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A Study on Image-Text Synergy Patterns in Media Reports from the Perspective of Multimodal Discourse Analysis: A Case Study of Belt and Road Initiative-Related Reports on Xinhua News Agency's English Website

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Abstract

In recent years, Chinese official media have accelerated their expansion on overseas communication platforms. Visual narratives targeting international audiences have increasingly become a crucial dimension in national image construction and discursive power competition. As a core narrative vehicle of China's Global Development Initiative, the international communication effectiveness of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) directly concerns whether China's proposals can be accurately understood and recognized worldwide. Meanwhile, image-text reporting is precisely the most intuitively persuasive media form in this regard. To this end, this study takes 64 image-text reports published between January 2025 and August 2026 in the BRI column of Xinhua News Agency's English website as its research object. Adopting multimodal discourse analysis as the main analytical framework, it integrates Kress & van Leeuwen's visual grammar theory with Martinec & Salway's logico-semantic model of image-text relations. Starting from three types of image-text synergy patterns: reinforcing, complementary, and symbolic, it systematically examines their distribution characteristics, visual-verbal interaction patterns, and functions in national image construction. The findings reveal that the complementary pattern has the highest occurrence rate (87.5%), followed by the reinforcing pattern (68.8%), and the symbolic pattern the lowest (29.7%). The three patterns correspond respectively to three discursive strategies: "evidential visual argumentation," "empathetic visual narrative," and "metaphorical visual rhetoric," serving three functions of national image construction: displaying hard power, communicating soft power, and fostering ideological identification. This study can provide a typological analytical approach for image-text research in international communication from the perspective of multimodal discourse analysis, offering empirical references for optimizing the overseas visual communication strategies of Chinese official media.

Keywords

multimodal discourse analysis, image-text synergy patterns, Belt and Road Initiative, Xinhua News Agency

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1. Introduction

In 2013, President Xi Jinping put forward the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Advancing high-quality Belt and Road cooperation and improving international communication effectiveness have been incorporated into the overall arrangement for Chinese modernization [1]. China's mainstream international communication media, represented by Xinhua News Agency's English website, play a key role in interpreting the initiative, yet they still face a dual dilemma: Western discursive suppression and a monolithic narrative modality [2]. The insufficient synergy between image and text is particularly prominent. In image-text reporting, text and images complement and reinforce each other. Text performs an "anchoring" function for image meaning, eliminating ambiguity, while images "extend" the emotional context of text. Only through their synergy can the effective construction of national discourse be achieved.

Visual grammar and the logico-semantic model of image-text relations are core analytical tools for image-text multimodal analysis [3,4]. Grounded in the three metafunctions of systemic functional linguistics, visual grammar analyzes how images independently construct meaning through representational, interactive, and compositional dimensions, addressing the question of "how images make meaning." Drawing on the analytical framework of clause relations in functional linguistics, the logico-semantic model examines how images and text jointly make meaning through two subsystems: status relations (equal/unequal) and logico-semantic relations (expansion/projection), addressing the question of "how image and text synergize meaning." Domestic scholars have systematically reviewed image-text relation theories and constructed comprehensive frameworks for multimodal discourse analysis [5,6]. However, most visual grammar studies of news discourse focus on individual images, leaving the systematic classification of image-text synergy patterns insufficient [7]. Multimodal studies related to the Belt and Road Initiative mostly concentrate on audio-visual forms such as promotional videos [8]; routine image-text reports on official English-language websites remain under-examined, and Xinhua's English website awaits systematic empirical analysis.

Accordingly, this study adopts multimodal discourse analysis as its framework, integrating visual grammar with the image-text relation model. It selects 64 image-text reports published between January 2025 and August 2026 in the BRI column of Xinhua's English website as the corpus to address three questions: RQ1: What are the distribution characteristics of the three synergy patterns? RQ2: What interaction patterns exist between visual grammar dimensions and verbal semantics under each pattern? RQ3: What functions do the three patterns serve in constructing China's national image in the BRI context?

2. Research Design

2.1 Corpus Collection

The corpus is drawn from the "Latest News" waterfall data source of the Belt and Road Initiative column on Xinhua News Agency's English website, which contains 985 reports spanning 2019 to 2026. The period from 2025 to 2026 coincides with the launch of the 15th Five-Year Plan. This plan positions high-quality Belt and Road cooperation and the enhancement of international communication effectiveness as mutually reinforcing strategic tasks. Reports from this period therefore better reflect current visual communication strategies for international communication. Based on these considerations, this study selected all eligible image-text reports published between January 2025 and August 2026, totaling 64 articles (42 in 2025 and 22 in 2026).

