Dreading the dragon: Health communication and Sinophobic visual metaphors in global COVID-19 cartoons

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Abstract

This study examines how political cartoons worldwide employed Chinese dragon trope during the COVID-19 pandemic to propagate Sinophobic narrative and assesses the ramifications for public health communication and the proliferation of misinformation. A qualitative multimodal discourse analysis was conducted on 15 purposively selected editorial cartoons (Jan 2020-Dec 2023) from international media. Each cartoon was coded for visual frames between Chinese dragon and COVID-19, using established metaphor frameworks. Cartoons were sourced from public archives, attributed, and analyzed under fair use for scholarly critique. Five dominant metaphors were identified: Dragon as Virus, Dragon as Transmitter, Dragon as Aggressor, Dragon as Negligent Entity, and Dragon as Threat. Each frame visually encoded blame and fear, recasting a cultural symbol into a villain. These frames reflect wider xenophobic narratives and may result in undermining public health messaging grounded in evidence. This analysis demonstrates how visual metaphors fueled Sinophobia during the COVID-19 infodemic, undermining crisis communication by spreading stigma and misinformation. To counter this, visual metaphors in public health messaging must be inclusive and culturally sensitive.

Keywords: Covid-19, Sinophobia, Visual metaphor, Political cartoons, Health communication

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged causing uncertainty and fear. Early on, the virus quickly became associated with China, sparking Sinophobia globally. The World Health Organization characterized the resulting rumors as an "infodemic," warning that misinformation about COVID-19 can be harmful, resulting in increased stigmatization (1). Political leaders and media figures reinforced this bias by using terms like "Wuhan virus" or "Chinese virus" (2). In turn, a wave of discrimination and violence against Asians was documented worldwide (3). These developments highlighted how pandemic narratives quickly became entangled with geopolitical blame, making the social dimensions of health communication critical.

In this charged environment, political cartoons became a prominent form of crisis commentary. By combining imagery and text, cartoons frame events through symbols, simplifying complex issues for mass audiences. Visual tropes drew from familiar cultural motifs to make immediate ideological points, casting China as the literal source of disease. Political cartoons often employed the Panda or Chinese dragon to frame China with the pandemic. Understanding these cartoons is important for future crisis communication (4).

Research on visual metaphors emphasizes their role in illness narratives (7; 8) and propaganda (9), but the pandemic introduced novel symbolic distortions. This study builds on visual metaphor theory to analyze how the Chinese dragon was transformed into a recurring visual metaphor for disease, threat, and negligence in political cartoons. This study addresses: how are dragon metaphors visually represented in COVID-19 cartoons? What recurring visual strategies and assumptions did they invoke, and what were the potential social and public health consequences of normalizing such Sinophobic mappings?

Methods

A qualitative multimodal discourse analysis (5) was conducted on a purposive sample of political cartoons. Fifteen single-panel cartoons were selected from an initial pool of 34 retrieved via targeted searches (using keywords like "COVID-19, dragon, China"). Each chosen cartoon (dated January 2020 – December 2023) explicitly referenced the Chinese dragon in the context of COVID-19. Sources included major newspapers and cartoon archives across North America, Europe, Asia, and Africa. These outlets ensured geographic and cultural diversity in

cartooning styles and perspectives. Table 1 provides metadata for each cartoon, including cartoonist, date, publication, and country.

Each cartoon was analyzed using conceptual metaphor theory (5) and multimodal discourse analysis (6). The Visual Metaphor Identification Procedure (VISMIP) (7) and Forceville's framework (8) was applied to identify visual metaphors linking the dragon (source domain) with COVID-19 (target domain).

The analysis also examined how metaphorical representations evolved across the three-year period of the study. A coding matrix recorded each cartoon's metadata (cartoonist, date, publication), the metaphorical frame, and visual strategies such as exaggeration, hybrid imagery, color, and labeling, along with rhetorical features like caricature, irony, and symbolism (9). Each image was coded to insure reliability. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion. The documented examples and coding criteria allow replication of the analysis.

