vervaeke (1993), who suggest that any visual depiction can be seen as an instance of metaphor, ‘provided that its use is intended to occasion a metaphoric thought’ (p. 244). But El Refaie (2003) argues that ‘since all signs are motivated by interest and based on social convention, it is thus impossible to determine unambiguously whether a visual sign is meant to be read “literally” or “metaphorically”’ (p. 82). Thus, our analysis incorporated two steps: 1) analysis of the visual semiotics of the image of a cartoon; and 2) analysis of the metaphorical meanings rendered by a combination of the visual semiotic elements of this cartoon. The former step is the key in considering the salience and significance of the identified EU images surfacing in the cartoons by answering:

… the question of representation (what do images represent and how?) and the question of the ‘hidden meanings’ of images (what ideas and values do the people, places and things represented in images stand for?) … what ideas and values do we associate with these depicted people, places and things, and what is it that allows us to do so? (van Leeuwen 2001, p. 92)

Respectively, the first-step analysis of the cartoons was concerned with determining which characters and people were seen to visually represent the EU, how they were depicted, and what actions they were seen to be undertaking, in order to gauge whether there were particular patterns in the EU portrayals. Drawing inspiration from Wiid, Pitt and Engstrom’s work (2011), this analysis also sought to catalogue the inherent binary struggle of the cartoon; Wiid, Pitt and Engstrom (ibid.) note that cartoons typically depict political situations as binary struggles between good and bad, winner and loser, right and wrong. Finally, analysis included consideration of other visual images such as symbols and objects both of the EU and its Member States (such as flags, maps and other objects), so as to determine whether the EU was easily recognisable. Additionally the text within the cartoon itself was considered where it appeared.

The elements described above were then considered in their contribution to the visual metaphor(s) rendered by the cartoon. In each case, this analysis considered the three levels of context in interpreting a visual metaphor, as proposed by El Refaie (2003, pp. 88–9): 1) the drawing’s reference (clear or implicit) to the metaphorical theme, 2) pictorial presence of the topic and the vehicle, and 3) the discourse context in which the association between the topic and the vehicle is common. For example, a cartoon which visually depicts two men wrestling, one wearing a ‘euro’ costume, the other wearing a ‘financial crisis’ costume depicts the metaphor EURO DEBT CRISIS AS A FIGHT WHICH THE EU MUST WIN. Terminology wise, a metaphor consists of a topic (target domain) and a vehicle (source domain). In the above example, the topic (target domain) is the EU’s handling of the debt crisis, and the vehicle (source domain) is the metaphor of battle. Following the classification of Bounegru and Forceville (2011, p. 213), metaphors in cartoons were then identified as ‘monomodal (either verbal metaphors or pictorial/visual metaphors) or multimodal (deploying both the verbal and the visual modalities)’. This study acknowledges that the high context-
dependency of visual metaphors presents a challenge to this analysis as it ‘means that their meaning is often implicit and that they tend to be open to quite a wide range of interpretations’ (ibid.). Our sampling method of including cartoons only where they featured in stories focused on the Eurozone debt crisis and in which the context was thus clear, helped our team to overcome this methodological challenge. After establishing any patterns or repeatedly employed visual images of the EU, an investigation of the meanings of those images was made. This was carried out in order to understand Chinese media framings of the EU’s reactions and responses to the euro debt crisis and what type of actor the EU was portrayed to be.

