

# A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of a Propaganda Image—Taking the Official Homepage of One Belt and One Road Economic and Cultural Development Center as an Example

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**Abstract**—Nowadays, China is overwhelmed by the thoughts of “One Belt and One Road Economic and Cultural Development”, which was proposed by President Xi Jinping in 2013. That is the main reason why we choose the propaganda image of One Belt and One Road Economic and Cultural Development Center, an official homepage (<http://www.oborecdc.org>), as research target. And we call it “One Belt and One Road Multimodal Discourse” for convenience in this paper. This paper, applying Kress & van Leeuwen’s Visual Grammar theoretical framework, is studied with qualitative analysis from three aspects, which are representational function, interactive function and compositional function. Besides, based on the specific social and cultural context, the paper gives a specific analysis of how different semiotic resources work together to produce a integrated meaning system. It is founded that: 1) For representational function, “One Belt and One Road Multimodal Discourse” belongs to a conceptual image, which includes the classification process and symbolism process; 2) As for interactive function, the designer builds the interactive relationship with viewers by using frontal-horizontal angle of view; 3) In composing the whole image, due to the different value of information, the designer composes the image by using different location, size and color. Specifically speaking, the central writing system belongs to the main mode, while the other visual modes mainly complement or highlight it in order to effectively realize the total meaning of the whole image; 4) Based on specific social and cultural context, the designer combines the historical symbol-Silk Road and cultural symbol-Chinese Red with realistic Symbol-globalization, to realize the complete meaning of “One Belt and One Road Multimodal Discourse”. It is theoretically and practically significant to do this research. Theoretically speaking, it enriches the relative research on static multimodal discourse analysis. In practice, it helps viewers to understand the implied meaning of “One Belt and One Road Multimodal Discourse” better.

**Index Terms**—“One Belt and One Road Multimodal Discourse”, representational function, interactive function, compositional function, social and cultural context

## I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital and web technology has enriched our human expression means a lot, which possesses the characteristic of multimodality. Multimodality means the combination of different semiotic modes.

The multimodal research officially begins from the end of last century in the west. There mainly have three approaches to do multimodal discourse analysis in west, which are social-semiotic approach, discourse analysis approach and interactional analysis approach. The social-semiotic approach puts emphasis on social-context. That is, social actors’ situated use of semiotic resources as well as their potential meaning. Some notable researchers include Kress, Leeuwen, Lemke and so on. The aim of discourse analysis approach is to create a meta-theory capable of theorizing semiotic resource, its meaning potential, and its integration in multimodal phenomena that are interpreted in the context of situation and culture, which was represented by O’Toole and O’Halloran. As for multimodal interactive analysis, it focuses on the rules and regularities that restrict the social actors using semiotic resources. Representative figures are Scollon, Norris, Jewitt, etc.

The research on multimodal discourse analysis in China derived from 2003. Li Zhanzi (2003) published an article *Social Semiotics Analysis on Multimodal Discourse*. She introduced the core concept of “Visual Grammar”, which was proposed by Kress & van Leeuwen in 2006. Since then, many scholars have started to pay attention to the field of multimodal discourse analysis. Although the history of multimodal discourse analysis development is short in China, yet it has made considerable achievements. The scope of its research mainly include three aspects: 1) theoretical exploration (Li Zhanzi 2003, Zhu Yongsheng 2007, Zhang Delu 2009/2012/2017 etc.); 2) static multimodal discourse analysis (Hu Zhuangling 2007, Zhang Delu&Wang Qun 2011); 3) dynamic multimodal discourse analysis (Hong Gang

& Zhang Zheng 2010, Geng Jingbei&Cheng Zijuan 2014, Wu Ting 2017 etc.)

Since China is enjoying a boom in “One Belt and One Road”, this paper takes the propaganda image of One Belt and One Road Economic and Cultural Development Center as research target, which we call it “One Belt and One Road Multimodal Discourse” for convenience in this paper. It is theoretically and practically significant to do this research. Theoretically speaking, it enriches the relative research on static multimodal discourse analysis. In practice, it helps viewers to understand the implied meaning of “One Belt and One Road Multimodal Discourse” better.