The overall profile of the corpus is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Profile of the Corpus

Metric	Results
Number of reports	64 (2025: 42; 2026: 22)
Time span	January 2025 – August 2026
Total number of news photographs	387
Total running words of body text	22,907
Word types	3,171
Type–token ratio	13.84%
Mean running words per report	357.9
Mean photographs per report	6.0

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2.2 Analytical Framework and Classification of Synergy Patterns

This study integrates Kress & van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar with Martinec & Salway's (2005) logico-semantic model of image-text relations, constructing a three-step analytical path: independent image meaning analysis → joint image-text meaning analysis → classification and statistics of synergy patterns. Visual grammar analyzes images in terms of representational, interactive, and compositional meaning, while the image-text relation model determines status relations (equal/unequal) and logico-semantic relations (expansion/projection). Based on this integration, three types of image-text synergy patterns are identified: the reinforcing type, where image and text are semantically aligned and the image reinforces the textual focus; the complementary type, where image and text are informationally asymmetrical, each supplying what the other lacks; and the symbolic type, where the image forms a concrete–abstract projective relationship with the text. Since a single report may contain multiple patterns, coding adopts a multi-label approach.

2.3 Inter-coder Reliability

To assess the reliability of the coding scheme, a random subsample of 16 reports (25% of the total corpus) was independently coded by a second coder (see Table 2). The agreement rate was 87.5%, with Scott's Pi = 0.833, Cohen's Kappa = 0.833, and Krippendorff's Alpha = 0.839, exceeding the 0.80 threshold for satisfactory reliability (Krippendorff, 2004). The coding scheme can therefore be considered reliable for the present study.

Table 2: Inter-coder Reliability Results

Indicator	Value
Coding variable	Image-text synergy pattern coding
Number of coders	2
Sample size (N Cases)	16
Number of decisions (N Decisions)	32
Number of agreements (N Agreements)	14
Number of disagreements (N Disagreements)	2
Percent Agreement	87.5%
Scott's Pi	0.833
Cohen's Kappa	0.833
Krippendorff's Alpha	0.839

3. Results

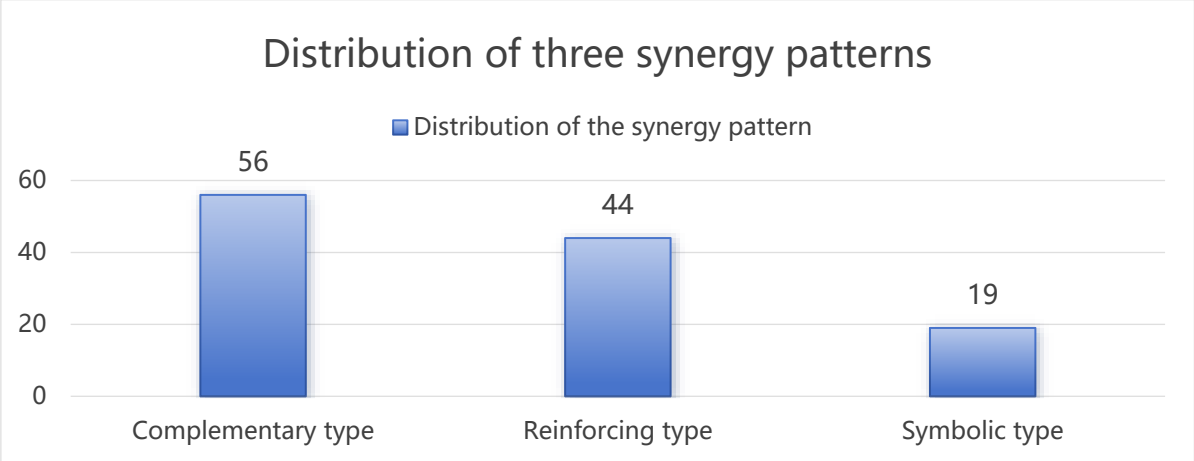
3.1 Distribution Characteristics of the Three Types of Synergy Patterns

The multi-label coding results for the 64 reports show that, in terms of the frequency of the three synergy patterns (see Figure 1), the complementary pattern appears 56 times (87.5%), the reinforcing pattern 44 times (68.8%), and the symbolic pattern 19 times (29.7%). In terms of co-occurrence combinations (see Figure 2), "complementary + reinforcing" is the most common (28 articles, 43.8%), followed by the single complementary pattern (11 articles, 17.2%) and the co-occurrence of all three types (10 articles, 15.6%). The single reinforcing pattern (6 articles, 9.4%) and the single symbolic pattern (2 articles, 3.1%) have the lowest proportions.