**Results**

A range of metaphors was identified in the 23 relevant cartoons that were collected in our six-month sample period, and several themes emerged across these. All but one of the cartoons identified Europe as the **target domain** of the metaphor: the economic crisis was seen as a European concern with no involvement by or repercussions for international actors. In other words, in these instances, all of the ‘action’ was seen to take place within a European environment and with European actors. Given the implications of the euro debt crisis, not only for China but also for other global partners, this was a surprising discovery. Thematically, the cartoons can be grouped into a number of **source domains**: most prominent were metaphors which depicted the EURO DEBT CRISIS AS A BATTLE/WAR/FIGHT/STRUGGLE with strong enemies and wounded heroes; the EURO DEBT CRISIS AS AN IMPENDING NATURAL OR MAN-MADE DISASTER; the EU AS A CONSTRUCTION OR SHELTER IN NEED OF REPAIR; and various other metaphors including PERSONIFICATION, ANIMALISATION and the notion of PRECIOUS TREASURE. The majority of the metaphors (14 out of 23) were monomodal in their representation, with visual metaphors more common than a multimodal combination of text and visual used to create the metaphoric meaning. This preference could be explained by the patterns of cartoons sourcing. With 22 of 23 cartoons being drawn by non-Chinese (arguably ‘Western’) cartoonists, verbal elements were found to be minimal, perhaps to facilitate understanding among Chinese readers. As discussed above, the news text within which the cartoons were placed was often only tenuously connected to the topic and metaphor depicted by the cartoon itself. In other words, while not much cognitive information was rendered by the cartoons to match the text, the emotional element (mainly the negative valence of the images, conveyed by the visual metaphors) was in sync with the negative textual descriptions of the problem.

**The euro debt crisis as a war or battle**

Danger was omnipresent in the cartoons depicting the Eurozone debt crisis which were printed for the Chinese business audiences. The first most common metaphor was EURO DEBT CRISIS AS A BATTLE/WAR/FIGHT/STRUGGLE. It necessarily involved the conceptual metaphor of personification (since war is, after all, a human pursuit), but the principle metaphor being depicted was that of Europe engaged in a battle, ostensibly to defend itself against the enemy (the economic crisis). Such life or death metaphors are common in political discourse, so it was not unexpected
to find them in our sample. An example of this type of metaphor can be seen in Figure 1, in which the euro is depicted as a wrestler fighting the ‘financial crisis’—a much bigger opponent than himself. The text on the cartoon tells us that the two have been fighting for a while, but this looks like it might be the end of the ‘euro’ challenger as the cartoon asks, is this ‘the final round’? The ‘euro’ wrestler might still be in the ring prepared to fight, but the conceptual metaphor thus rendered here by multimodal means is that of the EURO AS A WEAK AND INJURED FIGHTER; one who looks set to LOSE THE FIGHT.

![Figure 1](Source: IFN, 27 January 2011, p.4)

Similarly, another cartoon (Figure 2) depicts an EU member state (Greece) as Achilles, the doomed mythological hero. As can be seen, our hero is the SOLDIER READY FOR BATTLE, but who is mortally wounded by an arrow through his heel. The arrow in this instance is the market indicator, which points downwards. Thus, in this battle, the PLUMMETING EUROPEAN MARKETS ARE THE ENEMY—an ENEMY WHO WILL BEAT our Greek ‘hero’.

![Figure 2](Source: IFN, 31 March 2011, p.4)

A highly symbolic monomodal example of the metaphoric framing of battle—with very different outcomes—can be seen in Figure 3. As is clear, this cartoon references one of the most famous images of war, Joe Rosenthal’s Raising of the Flag at Iwo Jima. The use of this particular reference shows the EU’s struggles with its own economy and the euro debt crisis as a major battle, equivalent (in the mind of the cartoonist at least) to the struggles of the US in World War 2. In this image, the EU will stop at nothing to protect itself, much as the US would stop at nothing to defeat the Japanese in World War 2. Importantly, in this cartoon, three men are raising the EU’s flag—thus, unlike the previous cartoon, in this scene the EU is
THE VICTOR. The men climb over the debris (which presumably is the remains from their ‘battle’). Among the debris are the euro symbol and other financial symbols, indicating perhaps that to save the integration project, the EU might yet have to destroy its flagship currency. Thus, in a more successful portrayal, the EU’s financial woes are metaphorically framed here as a WAR WHICH THE EU WILL WIN—the EU is a SOLDIER, arguably a ruthless one who will do whatever it must to ensure its survival.

