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The Discursive Construction of the "Death Line": A Critical Metaphor Analysis of Chinese and U.S. Media Discourse

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Abstract: In late 2025, a term from Chinese multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) gaming culture-"Death line"-migrated from an in-game threshold of vulnerability into a political metaphor for the point beyond which ordinary Americans may face cascading financial hardship. This article applies Critical Metaphor Analysis to four purposively selected texts: two reports published by Xinhua News Agency and reproduced by People's Daily Online, one Newsweek report, and one New York Times commentary. The selected Chinese texts primarily use structural and ontological metaphors to frame financial precarity as an institutional outcome, whereas the selected U.S. texts foreground the circulation and strategic framing of the metaphor, although the Newsweek report also reproduces its object-level socioeconomic meaning. The study describes this contrast as asymmetric meta-discursive competition while treating it strictly as a bounded case study rather than evidence of stable differences between the broader Chinese and U.S. media landscapes. It also proposes vernacular metaphor capture to describe how a bottom-up gaming expression is recontextualized in institutional discourse. The findings illustrate how metaphor selection can organize competing interpretations of the same transnational discursive event.

Keywords: Critical Metaphor Analysis; Death Line; Selected Chinese State-Media Texts; Selected U.S. Media Texts; Conceptual Metaphor; Ideological Construction; Asymmetric Meta-Discursive Competition; Sino-American Discourse

1. Introduction

Metaphors are not ornamental additions to language but constitutive resources of thought: they shape how people perceive, reason about, and act within the social world [1]. This claim is especially consequential when a metaphor participates in the construction of competing realities across national and linguistic boundaries. The emergence of the "Death line" as a transnational discursive phenomenon between late 2025 and early 2026 offers a compact illustration. The expression originated in Chinese MOBA gaming culture, where it denotes the health-point threshold below which a player character can be eliminated by a targeted attack. It was then repurposed to describe a socioeconomic threshold beyond which illness, job loss, rent arrears, or debt may trigger a cascading decline from which recovery is difficult. Within weeks, a vernacular gaming expression appeared in institutional media commentary, while selected U.S. outlets responded by reporting or evaluating both the underlying economic claims and the Chinese circulation of the term.

The discursive trajectory of the "Death line" can be divided into three phases. First, users on Chinese digital platforms used the gaming term to narrate the vulnerability of American households, linking a single crisis to sudden poverty; Newsweek reported both sympathetic and schadenfreude-oriented reactions [2]. Second, two Xinhua reports reproduced by People's Daily Online reframed the expression as a structural critique of U.S. welfare, labor, tax, and political arrangements [3, 4]. Third, the selected U.S. coverage foregrounded the circulation and political use of the narrative. Newsweek explained the gaming metaphor and supplied socioeconomic context, whereas The New York Times interpreted the official uptake of the phrase as a form of emotional reassurance and political deflection [2, 5]. This sequence makes the case productive for critical linguistic analysis, while the small sample requires that its conclusions remain text-specific.

The case has three theoretical implications. First, it illustrates vernacular metaphor capture: a bottom-up expression is appropriated, recontextualized, and stabilized in institutional discourse. This process connects digital

vernacular creativity with the dynamics of official discourse and social-media circulation [6, 7]. Second, the gaming source domain is analytically consequential because it encodes a binary threshold, sudden elimination, and reduced agency after the threshold is crossed. These entailments can be transferred to the target domain of household insecurity. Third, the selected texts display an asymmetry of analytical level. The Chinese texts primarily construct U.S. socioeconomic conditions, while the New York Times commentary primarily constructs Chinese official messaging; the Newsweek report occupies a mixed position. The term asymmetric meta-discursive competition is used here to describe this case-specific configuration, not a stable property of the broader Chinese and U.S. media landscapes.

The present study brings Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA) into dialogue with comparative media discourse research. CMA combines Conceptual Metaphor Theory, corpus-sensitive linguistic analysis, and Critical Discourse Analysis [8]. Its critical dimension is informed by approaches that connect textual choices with social practice, ideology, and power [9, 10]. Ji and Chen introduced CMA to Chinese-language scholarship and demonstrated its value for cross-cultural political discourse [11]. Chen and Lu's comparison of Chinese and U.S. reporting on the bilateral trade dispute offers the closest methodological precedent [12]. Xin and Gao provide a broader account of CDA's goals, methods, and development in Chinese scholarship [13]. Three gaps remain relevant to this case: the asymmetry of analytical level across the selected texts, the political recontextualization of gaming vocabulary, and the institutional uptake of viral digital discourse.