The above distribution exhibits three characteristics. First, the high occurrence rate of the complementary pattern (87.5%) indicates that the core function of images in BRI image-text reporting is to provide sensory details and humanistic scenes that text cannot reach, rather than merely reinforcing textual information. Second, the dominance of the "complementary + reinforcing" combination (43.8%) suggests that most reports simultaneously possess dual functions of information supplementation and visual argumentation. Third, the symbolic pattern is highly dependent on topic type: of the 19 reports containing it, 14 are infrastructure anniversary or policy speech reports, indicating that it concentrates in topics requiring the elevation of concrete achievements to abstract ideas.

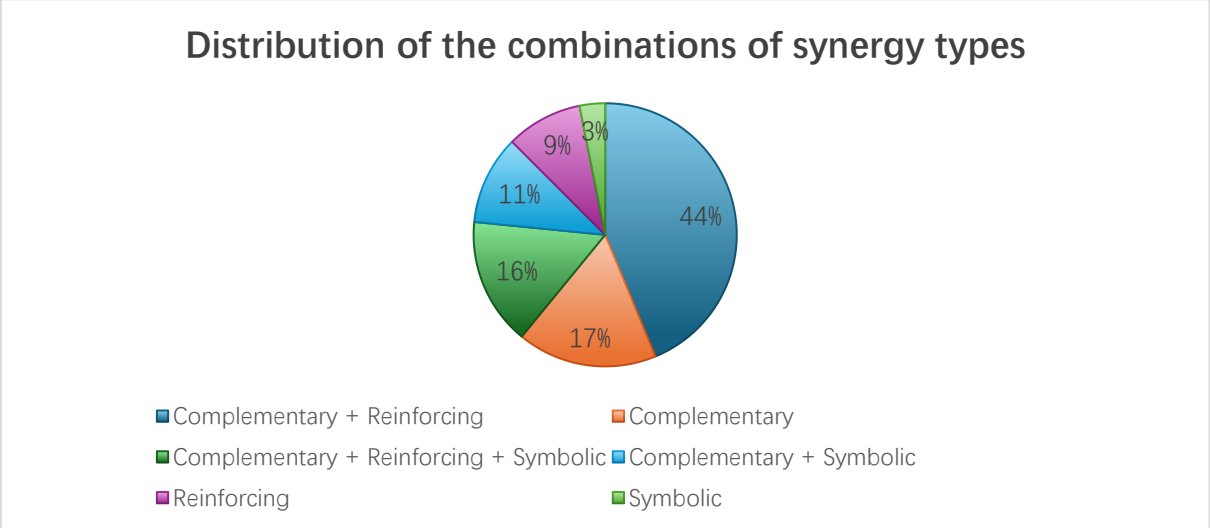
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Figure 1: Distribution of Three Synergy Patterns



Note. Under multi-label coding, pattern counts sum to more than the 64 reports.

Figure 2: Distribution of the Combinations of Synergy Types



3.2 Interaction Patterns between Visual Grammar and Verbal Semantics

The three types of synergy patterns exhibit differentiated mechanisms of meaning generation in image-text interaction. Through the analysis of typical cases, the following section reveals how the dimensions of visual grammar synergize with verbal semantics.

To quantitatively profile the verbal semantic features of the corpus, this study conducted a word-frequency analysis of the body texts of the 64 reports (generating word lists after the removal of function words). The top 15 high-frequency content words across all reports were tallied (see Table 3). Table 3 shows that these top 15 content words are mainly distributed across the semantic domains of China-related terms (china, China's, chinese), BRI vision (road, silk, belt), transport and infrastructure (train, freight, railway, port), and international community and cooperation/diplomacy (countries, international, cooperation), while also encompassing culture and people-to-people exchange (cultural).