Figure 3 (Source: IFN 16 February 2011, p.2)

The euro debt crisis as an impending disaster
Much as the concept of battle and war is not uncommon in political discourse, so too the metaphor of impending disaster is a regular sight in economic and political rhetoric generally, and in our sample in particular. The notion that the EU faced a serious disaster was the second of our most commonly identified metaphoric images—and, in the majority of examples, this disaster was man-made, not natural. There were some instances in which the blame for the impending disaster was unclear, where there were both natural and man-made disaster elements present. In one notable instance (Figure 4), the world economy was depicted as the ill-fated Titanic, sailing unknowingly into the path of icebergs, which, as history tells us, will be its downfall. The existence of the icebergs themselves is not the fault of the ‘world economy’ certainly, but the presence of the ship in their midst is arguably a human error of arrogance (the Titanic was billed as being ‘unsinkable’). In this example, the icebergs represent several EU Member States—those with the major economic problems. The metaphor inherent in this cartoon

Figure 4 (Source: IFN 25 March 2011, p.4)
then, is the WORLD ECONOMY AS A SHIP HEADED TOWARDS ITS OWN DESTRUCTION. The EU MEMBER STATES AS ICEBERGS ARE A NATURAL THREAT, the depths of which are hidden but could be catastrophic.

Another less-than-clear case of ‘natural’ or man-made disaster is found in Figure 5 (and printed twice over the course of the timeframe under review). Here, the 2011 deficit is visually rendered as the sun, getting ever closer to the people standing on Earth. This visual reference to climate change thus metaphorically renders the ECONOMIC CRISIS AS A PHYSICAL DANGER to the (rather ignorant) bystanders. The degree to which this can be considered a natural or man-made disaster rather depends on the perspective taken towards climate change, but prevailing scientific and political opinion increasingly views this as a man-made disaster about to cause very real natural and physical consequences for the public.

An example of natural disaster was found in a monomodal cartoon in which a large house with a nice garden, sitting on an island, is half submerged (Figure 6). In this image, the sky looks very dark, and it looks as though there has just been a storm and another may be on its way. In this cartoon, the reader is forced to read the text of the accompanying article, which is about the euro debt crisis, as there are no apparent symbols or figureheads to link the cartoon with the EU visually. The Eurozone is thus displayed as A SINKING HOUSE/ISLAND, LEFT TO DRIFT, WITH NO OBVIOUS RESCUERS NEARBY.
**The euro debt crisis as a faulty shelter**

A further commonly identified visual metaphor in our sample was that of the EU as a CONSTRUCTION OR SHELTER IN NEED OF REPAIR. An example of this can be seen in the below cartoon (Figure 7), in which the euro is rendered as a STRUCTURE WITH SERIOUS DEFECTS. The various EU leaders are here seen as CONSTRUCTION WORKERS undertaking emergency repairs, attempting to both fix the cracks in the structure, and provide additional structural support through guy ropes. Thus, the EURO IS A STRUCTURE IN DANGER OF COLLAPSE without the hard work of France and Germany who are propping it up. Another EU leader—the Irish Taoiseach—is standing nearby ready to paint over the repairs in EU blue, to make the ‘euro structure’ look as good as new, so that the rest of the world will not be able to see the repairs that have been made under the surface.

![Figure 7 (IFN 15 March 2011, p.1)](image)

The EU was similarly critiqued in the example shown in Figure 8 (again, printed twice in the course of our study), in which we see a number of anonymous black-suited people (rendered thus to denote that these represent all EU leaders or ‘Eurocrats’) huddled under an umbrella as the rain pours down overhead. Unfortunately, however, the umbrella has a series of star-shaped holes that let in the rain (the danger) to soak the people beneath. In this cartoon the EU (rendered by a blue umbrella with the EU stars as cut-outs) is A DEFECTIVE SHELTER WHICH CANNOT PROTECT ITSELF FROM DANGER. While the cartoon itself is monomodal, the text accompanying the cartoon in the news item tells us that the threat, in this instance, is the euro debt crisis, but the target domain of the metaphor—the EU—is clearly represented here as a FLAWED AND FAILING SHELTER.