## II. THEORETICAL BASIS

According to the Kress and Leeuwen’s view inspired by Halliday’s Systemic-Functional Linguistic, the meta-function of language system is also applicable to visual symbol system. Thus, Kress and Leeuwen (2006) proposed the term “Visual Grammar” in their works, *Reading Image*, and claimed that “Visual Grammar” covers corresponding three aspects, representational function, interactive function and compositional function. Besides, it also involves two key conceptions, which are represented participants and interactive participants. The former one refers to the components in an image, such as the color, size of words, etc. The latter one refers to the designer and viewer of an image.

Based on the criteria, whether an image involves “vector” or not, the image can be classified into two types, a narrative image and a conceptual image. Here, the term “vector” refers to the eye contact, body movement and such things like that. If there has “vector” in an image, that image is a narrative one. Otherwise, it is a conceptual image, which involves two kinds of process, classification process and symbolism process.

Three aspects need to be noted for interactive function, which are contact, distance and angle of view. Firstly, contact is dominated by system of gaze. For example, if the person in an image stares at you, which means his or her wants to build a intimate relationship with you. We call such a image is a “claimable image”. On the contrary, the image belongs to a “supplied image”. And then, distance means the size of represented participants’ framework. Generally, clear appearance of represented participate alludes that the designer tries to close the “psychical distance” with viewers. As for the last one, horizontal-frontal angle of view and vertical-lateral angle of view are included.

Compositional function can be considered form value of information, value of significance and framework. The represented participants’ location, including above and below, left and right, center and edge, is decided by the value of different information. Usually, the central position possesses considerable importance. And, the different visual complexity causes the the viewers’ different degree of attention, that is value of significance. The term “framework” means space segment in the image.

Baldry and Thibault (2006) suggests that the attention of multimodal discourse analysis focuses on how various semiotic resources combined together in a certain social context for a specific communicative purpose. In other words, the rules of choosing, designing and mixing different semiotic resources all restricted by specific social context. From this point of view, based on the specific China social and cultural context, this paper focuses on analyzing how designer mixes different semiotic resources together to achieve meta-function of Propaganda Image, the Official Homepage of One Belt and One Road Economic and Cultural Development Center.

## III. MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

The research target of this paper is the the Official Homepage of One Belt and One Road Economic and Cultural Development Center (see following picture 1), which is a multimodal discourse mixed with different modes, such as color, size of words and etc. And, we call it “One Belt and One Road multimodal Discourse” for convenience in this paper.



Picture 1: One Belt and One Road Multimodal Discourse

### A. Representational Function

Based on the above theoretical basis, Picture 1 is a “conceptual image”, because of the absence of vector. A conceptual image refers to a congregation of implied meaning of an image, which is general (Wei Qinghong, 2008). And, One Belt and One Road multimodal Discourse involves classification process and symbolization process.

Based on the specific information and communicative purposes, the classification process can be divided into three parts, which are historical information, selective activity information and meta-information. Here, historical information

refers to the ancient Silk Road. As we can see in Picture 1, it covers the yellow and blue part of China map located on the left, the road route pictured with slight blue on the above and the pictures of stocks of camels below. And, selective activity information, One Belt and One Road, reflects on the writing system both in the China map on the left and at the very center of whole image. Besides, the meta-information is designed to highlight the significance of selective activity information. The designer here uses the pictures, representing three modes of modern transportation-land, sea and air, to implicate the increasingly convenient communication and close cooperation among the countries nowadays. Therefore, we should follow the tendency of globalization, learn lessons from history-Ancient Silk Road, and promote the cooperation with other countries. As for symbolism process, it includes historical information and meta-information. From the above analysis, the historical information refers to the Silk Road, embodied with a profound historical meaning, which stands for the main communicative channel between east and west in aspects of policy, economy and culture, in ancient times. In addition, The meta-information here symbolizes the inevitable trend of globalization.

In a word, restricted by the limited space of homepage, the designer resorts to the pictures, to achieve the representational function of whole image. And that sparks the viewers contemplate, and brings about a fantastic effect – “no words but win words”.

### B. *Interactive Function*

With the above, since it is nothing to do with “vector”, the image is an “supplied image”, which just gives some objective information to viewers, including the above historical information, selective activity information and meta-information.