This lexical distribution indicates that the semantic focus of BRI image-text reports on Xinhua's English website lies in hard connectivity construction and international cooperation. Meanwhile, it provides cultural and interpersonal semantic resources for the complementary pattern, and discourse resources of vision and shared values for the symbolic pattern. Specifically, "china" ranks first with 365 occurrences, highlighting China's subjectivity; vision words such as "road" and "silk" appear with high frequency, carrying the abstract concepts of the initiative; the high frequency of infrastructure words such as "train" and "freight" corresponds to the data and scale narratives of the reinforcing pattern; and the presence of cultural words such as "cultural"

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lays the semantic foundation for the humanistic perception of the complementary pattern. Overall, the lexical distribution closely aligns with the semantic configurations of the three image-text synergy patterns, providing corpus-level support for the subsequent case analysis.

Table 3: Top 15 High-Frequency Content Words in the Corpus

Rank	Word	Frequency	Per 10,000 words	Semantic domain
1	china	365	159.3	China-related
2	road	166	72.5	BRI vision
3	countries	147	64.2	International community
4	China's	138	60.2	China-related
5	international	127	55.4	International community
6	train	124	54.1	Transport & infrastructure
7	europe	115	50.2	BRI geography (China-Europe)
8	freight	112	48.9	Transport & infrastructure
9	cooperation	112	48.9	Cooperation & diplomacy
10	railway	107	46.7	Transport & infrastructure
11	silk	98	42.8	BRI vision
12	cultural	95	41.5	Culture & people-to-people
13	chinese	91	39.7	China-related
14	port	68	29.7	Transport & infrastructure
15	belt	67	29.2	BRI vision

Note. Frequencies are based on word forms after removal of function words; locative elements of place names (e.g., province) were excluded, and compound components (e.g., China-Europe) counted separately. Normalized per 10,000 running words.

In addition, this study summarizes the distribution of major semantic domains across all reports (see Table 4). Lexical features confirm that the verbal semantics of the corpus are dominated by hard-connectivity vocabulary: transport and infrastructure words total 757 (5.22% of content words), and quantitative words (total, million, billion, trips) appear consistently across reports, providing the "precise data" element for the reinforcing pattern. Meanwhile, cooperation and diplomacy words (countries, international, cooperation) and cultural words (371 tokens, 2.56%) supply the interpersonal and humanistic semantics that anchor the complementary pattern, while BRI vision words (584 tokens, 4.03%) constitute the abstract propositional resources projected by the symbolic pattern. The word-frequency evidence thus corresponds closely with the verbal-semantic configurations of the three patterns analyzed below.

Table 4: Distribution of High-Frequency Words across Semantic Domains

Semantic domain	Representative words	Frequency	Share of content words (%)
Transport & infrastructure	train, freight, railway, port, logistics	757	5.22
BRI vision & shared values	road, silk, belt, initiative, win, shared	584	4.03
Cooperation & diplomacy	countries, international, cooperation, president	588	4.05
Culture & people-to-people	cultural, people, ancient, heritage, art	371	2.56
Economy & trade	trade, economic, cargo, business	199	1.37
Quantification & measurement	total, million, billion, trips, dollars	172	1.19