![Figure 8 (Source: IFN 9 May 2011, p.5)](image)
Personification

As mentioned previously in describing the metaphors of war, personification was an accompanying metaphoric device, but in a number of other cartoons, personification was itself the leading conceptual metaphor. Two particular examples demonstrate this. In Figure 9 we see the EU (personified as a woman) has made herself sick (drunk) by drinking/absorbing all the problems of Greece, Ireland and Portugal, represented here as bottles of their nation’s signature liquor. The EU has wasted all her money drinking herself into oblivion. In this cartoon then, the metaphor is the EU AS A SICK PERSON. But, the EU has not caught a cold—this is an illness of her own doing. By wasting all her money on emptying the bottles herself, the blame is laid here at the (up-ended!) feet of the EU, and she is thus cast further not only as sick, but also AS A PERSON LACKING COMMON SENSE OR SELF CONTROL.

More ominously, in another striking example of the personification metaphor, in Figure 10 the illness appears to have gone much further. In this example we see a coffin shrouded in the Greek flag. Arguably, the metaphor in this cartoon is clear, and foreboding: the GREEK ECONOMY HAS BEEN PERSONIFIED, BUT IT IS DEAD AND IS ABOUT TO BE BURIED. The euro debt crisis is thus clearly a deadly force capable of killing its Member States. In this instance, there is no hope for economic recovery. The metaphor of death or impending doom was apparent in at least three of the cartoons. In another example (Figure 11), it was Irish Taoiseach Brian Cowen who was the cause of the rest of Europe’s woes. This cartoon depicts Cowen dragging the leaders of France, Germany, the UK, and President van Rompuy and others towards the edge of a cliff, about to fall over. Cowen’s own weight is added to by his banks and debt. In this instance, Cowen is the antagonist. As well as impending doom and possible death, there are a number of other metaphors rendered by the picture:
that Irish debt has pulled Europe to a precipice and may fall, taking other Europeans with it, and, likewise, there is the theme of European countries being TIED TOGETHER AND UNABLE TO ESCAPE FROM DISASTER.

Animalisation

While it is common for states and similar actors to be personified in both textual and visual cartoons, a perhaps less common theme is ANIMALISATION, but it was identified in our sample twice. In the first (Figure 12), we see a big fat pig (a piggy bank) lying on its side, feeding two piglets (two small piggy banks), watched over by Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany (denoting that the bigger pig is representative of Germany). A very thin worm-like pig (a piggy bank again), coloured in the Greek flag, is approaching, obviously asking for some food (as expressed in a begging pose of the smaller pig). Merkel leans on the pig and looks sombre, giving the impression to the ‘Greek pig’ that it is not welcome; there is not enough ‘food’ left for it. In this metaphor then, both Germany and Greece are pigs, but one is STARVING TO DEATH. Germany, in this cartoon, has been ‘nursing’ the EU and providing its ‘mother’s milk’ sustenance, but it is running out and cannot provide for another ‘runt’ in the litter. The symbolic value of this cartoon’s metaphors would arguably not be lost on Chinese business news readers as the pig has always had a place of symbolic value in Chinese culture, and some claim that Qing Dynasty China invented the predecessors to the present day piggy banks (Welch 2008, p. 140). In fact, Welch claims that:
the pig is one of the most important animals in the Chinese economy, where ownership of a pig was a sign of wealth, rightly earning the pig its position as one of the twelve animals in the Chinese zodiac … its symbolic meaning is restricted to the important role it plays as a sign of general prosperity, wealth and overall good fortune. (ibid.)