Ethical considerations: All cartoons were obtained from publicly accessible sources and are attributed by cartoonist and publication. The images were analyzed under fair use for academic critique. No human subjects were involved. The focus was on visual rhetoric, not on personal identities, this ensured respect for copyright and cultural sensitivity.

Results

The qualitative analysis, grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (6; 8), Multimodal Discourse Analysis (5) and guided by the Visual Metaphor Identification Procedure (VISMIP) (7), identified five salient metaphorical framings of the Chinese dragon within COVID-19 political cartoons.

Each metaphorical construction mobilizes distinct semiotic strategies that encode and circulate Sinophobic ideologies and geopolitical attributions of blame.

1. Dragon as virus

In the early pandemic phase, the dragon was often conflated with the virus itself. This metaphor appeared through grotesque hybridization: dragons bore coronavirus features, exhaled viral particles, or were labeled "Wuhan Virus." In C1 (Kyaw Thu Yein, 2020), the dragon's head mimics a spiked viral protein, visually equating China with contagion. C4

(Dimitris Georgopalis, 2020; Bondori, Forozani, & Ghasemzadeh, 2025) depicts a dragon exhaling viral breath in red tones, with claws, fangs, and textured scales signaling contamination. These images used verbo-pictorial metaphors and distortion to collapse cultural identity into biological hazard, reinforcing racialized associations.

2. Dragon as transmitter

Here, the dragon shifts from being the virus to representing its carrier, positioning China as the source of global spread. In C2 (Oliver Schopf, 2020), the dragon lurks behind the Great Wall as viral particles escape, symbolizing failed containment. C14 (Peter Schrank, 2022; Ghaffar, Gazali, & Aziz, 2024) shows it sneezing across continents, with pathogens as invading figures. C15 (Alessa, 2023) links mobility and infection, portraying the dragon with a passport and exhaling disease. These images encode travel anxiety and reflect border politicization during the pandemic.

3. Dragon as threat

This metaphor uses posture and scale to frame the dragon as a looming danger. C3 (Feica, 2020) shows the dragon towering over a masked Earth, evoking global domination. In C5 (Dario Castillejos, 2020), it is barely restrained by Western figures, implying imminent conflict. C13 (Enrico Santisas, 2022) presents a submerged dragon with predatory eyes, suggesting hidden expansionism. These images activate Orientalist portrayals of China as inscrutable and threatening, echoing the Yellow Peril trope.

4. Dragon as Aggressor

This framing depicts the dragon as deliberately hostile. In C12 (Lisa Benson, 2022), it torches symbols of democracy and economics, linking China to global destabilization. C9 (Bob Moran, 2022) shows it attacking a healthcare worker, portraying China as antagonistic to global health. Techniques like sharp lines, flames, and dynamic motion convey aggression. These cartoons evoke Cold War-style hostility, casting China as intentionally harmful.

5. Dragon as negligent entity

This metaphor presents the dragon not as malicious but as indifferent or backward. In C10 (Steph Bravo, 2022), it sleeps atop collapsing frontline workers, symbolizing governmental neglect. C11 (Ben Garrison, 2022) shows it wallowing in decay and

illness, reinforcing stereotypes of uncleanliness. Features like closed eyes, slack posture, and filth signal moral failure over intent. This frame reproduces civilizational binaries between a responsible West and an apathetic East.

Discussion

This study examined political cartoons from 2020 to 2023 that employed the Chinese dragon to represent COVID-19. Five metaphorical frames emerged: virus, transmitter, threat, aggressor, and negligent entity. Although the tone of these metaphors shifted over time, they consistently reinforced Sinophobic imagery. Cartoonists leveraged the dragon's symbolic flexibility to reflect anxieties about illness, travel restrictions, and global politics. However, these depictions routinely relied on Orientalist stereotypes, portraying aggression, uncleanliness, or moral deficiency, and they revived Yellow Peril tropes that cast China as the source of global disorder.