Against this backdrop, the present study is guided by three research questions:

RQ1: What conceptual metaphors are employed in the four selected Chinese and U.S. media texts to construct the "Death line" phenomenon, and what source and target domains do they recruit?

RQ2: How do the metaphorical constructions in the two sub-corpora differ in ideological orientation, rhetorical function, and modes of Self/Other representation?

RQ3: What does this bounded case suggest about asymmetric meta-discursive competition and the institutional recontextualization of gaming vernacular?

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews Conceptual Metaphor Theory [1], Critical Metaphor Analysis [8], and critical approaches to media and social-media discourse [6, 14]. Section 3 presents the integrated theoretical framework. Section 4 describes the four-text corpus and analytical procedures. Section 5 reports the textual evidence, compares the two sub-corpora, and develops the concepts of asymmetric meta-discursive competition and vernacular metaphor capture. Section 6 concludes by restating the case-study scope and identifying directions for larger-corpus research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Critical Discourse Analysis and Media Discourse

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) treats language as a constituent of social practice that is shaped by, and can reproduce, relations of power [14]. Early work in critical linguistics and CDA demonstrated how grammar, lexical choice, and textual organization can encode ideological positions [15,16]. Media discourse is especially relevant because evaluative framings may be embedded in apparently descriptive reporting through lexical selection, source attribution, and narrative organization [17]. Major approaches include Fairclough's dialectical-relational model [9], Wodak's discourse-historical approach [18], and van Dijk's socio-cognitive account of ideology and discourse [19]. The cross-disciplinary character of CDA also supports its use alongside cognitive and metaphor-analytical frameworks [13].

2.2 Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Its Ideological Implications

Conceptual Metaphor Theory reconceived metaphor as a pervasive structuring principle of ordinary thought rather than a peripheral feature of figurative language [1]. People routinely understand one domain of experience in terms of another, and these mappings organize inferences by highlighting some aspects of a target domain while backgrounding others. The distinction among structural, orientational, and ontological metaphors provides the basic taxonomy used in this study. For critical analysis, highlighting and hiding are ideologically consequential because institutional actors can stabilize preferred ways of understanding contested social realities.

2.3 Critical Metaphor Analysis

Charteris-Black integrates Conceptual Metaphor

Theory, corpus-based analysis, and CDA into a three-stage procedure of metaphor identification, interpretation, and explanation [8]. Identification isolates candidate metaphorical expressions; interpretation reconstructs source-target mappings and their pragmatic functions; explanation situates recurrent patterns within institutional and ideological contexts. The present study uses MIPVU as a systematic guide for identifying metaphor-related words [20]. As Ji and Chen argue, CMA is especially useful when formal linguistic description must be connected to socially oriented critical interpretation [11].

2.4 Existing Research and Remaining Gaps

Chen and Lu's study of Chinese and U.S. reporting on the Sino-U.S. trade dispute shows that different metaphor preferences can construct contrasting national images and policy orientations [12]. That work provides a methodological point of departure but examines a larger and more symmetrical referential field. The present case differs because the selected Chinese texts primarily construct U.S. socioeconomic conditions, whereas the selected New York Times commentary primarily constructs Chinese official discourse; Newsweek combines object-level explanation with attention to circulation. In addition, the gaming origin of the "Death line" supplies distinctive entailments of threshold, elimination, and reduced agency. Finally, the movement from digital vernacular to institutional media connects CMA with social-media critical discourse studies [6]. These are case-specific analytical problems rather than grounds for generalizing about the broader Chinese and U.S. media landscapes.

3. Theoretical Framework

The present study integrates three mutually reinforcing theoretical layers into a unified analytical architecture. Figure 1 illustrates their hierarchical relationship and the analytical function each performs within the study.

At the cognitive layer, Conceptual Metaphor Theory supplies the vocabulary for describing cross-domain mappings and their inferential entailments [1]. At the discursive layer, CMA provides procedures for identifying metaphorical expressions, reconstructing conceptual metaphors, and interpreting their cognitive-pragmatic functions [8]. At the ideological layer, CDA and social-media critical discourse studies connect textual patterns with institutional interests, power relations, and the circulation of digital discourse [6, 14].