In Germany, too, the pig is typically associated with good fortune, and marzipan pigs (as well as pig imagery) have long since been exchanged as gifts on New Year's Eve (Goad 2011). In the case of this cartoon, the fact that the German economy ‘pig’ is suffering and cannot feed its entire litter is arguably a highly negative portrayal.

The only obvious cartoon in our sample which originated from a Chinese source was also the only one that linked the Eurozone crisis with the wider world economy (Figure 13). In this, a person wearing a bull's mask is crouching on a crate used for transporting goods. The ‘bull’ is hammering on the crate trying to keep down the bear contained within it. A Chinese man is watching aghast as the bear is trying to escape. On the crate are a number of words written in Mandarin—‘earthquake’, ‘oil’, ‘change of government’ and, importantly for this study, ‘European debt’. The crate thus can be seen to contain key issues of political and economic importance for China, in the year prior to its first change in government in a decade. In this image, both the bull and the bear are active, though the bull is cunning and attempts to nail the crate shut. But the bear is also strong and angry—its teeth are clenched and it is struggling to rise. As well as the more obvious business metaphors which the bear and the bull are used to depict (namely the US stock market), the metaphor of the Eurozone is one of CONTAINMENT: the bull is trying to contain the bear who represents these issues (including the euro debt crisis). Both creatures also have symbolic value in Chinese culture, the bull being one of the signs of the Chinese zodiac, symbolic of perseverance, determination, stability and long-suffering while the bear in Chinese culture is understood to be a symbol of strength (Werness 2006, p. 36)—thus ensuring the meaning rendered by this cartoon would be understood by Chinese news readers.

Figure 13 (Source: IFN 12 April 2011, p.4)
Discussion

With the goal of evaluating China’s reaction to the euro debt crisis, this paper has explored visual metaphors rendered by political cartoons depicting Europe’s financial problems. All cartoons were printed in one influential Chinese business daily, *International Finance News*, yet future studies could consider other press outlets to expand the sample. Future work could also consider comparative analysis of representations of other leading international actors (the USA or fellow members of the BRICS group). Despite its specific focus, the *IFN*, as a leading national news outlet shaping the opinions of the business community in China, enjoys a prestigious status and strong agenda-setting qualities. Importantly, the euro debt crisis was highly visible in the *IFN* coverage in 2011, and this visibility was further enhanced by the high level of attached visual imagery (including cartoons).

The pioneering nature of this investigation is not only concerned with content—an early assessment of the euro debt crisis’s impact on the EU’s global image—but also methodology. That is, it represents an important attempt to assess the potentially influential Chinese media *visual* images regarding the EU in crisis. Tracing underlying metaphorical concepts, this study identified and described visual metaphors which may affect Chinese business readers’ attitudes towards the EU at a ‘more irrational and emotional level than if the same idea had been expressed verbally’ (El Refaie 2003, p. 89). Moreover, by incorporating the element of the visual metaphor, an ‘extraordinarily difficult and elusive one to deal with’ (ibid.), the study advances political cartoon analysis—an often overlooked but important area in media content analysis.

With the demarcation line between the literal and the metaphorical being ‘fuzzy and highly context dependent’, it was crucial to study metaphors ‘within their socio-political context’ (El Refaie 2003, p. 85). As such, China was understood as an ‘emerging power’ and the occasion of the euro debt crisis was a unique chance for self-reflection. With a growing economy increasing in both strength and influence, China watches the EU, its major trading partner (and one which has always traditionally held the upper hand), suffer and struggle. Thus, the crisis provides China with an opportunity and a potential challenge. On the one hand, China needs the EU to be strong, given its importance as a destination for Chinese goods; on the other hand, if the EU abdicates its ‘title’ as a world economic ‘heavyweight’ (as one of the cartoons in our analysis claims it is about to do) then that role would perhaps be open for the taking (by China).