3.2.1 Reinforcing Type: Scale Mapping between Data and Imagery

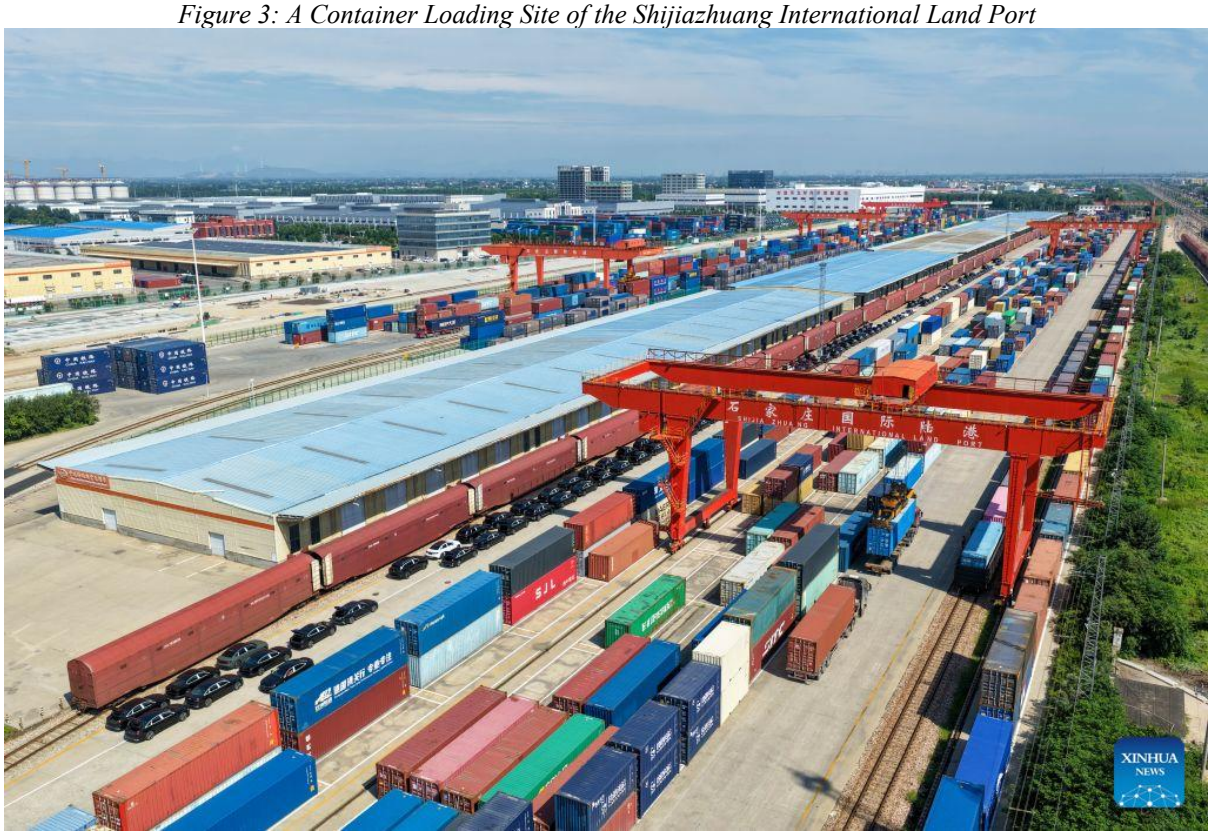
Taking "Shijiazhuang int'l land port handles 814 China-Europe freight train trips in H1" (2026-08-04) as an example. The core information is "Shijiazhuang international land port in north China's Hebei Province handled a total of 814 China-Europe and China-Central Asia freight train trips in the first half of 2026, up 42.06 percent year on year". Photographs can only capture a single moment, and such temporal growth is precisely what images cannot directly present. The image's synergy strategy is therefore not to "show growth" but to translate abstract data into perceptible spatial scale (see Figure 3): the container yard occupies the frame with matrix density and depth extension, and the orange structure of the gantry crane contrasts with the blue container matrix, jointly translating the number "814" into a perceptible scale of operations.

In the interactive meaning dimension, the five images display a mixed perspective configuration: three aerial long shots with an overhead perspective, one eye-level shot (see Figure 4), and one low-angle shot (see

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Figure 5). The overhead images sustain a cognitive position of global overview, where viewers see the operational scale of the entire land port rather than the specific operations of an individual worker, corresponding precisely to the functional positioning of "hub" and "corridor" in the text. The eye-level image shifts viewers from "overlookers" to "on-site participants," while the low-angle image reinforces the sense of volume of facilities, conveying grandeur and reliability. This mixed perspective maintains the strategy of "evidential visual argumentation" while avoiding the visual fatigue that a single overhead perspective might induce. However, human elements in the frames are relatively limited, and the visual presentation remains dominated by the scale of "things," which to some extent may weaken the "human experience" dimension in infrastructure narratives.

Figure 3: A Container Loading Site of the Shijiazhuang International Land Port



Note. From "Shijiazhuang int'l land port handles 814 China-Europe, China-Central Asia freight train trips in H1" [Photograph], by Liang Zidong, 2026, Xinhua. (https://english.news.cn/20260804/8d681846f49446c39a319e3e3736974c/c.html). Copyright 2026 by Xinhua.

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Figure 4: a container loading site of the Shijiazhuang international land port



Note. Same source as Figure 3.

Figure 5: A cargo truck enters the Shijiazhuang international land port



Note. Same source as Figure 3.