The degree of intimate decided by the different ways of viewing (Li Dengzhi, 2013). Generally speaking, a remote angle of view indicates a unfamiliar psychological distance, while a close one always can create a intimate psychological distance. To be more specifically, in picture 1, the left picture system and writing system, the right writing system, and the picture system just above all apply a close angle of view. While, the picture system below uses a remote angle of view. Generally speaking, the whole image, that is picture 1, adopts a close angle of view, which is convenient for viewers to look through the information clearly. It is also benefit to realize the communicative purpose and broadcast the core concept of One Belt and One Road Economic and Cultural Development.

Furthermore, this image tries to build a close social-relationship with viewers by adopting a frontal-horizontal view. A horizontal view allows the viewers to keep the same height as the representational participants in the image. And a frontal view enables viewers to feel that they are also the parts of the image, to produce the effect of “empathy”. The artistic combination of these two angles of view seems that it appeals to the viewers – let us pay great attention to One Belt and One Road Economic and Cultural Development.

### C. *Compositional Function*

Different location in an image indicates different vale of information. Generally speaking, above location means “authoritative”, below location means “true”, center location means “emphasized”, edge location means “unremarkable”, left location means “known information” and right location means “unknown information”. Based on the above analysis, the general ancient silk road route is located on above of the image, which belongs to the authoritative information. The central writing system, including the slogan - One Belt and One Road Economic and Cultural Development Center, and inscription proposed by Xi Jinping- One Belt and One Road is a mutual-benefit way of cooperation, which highlights the importance of One Belt and One Road. And the left picture system and writing system all belong to known information among Chinese community. While the picture system on the right is unknown, representing there are still many unknowns in the future development. Finally, the pictures of mountains, camels etc., are all belong to some unremarkable information.

As for the size, we can see form picture 1, the central writing system and above picture system nearly cover half of whole image. While left picture and writing system and right picture system cover about a quarter of each. And, the color of whole image combines the cool tone with warm tone. The abundant color leaves a rich visual impression on viewers. Especially, the central writing system mixes the black with red, high modality, which is impressive. Besides, the whole image tries to create a complete multimodal discourse in the shape, avoiding use obvious space segmentation.

Combined the above three aspects of analysis, representational function, interactive function and compositional function. It is found that the designer of the image tends to combine the historical information - Silk Road and social reality- globalization, to emphasize the great social and practical significance of One Belt and One Road. Besides, based on natural quality of information and communicative purpose, the designer adopts a reasonable way of composition. In composing, central location, big size framework, a high modality of combing black and red etc., are all underscore the importance of One Belt and One Road.

## IV. SOCIAL-CULTURAL CONTEXT

Social-cultural context refers to the certain customs, thinking models, mortal criteria, concept system of value etc., which is formed during the history of a certain social community. Therefore, in constructing a multimodal discourse, the designer always identifies the different implied meaning of different semiotic resources, and then combines them together based on certain rules. After above analysis, we find that the “One Belt and One Road Multimodal Discourse”

involves historical information, thus, so it is necessary to analyze its implied meaning from the view of social-cultural context.

#### (1) Historicity

When cut multimodal discourse analysis off from the history, it can not get the original roots of discourse. We already know that “One Belt and One Road Multimodal Discourse” includes rich historical information, Silk Road. Therefore, knowing the related-history is necessary for us. In ancient, there are two types of silk road in terms of ways of transportation, one is land silk road, the other is sea one. And the route of land silk road begins with Changan (nowadays we call Xian), going with Gansu, Xinjiang, Zhongya, Xiya etc. While the sea one includes three ship routes: 1) the eastern route, from China’s coastal port to North Korea and Japan; 2) the southern route, from China’s coastal port to some southeast Asian countries; 3) the western route, from China’s coastal to south Asia, Arabia and East Africa. Therefore, the combination of these two silk roads facilitates the cooperation between China and most other countries in the world. It can be concluded that the Silk Road plays a significant role in promoting the global development in history. And President Xi Jinping appropriately exploits the lessons from history, to develop partnerships with countries actively.

Besides, the size of character “Dunhuang” is bigger, that is worth paying attention. Dunhuang outbounds traffic of the throat of the Silk Road, and it is inevitable pass. Highlight this important geographical position is to remind people to put emphasis on the principle contradictions to solve the urgent problems. In a word, the design of “One Belt and One Road Multimodal Discourse” runs through pivot axis- ancient Silk Road, which is time honoured and enduring history.