Echoing a claim by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, p. 59) regarding the narrative significance of abstract visuals, the cartoons in this study were found to create a narrative formed by two elements: firstly, by people and objects and secondly by abstract graphic elements, and some of those elements were more typical than others. Importantly, an abstract ‘vision’ of the EU was pictorially present. Highly recognisable EU symbols were used as vehicles for the metaphors—a blue flag with yellow stars, star-shaped holes in a blue umbrella or the euro sign, for example. EU Member States were represented by their cultural artefacts (for example, an ancient Greek vase, the Parthenon), fictional heroes (for example, Achilles, Don Quixote),
maps (a map of Portugal as a door to the safe), or easily recognised political leaders (German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, and so on). German Chancellor Angela Merkel was the most obvious ‘face’ of Europe in the sample; a piggy bank was the most typical ‘object’; and a market arrow pointing down was the most frequent ‘symbol’. This ultimate reduction of an intricate process into single, easily recognised images is typical for cartoons and is labelled by Morris (1993) as ‘condensation’. In the view of Bounegru and Forceville (2011, p. 225), ‘such strongly coded visuals (logos, national flags, many pictograms) require very little, if any, verbal context, or verbal anchoring, to cue pertinent connotations, and thus have “language-like” properties’. Correspondingly, these concrete symbols did not require additional text, thus rendering the EU, its states and their struggles, easily discerned among Chinese business elites.

We extend this argument and suggest a presence of the same ‘metaphor scenario’ (Musolff 2006) that elicits responses both from the international audiences and the Chinese readers. It seems that conceptualisations of a crisis situation evoking images of A BATTLE /WAR/FIGHT/STRUGGLE; NATURAL OR MAN-MADE DISASTER; or A FAULTY SHELTER; employing personification and animalisation are cross-culturally shared scenarios. Yet this study warns that ‘universal patterns’ of cognition should be treated with caution, as interpretations of cartoons will be necessarily dependent on an individual with their own world view:

Meaning is never simply inherent in a (visual) text, but it is jointly negotiated by producers and viewers. Consequently, the analyst can only ever point to a meaning potential or preferred reading and cannot assume that this will correspond exactly to the actual readings of a text. (El Refaie 2003, p. 81)

As such, ‘different viewers may infer (slightly or fundamentally) different interpretations’ (Bounegru & Forceville 2011, p. 213). Follow-up studies could include other cultural contexts, to see if similar metaphoric patterns are identified in their media’s cartoons. Furthermore, interviews could be conducted with key business stakeholders in China to reveal their perceptions and compare these to the findings of this study.

If we follow Hall’s (1997 cited in El Refaie 2003, p. 89) assumption that the visual mode often ‘engages feelings, attitudes and emotions and it mobilizes fears and anxieties in the viewer, at deeper levels than we can explain in a simple, common-sense way’, then the dramatic metaphorical imagery of the EU surfacing through political cartoons in external media discourses (in our case Chinese) may mean ‘bad news’ for EU–China relations. The EU is seen as a baffled, damaged and solitary actor on the global economic scene. Such a partner is easy to take advantage of or turn your back on. Both options are corrupting for a stronger partner and are still a viable possibility, with the euro debt crisis being far from its resolution.

While the political cartoon genre is about ‘amplify[ing] and exagerrated[ing] the negative impact ... with satirical effects’ (Bounegru & Forceville 2011, p. 213), El Refaie (2003, pp. 83–4) warns that
... it is possible that the constant repetition of particular metaphors will encourage the unconscious or at least semi-conscious acceptance of a particular metaphorical concept as the normal, natural way of seeing a particular area of experience ...