3.2.2 Complementary Type: Perceptual Anchoring of Proposition and Feeling

Taking "Feature: Turkish artist paints new Silk Road stories in China's 'porcelain capital'" (2026-01-10) as an example. The report focuses on Turkish artist Dilan Atasayar, who created The Friendship Vase in Jingdezhen by fusing traditional Turkish vine patterns with Dunhuang "flying apsara" motifs, illustrating cross-civilizational exchange and mutual learning under the Belt and Road Initiative. However, the phrase "mutual learning among civilizations" appears repeatedly in BRI reporting, yet remains difficult to perceive directly at the perceptual level. The task of the images is not to "prove" this proposition but to make it credible, transforming the abstract proposition into visible perceptual evidence through the juxtaposition of ceramic work motifs.

In the interactive meaning dimension (see Figure 6), the close-up images of the work are predominantly offer images with no gaze contact from figures in the frame, positioning viewers as appreciators, and the close

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social distance enables viewers to examine the motif details; the exhibition scene images, in medium and long shots, present the overall atmosphere of the exhibition hall and crowd activities, with the eye-level attitude placing viewers in an equal viewing relationship with the figures. In the representational meaning dimension, the interweaving of Chinese auspicious clouds with Turkish scroll patterns and Oriental lotus with Ottoman tulip motifs constitutes a symbolic process in conceptual representation: the two cultural traditions coexist and echo each other on the same surface, which itself is the visual vehicle of "mutual learning among civilizations." The visiting scenes belong to action processes in narrative representation, providing a perceptual context for the close-ups, while the images transform the text's abstract statement of motif interweaving into visible visual facts.

In the compositional meaning dimension (see Figure 7), the information value presents a vertical structure of "ideal—real": the text provides the idealized proposition, while the images provide concrete scenes of work details and the exhibition site; salience is concentrated on the areas where motifs interweave, the visual anchor of the proposition. The function of images here is not to provide "more information" but a credible perceptual anchor for the abstract proposition.

Figure 6: A Person Visits the "Dunhuang in Glazes" Exhibition at the Jiangxi Provincial Art Museum



Note. From "Feature: Turkish artist paints new Silk Road stories in China's 'porcelain capital'," by Zhou Mi, 2026, Xinhua (https://english.news.cn/20260110/8085eae222ab4af0a7189e1a458ebad0/c.html). Copyright 2026 by Xinhua.

Figure 7: Turkish artist Dilan Atasayar's artwork "The Friendship Vase"



Note. Same source as Figure 6.

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3.2.3 Symbolic Type: Indirect Projection of Ideas and Imagery

Taking "China's BRI truly changes lives, destinies of people around world: Cambodian senior minister" (2025-03-15) as an example. The report quotes that "The China-proposed Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has truly changed the lives and destinies of people around the world," yet the words come from a Cambodian senior minister rather than a Chinese official, forming a narrative framework of "testimony from the Other". The task of the image is therefore more subtle: it can neither directly present "changes in destiny" nor simply repeat "China's contribution"; it must accomplish the indirect construction of China's image within third-party narration.

The accompanying image is an aerial shot (see Figure 8) of a modern highway passing through Cambodian rural fields, and the curved line of the highway becomes the visual focus, extending from the edge of the frame toward the center. This composition forms a precise visual projection with the textual proposition: "changes lives and destinies" is an abstract judgment, while "highway crossing fields" is a perceptible image—the highway is not merely physical infrastructure but a visual metaphor of "connection," "arrival," and "development." The highly saturated blue sky, white clouds, and green fields constitute a high-modality image, reinforcing the credibility of "development achievements." The underlying mechanism lies in a "de-identification" of image construction: there is no Chinese national flag, corporate logo, or Chinese face in the frame, yet the highway, as a product of Chinese infrastructure, becomes the visual evidence of "testimony from the Other." China's presence is "self-evident," completing the projection of meaning through the imagery of the "highway" within the third-party narrative context.

Figure 8: A Section of the Chinese-invested Phnom Penh-Sihanoukville Expressway in Kampong Speu province, Cambodia



Note. From "China's BRI truly changes lives, destinies of people around world: Cambodian senior minister," by Cambodian PPSHV Expressway Co., Ltd., 2025, Xinhua (https://english.news.cn/20250315/54fd805bc4b04d6ebe54746f83edff5c/c.html). Copyright 2025 by Cambodian PPSHV Expressway Co., Ltd.