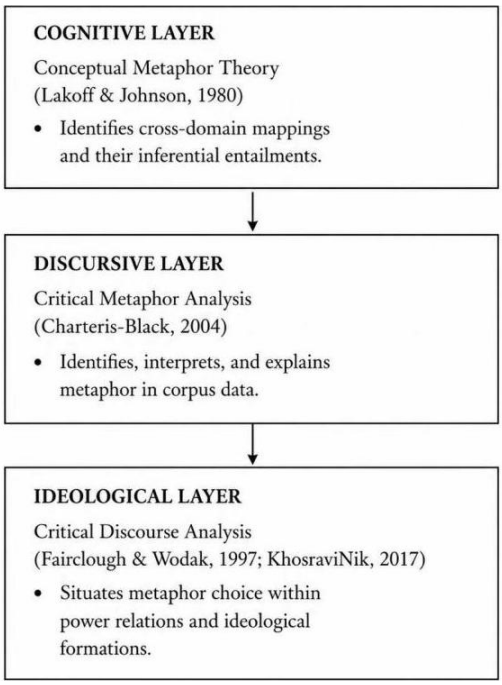


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework of the Study

The three-layer framework enables analysis of linguistic form, conceptual mapping, and ideological function without treating any single level as sufficient. Applied consistently to the four selected texts, it supports internal comparison while preserving the bounded status of the corpus. The objective is therefore not to infer stable features of Chinese or U.S. media as a whole, but to characterize how these particular texts organize a shared discursive event.

4. Data and Methodology

4.1 Corpus Description

The analytical corpus comprises four texts selected through purposive sampling for close qualitative analysis of the period in which the "Death line" gained transnational visibility. The Chinese sub-corpus contains two Xinhua reports reproduced by People's Daily Online: a January 16 report that links the term to welfare vulnerability and institutional design [3], and a January 29 report structured around "historical," "current," and "political" accounts of household insecurity [4]. The U.S. sub-corpus contains a Newsweek report published on December 26, 2025, which explains the term's online circulation and socioeconomic referent [2], and a New York Times commentary published on January 13, 2026, which evaluates the official Chinese use of the narrative [5]. The four texts constitute a small,

purposively bounded corpus suitable for in-depth case analysis; they are not treated as representative of either national media field [18].

4.2 Analytical Procedures

The analysis follows Charteris-Black's three-stage CMA framework [8].

Stage 1 is metaphor identification. Each text was read in full and candidate metaphorical expressions were identified with MIPVU as a procedural guide [20]. Each lexical unit was assessed by comparing its contextual meaning with a more basic, concrete meaning; a contrast that could be understood through cross-domain mapping was marked as metaphor-related. The Chinese texts were examined in the source language. For consistency of presentation, the textual evidence cited below is presented in English translation.

Stage 2 is metaphor interpretation. Candidate expressions were grouped by conceptual metaphor and analyzed in terms of source domain, target domain, contextual meaning, and the aspects of the target that the mapping highlights or backgrounds. Particular attention was paid to entailments of threshold, agency, causality, and reversibility.

Stage 3 is metaphor explanation. The identified patterns were interpreted in relation to the institutional position and rhetorical purpose of each selected text. Comparison was conducted between the two sub-corpora and, where necessary, between the two texts within the same sub-corpus. This procedure avoids treating the four texts as homogeneous representatives of the broader Chinese and U.S. media landscapes.

The three stages correspond to the research questions. Identification establishes the metaphor inventory for RQ1; interpretation compares mappings and rhetorical functions for RQ2; explanation addresses RQ3 by examining the analytical-level asymmetry visible in this bounded case. The findings in Section 5 are therefore traceable to textual evidence rather than inferred from outlet labels alone.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Conceptual Metaphors in the Selected Chinese State-Media Texts: Systemic Critique and De-Contingentization

The two selected Chinese texts deploy a mutually reinforcing network of metaphors that transforms household misfortune from an apparently contingent event into an institutionally patterned outcome. Table 1 provides the textual basis for the five principal classifications, including English translations of the relevant expressions, their contexts, domain mappings, and discursive functions.

Table 1. Textual Evidence for Metaphors in the Selected Chinese Texts. All Chinese-language Textual Examples are Presented in the Author's English Translation.