In this case, it is the China–EU business interactions around the euro debt crisis. As such, we firstly aimed to explore if negativity in the cartoons presented the EU in an extremely negative way that could send a message to the Chinese business community that perhaps the EU is not a good partner. We argue that the fact that the EU was framed by the cartoons as acting alone on the ‘European stage’, with no obvious engagements with global or local (Chinese) actors, suggests that, at least in the minds of the IFN newsmakers, the impacts of the euro debt crisis have not yet been transpositioned to local Chinese happenings or actors in a major way. The IFN, a reputable business news source, used its cartoons to deliver a message on the serious and sinister European financial problem. But the problem was not shown to have any serious repercussions in affecting and infecting China, and as such, the EU was not cast as a disastrous partner to China (yet).

We were also interested to see if the cartoons provided predominantly good-humoured reflections on the economic troubles suffered by China’s key counterpart (the EU), thus minimising the negative impact on the severity of the problem (and as such, possibly under-informing the IFN readers). The study discovered a plethora of gloomy (if not catastrophic) images of the EU and its Member States. Specifically, the tool of visual metaphor was instrumental in tracing these grave images and negative evaluations. It is thus arguable that, without this tool, an informed judgment to differentiate between a kind joke and a stinging satire would be almost impossible. With only one cartoon identified as locally sourced, the rest of the sample appeared to be penned by Western (presumably European) cartoonists. While pan-European scepticism and criticism of the EU are expected, the fact that a leading Chinese paper considered and reprinted those images signifies local agreement with positions expressed by non-Chinese commentators. The EU’s arrogance is seen to be to blame for its own problems in many cases, or it is seen as failing to live up to its responsibilities (such as providing a safe shelter, failing to win the battles, being unable to feed its young or simply dying).

Finally, our study explored if there were any messages in the cartoons that explicitly portrayed China’s rise and economic success vis-a-vis the EU’s fall and woes. As discussed above, the sampled cartoons told a dramatic story about Europe harming itself. While these images were produced primarily by external ‘Western’ cartoonists, they were chosen by IFN editors as a means of framing these economic events, rather than being commissioned by local cartoonists to comment on the events in the EU. Only in one cartoon (presumably locally sourced) was there a Chinese figure, but this character was not cast as the EU’s antagonist—he was more of an appalled spectator. These observations may lead to the conclusion that the studied cartoons—extremely powerful tools for grabbing readers’ attention and delivering emotional messages—have guided the paper’s readers towards a particular message: the European economic ‘giant’ may be collapsing (or drowning
or losing its battle) but China is not there to benefit or establish its own supremacy. As such, it would seem for now that the Chinese ‘dragon’ can be considered both watchful and critical of the EU’s problems, but it is not yet eager to 'step into the breach' itself.

NOTES

1. According to the National Audit Office (NAO), by the end of June 2011, local governments in China 'have accumulated debts totalling 10.7 trillion renminbi (RMB) or $1.65 trillion – about 27 percent of China’s GDP in 2010… The People’s Bank of China, the central bank, recently estimated that local government debt totalled 14 trillion RMB (most of which was owed to banks), almost 30 per cent higher than the NAO figure'. (Pei 2011) See http://thediplomat.com/2011/07/05/china%E2%80%99s-ticking-debt-bomb/.

2. One notable exception is Gamson and Stuart’s (1992) systematic analysis of the framing of the nuclear bomb in American newspapers.

3. For example, see Schilperoord and Maes (2009); and Yus (2009).

4. For example, see Chaban, Bain and Stats (2007a, 2007b); Chaban et al. (2008); Chilton and Ilyin (1993); Chilton and Lakoff (1995); Chilton (1996a, 1996b); Schäffner (1996); and Straehle et al. (1999).

5. Occasionally, the actors in the cartoons and the texts did not overlap: for example, an article that appeared with the cartoon of an Irish PM falling into the precipices (Figure 11), did not actually have any reference to Ireland; the article placed with the cartoon of the drunk woman (Figure 9) mostly talked about Portugal, and a little bit about Spain, but not other countries represented by the drinks in the cartoon. But the article next to the coffin with Greek flag (Figure 10) was about Greece.

References


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