#### (2) Chinese Red

With above, the central writing system is in red, a high modal color. As we all know, there have many other high modal colors. But, the reason why the designer choose to use red to highlight the dominant role of writing system is that the red has a rich and traditional color cultural meaning in Chinese community.

Different choices of color reflect different character of nationals. For example, Japanese prefer to red and blue, Thai give their predilection for red and yellow. In china, as we all know that Chinese-red possesses a rich cultural meaning, which is the most convincing way of representing Chinese’ character. The heat and widely use of Chinese-red reflects profound color culture and abundant psychology in Chinese community. Chinese Red is endowed with the positive implied meaning, such as happiness, justice, victory and so on. Besides, it also represents the banner of communism and socialism, which reflects on the design of Chinese national flag and party flag. To some extent, “Chinese Red” is authoritative. As we can see, in picture 1, the central writing system in red has two aspects of implication. The one is to give best wishes to the One Belt and One Road economic and cultural development. The other is to praise for the great strategic thoughts proposed by, leader of modern communist in China, Xi Jinping, which gives a hopeful direction for China development.

#### (3) Social Reality

To fully grasp the implied meaning of a certain discourse, it is need to put it into a specific social reality, to insight into its counter-productive to social reality. Nowadays, peace, development, cooperation and mutual-benefit is the theme of the times. Therefore, China will continue to uphold the banner of peace, development, cooperation and mutual-benefit, and pursue a win-win strategy of opening up.

In terms of mutual-benefit, the core concept of “One Belt and One Road” is sharing-together, with the aim to promote efficient allocation of market resource and the further fusion of market cooperation. From the above analysis, we know that the route of silk road covers a large number of countries all over the world, which is benefit to create a regional cooperation team with greater scope and higher level. Therefore, the thoughts of “One Belt and One Road” conforms to the fundamental interests of people all over the world, which is the result of active efforts on international cooperation. Besides, it is also can be regarded as a milestone in the development of world peace history. In a word, the thoughts of “One Belt and One Road” sparked by the social reality-globalization, and it also causes a positive reaction to the social reality.

## V. CONCLUSION

Based on all above analysis, this paper gives the conclusion from the following four aspects.

(1) In terms of representative function, “One Belt and One Road Multimodal Discourse” belongs to a “conceptual image”, including the process of classification and symbolism. And the aspect of classification reflects on three kinds of information, which are historical information-Silk Road, selective activity information-One Belt and One Road Economic and Cultural Development, and meta-information-the transportation of land, sea and air. Among which, the historical information and meta-information also contain the process of symbolization. The historical information symbolizes the communicative channel between east and west. And the meta-information symbolizes the further and inevitable tendency of globalization. Besides, the writing system in red represents the best wishes to China development and the praise for Chinese Communist.

(2) As for interactive function, the “One Belt and One Road Multimodal Discourse” is a “supplied” one. In terms of this aspect, it lacks the interaction with viewers. However, the designer adopts an effective way of viewing, that is frontal-horizontal angle of view. As we stated above, a frontal view enables viewers to feel that they are also the parts of

the image, to produce the effect of “empathy”. The artistic combination of these two angles of view, it seems that it appeals to the viewers- let us pay great attention to One Belt and One Road Economic and Cultural Development.

(3) In composing this whole image, there is no obvious space segmentation. Besides, the different location, size, color of representative participants, all contribute to the different value of significance. Specifically speaking, the central writing system belongs to the main mode, while the other visual modes mainly complement or highlight it, in order to effectively realize the total meaning of the whole image.

(4) Based on the specific social-cultural background, the paper finds that the general idea of “One Belt and One Road Multimodal Discourse” is to mix the historical symbol-ancient Silk Road, color cultural symbol-Chinese Red and the realistic symbol-further globalization together, to emphasize the social-practical significance of One Belt and One Road Economic and Cultural Development. In other words, under the inevitable tendency of globalization, cooperate with other countries all over the world is a wise choice for China. And President Xi Jinping, learning lessons from the history, proposes a great strategic thought- One Belt and One Road.

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