The analysis of the above three types of cases indicates that image-text synergy is not simply "images accompanying text" or "text explaining images," but a strategic configuration formed between the dimensions of visual grammar and verbal semantics: the reinforcing type replaces "calculable data" with "visible scale"; the complementary type anchors "comprehensible proposition" through "bodily perceptibility"; and the symbolic type supports "recognizable concept" through "credible imagery." The three patterns address different communication dilemmas and jointly constitute the visual discourse system for the international communication of the Belt and Road Initiative.

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3.3 Functions of the Three Patterns in National Image Construction

Table 5: Comparison of the Three Types of Image-Text Synergy Patterns

Dimension	Reinforcing type	Complementary type	Symbolic type
Dominant type of representational meaning	Conceptual representation (analytical process)	Narrative representation (action/reaction process)	Conceptual representation (symbolic process)
Text–image relation	Data–scale mapping	Proposition–detail supplementation	Abstract–concrete projection
Viewer position	Global controller	Close-range witness	Meaning interpreter
National image dimension	Hard power (infrastructure)	Soft power (humanistic warmth)	Ideology (civilization/development)
Discursive strategy	Evidential visual argumentation	Empathetic visual narrative	Metaphorical visual rhetoric

Synthesizing the above case analyses, the three types of image-text synergy patterns exhibit differentiated functional positioning and discursive strategies in national image construction. Table 5 presents a systematic comparison of the reinforcing, complementary, and symbolic types across five dimensions: dominant type of representational meaning, text–image relation, viewer position, national image dimension, and discursive strategy. Overall, the reinforcing type constructs a hard power image through data and scale imagery, the complementary type conveys the warmth of soft power through humanistic details, and the symbolic type projects ideological and civilizational concepts through metaphorical rhetoric.

The reinforcing pattern, through the combination of "precise data + large-scale infrastructure imagery," constructs China's hard power image as a "global logistics hub" and "infrastructure builder." Among the 44 reports containing the reinforcing pattern, 30 involve infrastructure topics such as China-Europe freight trains, ports, and railways, with aerial long shots and industrial scenes translating abstract trade data into perceptible physical scale.

The complementary pattern, through the combination of "event information + humanistic scene imagery," constructs China's soft power image as a "promoter of civilizational exchange" and "respecter of cultural diversity." Concentrated in cultural exchange, expos, and art festivals (16 reports), it supplements the "emotional warmth" that text cannot directly convey through facial expressions, interactive postures, and senses of participation in the images.

The symbolic pattern, through the combination of "abstract proposition + metaphorical imagery," transforms abstract ideas such as "a community with a shared future for mankind" and "mutual learning among civilizations" into visual metaphors. Among the 19 reports containing the symbolic pattern, policy speech reports position China's international role as a "connector" and "enabler" through image schemas such as "road," "bridge," and "light."

4. Conclusion

This study integrates Kress & van Leeuwen's visual grammar with Martinec & Salway's image-text relation model to operationalize image-text synergy patterns into reinforcing, complementary, and symbolic types, providing a replicable typological path for international communication research. By combining independent image meaning analysis with joint image-text meaning analysis, it overcomes previous one-sided emphases on either visual grammar or image-text relations. The three patterns correspond to three meaning dimensions of visual grammar: reinforcing uses conceptual representation, overhead perspective, and scale salience for evidential visual argumentation; complementary uses narrative representation, eye-level perspective, and personal distance for empathetic visual narrative; symbolic uses symbolic processes, image schemas, and high-modality color for metaphorical visual rhetoric. Topic type also correlates with synergy pattern—infrastructure favors reinforcing, cultural exchange favors complementary, and policy/conceptual favors symbolic—indicating conscious matching rather than random choice.

The findings suggest three implications for optimizing Chinese official media's overseas visual communication. First, infrastructure reporting should intersperse human elements into aerial and industrial scenes: adding a worker's close-up to the Shijiazhuang land port report would shift the narrative from "scale of things" to "experience of people." Second, cultural exchange reporting can further strengthen individual

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narratives: in the Turkish artist feature, a studio shot of the artist shaping clay would convey emotional resonance more effectively than exhibition scenes alone. Third, policy and conceptual reporting should more systematically use image schemas such as "road," "bridge," and "light" to make abstract propositions visually perceptible to cross-cultural audiences.

Future research could extend to multiple years and platforms (e.g., China Daily, CGTN), adopt finer-grained units such as images, and examine audience effects experimentally.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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