These findings align with research on visual propaganda showing that humor can conceal hostility and legitimize prejudice. By simplifying complex geopolitical narratives into easily grasped images, visual metaphors encode moral judgments and embed racialized blame in public discourse. While earlier work has emphasized verbal metaphors in health communication, this study highlights the persuasive and emotional impact of visual framing.

Limitations include a small sample restricted to editorial cartoons, excluding other formats such as memes. Future research should examine audience reception to determine how these metaphors influence perceptions of responsibility and blame. Understanding these processes is vital for developing more ethical and effective health communication strategies.

Conclusion

Political cartoons during the COVID-19 pandemic actively shaped public discourse by associating China's national symbol, dragon, with disease, aggression and negligence. By equating ethnicity with contagion, these images normalized exclusion and racial blame. Given that visual information is processed rapidly and intuitively, metaphors of this kind exert considerable influence on health and crisis communication. To promote equity and foster international cooperation, public health narratives must employ socially responsible visual rhetoric.

Confronting and deconstructing harmful visual metaphors is both a scholarly obligation and a public health priority.

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Appendices

Figure legends

Figure 1: C1
Note. Cartoonist: Kyaw Thu Yein. Publication: Cartoon Movement, Myanmar. Date: Jan 26, 2020. Reproduced under fair use for scholarly analysis
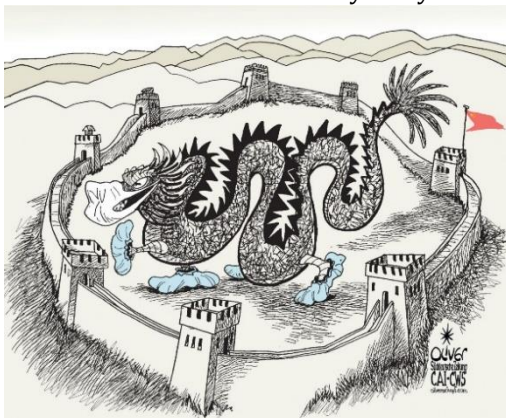

Figure 2: C1
Note. Cartoonist: Oliver Schopf. Publication: *The Japan Times*. Date: Jan 29, 2020. Reproduced under fair use for scholarly analysis

Figure 3: C3
Note. Cartoonist: Feica. Publication: *Daily Times*, Pakistan. Date: Feb 1, 2020. Reproduced under fair use for scholarly analysis
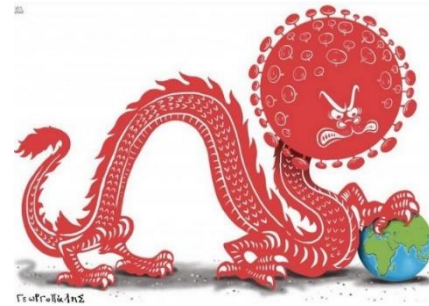

Figure 4: C4
Note. Cartoonist: Dimitris Georgopalis. Publication: *Real News*, Greece. Date: Feb 8, 2020. Reproduced under fair use for scholarly analysis

Figure 5: C5
Note. Cartoonist: Dario Castillejos. Publication: *Bainbridge Review*, USA. Date: Apr 25, 2020. Reproduced under fair use for scholarly analysis

Figure 6: C6
Note. Cartoonist: Paul Fell. Publication: Cartoon Stock. Date: Jun 27, 2020. Reproduced under fair use for scholarly analysis
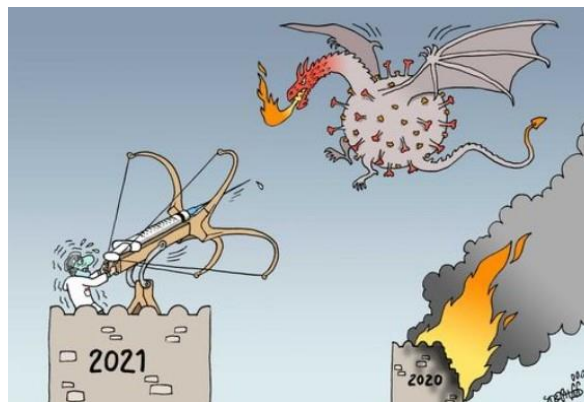
Figure 7: C7
Note. Cartoonist: Stephane Peray. Publication: Cagle Cartoon. Date: Dec 31, 2020. Reproduced under fair use for scholarly analysis

Figure 8: C8
Note. Cartoonist: Seth Fleishman. Publication: *The New Yorker*, USA. Date: May 24, 2021. Reproduced under fair use for scholarly analysis

Figure 9: C9
Note. Cartoonist: Bob Moran. Publication: *The Telegraph*, UK. Date: Apr 16, 2022. Reproduced under fair use for scholarly analysis

Figure 10: C10
Note. Cartoonist: Steph Bravo. Publication: *Inquirer*, Philippines. Date: Feb 15, 2022. Reproduced under fair use for scholarly analysis

Figure 11: C11
Note. Cartoonist: Ben Garrison. Publication: GrrrGraphics, USA. Date: Jun 2, 2022. Reproduced under fair use for scholarly analysis

Figure 12: C12
Note. Cartoonist: Lisa Benson. Publication: *Washington Post*, USA. Date: Oct 24, 2022. Reproduced under fair use for scholarly analysis.

Figure 13: C13
Note. Cartoonist: Enrico Santisas. Publication: *Sun Star*, Philippines. Date: Nov 29, 2022. Reproduced under fair use for scholarly analysis.
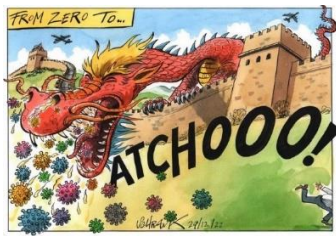

Figure 14: C14
Note. Cartoonist: Peter Schrank. Publication: *The Times*, England. Date: Dec 29, 2022. Reproduced under fair use for scholarly analysis.

Figure 15: C15
Note. Cartoonist: Alessa. Publication: *Premium Times*, Nigeria. Date: Jan 23, 2023. Reproduced under fair use for scholarly analysis

Table 1.

Figure	Cartoonist	Publication (Country)	Date	Metaphorical Frame
C1	Kyaw Thu Yein	Cartoon Movement (Myanmar)	Jan 26, 2020	Aggressor/Threat
C2	Oliver Schopf	*The Japan Times* (Japan)	Jan 29, 2020	Transmitter
C3	Feica	*Daily Times* (Pakistan)	Feb 1, 2020	Omnipresent Threat
C4	Dimitris Georgopalis	*Real News* (Greece)	Feb 8, 2020	Virus
C5	Dario Castillejos	*Bainbridge Review* (USA)	Apr 25, 2020	Aggressor/Threat
C6	Paul Fell	Cartoon Stock (UK)	Jun 27, 2020	Virus
C7	Stephane Peray	Cagle Cartoon (USA)	Dec 31, 2020	Virus
C8	Seth Fleishman	*The New Yorker* (USA)	May 24, 2021	Omnipresent Threat
C9	Bob Moran	*The Telegraph* (UK)	Apr 16, 2022	Aggressor/Threat
C10	Steph Bravo	*Inquirer* (Philippines)	Feb 15, 2022	Negligent Entity
C11	Ben Garrison	GrrrGraphics (USA)	Jun 2, 2022	Negligent Entity
C12	Lisa Benson	*Washington Post* (USA)	Oct 24, 2022	Aggressor/Threat
C13	Enrico Santisas	*Sun Star* (Philippines)	Nov 29, 2022	Negligent Entity
C14	Peter Schrank	*The Times* (UK)	Dec 29, 2022	Transmitter
C15	Alessa	*Premium Times* (Nigeria)	Jan 23, 2023	Transmitter

Note. Summarizes cartoon metadata

Table 2.

Metaphorical Frame	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
Virus	3	0	0	0	3
Transmitter	1	0	1	1	3
Aggressor	2	0	2	0	4
Negligent Entity	0	0	3	0	3
Threat	1	1	0	0	2
Total	7	1	6	1	15

Note. Shows metaphorical frame per year (2020–2023).