Conceptual metaphor	Textual evidence in English translation and context	Source → target domain	Discursive function
AMERICAN SOCIETY IS A JUNGLE	"A jungle law in which the winner takes all and the loser exits." The phrase appears in an expert explanation linking the "Death line" to Social Darwinism [3].	Jungle competition → U.S. social order	Frames exclusion and inequality as systemic rules rather than isolated accidents.
SOCIAL PROTECTION IS A DISMANTLED BUFFER	"Risk buffer" and "institutional dismantling." They occur in the historical account of welfare retrenchment [4].	Physical buffer / dismantling → welfare institutions	Materializes policy history and assigns causal responsibility for household exposure.
ECONOMIC INEQUALITY IS A SCISSOR GAP	"A scissor gap between wealth and costs." The phrase introduces the first layer of the report's current account [4].	Diverging scissor blades → wealth concentration and living costs	Depicts two pressures as separating simultaneously and mechanically.
FINANCIAL DETERIORATION IS DESCENT	"Fall into hardship and find it difficult to return to the previous life." The wording defines the threshold effect [4].	Downward movement → loss of socioeconomic security	Encodes loss of agency and difficult recovery after the threshold is crossed.
POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY IS A BURDEN TO BE PASSED	"Shift the blame and evade responsibility." The phrase concludes the political account [4].	Passing an unwanted burden → partisan responsibility	Constructs political actors as transferring responsibility rather than resolving the problem.

AMERICAN SOCIETY IS A JUNGLE is grounded in the explicit expression "jungle law" and the associated rule that winners take all while losers exit [3]. The source domain highlights competition, exposure, and exclusion, encouraging readers to interpret financial insecurity as a normal operating rule rather than an exceptional policy failure. The analysis does not claim that the metaphor exhausts the source text; rather, it identifies the inferential work performed by this recurrent expression.

SOCIAL PROTECTION IS A DISMANTLED BUFFER materializes welfare institutions as a protective object that can absorb shocks and then be removed [4]. The paired expressions "risk buffer" and "institutional dismantling" assign causal weight to policy history: risk reaches households because an intervening structure has been weakened. ECONOMIC INEQUALITY IS A SCISSOR GAP similarly converts the divergence between wealth concentration and living costs into the image of blades moving apart [4].

FINANCIAL DETERIORATION IS DESCENT maps socioeconomic loss onto downward physical movement. The report's description of households that "fall into hardship" and cannot easily return to their prior life activates the embodied schema BAD IS DOWN [4]. This mapping resonates with the threshold logic of the "Death line," because movement below the threshold is represented as difficult to reverse.

POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY IS A BURDEN TO BE PASSED is supported by the compact expression "shift the blame and evade responsibility" [4]. The metaphor extends the critique from economic structure to political response: responsibility is represented as an unwanted object transferred among actors rather than accepted and acted upon. Taken together, the five mappings create a case-specific narrative in which exposure is systemic, protection has been removed, divergence widens, decline is downward, and responsibility is displaced.

5.2 Conceptual Metaphors in the Selected U.S. Media Texts: Mixed Object-Level and Meta-Discursive Framing

The two selected U.S. texts are not analytically identical. Newsweek primarily explains the imported gaming metaphor and supplies socioeconomic context, whereas The New York Times commentary is more explicitly meta-discursive, interpreting the official Chinese uptake of the phrase. Table 2 therefore separates object-level metaphors from metaphors about media circulation and communicative function.

Table 2. Textual Evidence for Metaphors in the Selected U.S. Texts

Conceptual metaphor	Textual evidence and context	Source → target domain	Discursive function
HOUSEHOLD COLLAPSE IS ELIMINATION	Newsweek explains that an accident, illness, or bill could "finish them off" [2]. The wording translates the gaming threshold for English-language readers.	Lethal game attack → household financial collapse	Makes the suddenness and severity of cascading hardship cognitively accessible.
MEDIA CIRCULATION IS AMPLIFICATION	Newsweek states that state-linked outlets "amplified" the conversations [2].	Signal or sound amplification → media circulation	Foregrounds the scaling and institutional transmission of a viral narrative.
OFFICIAL MESSAGING IS DEFLECTION	The New York Times describes the narrative as attempting to "deflect criticism" [5].	Redirection of movement → communicative strategy	Reframes the issue from U.S. poverty to the alleged purpose of official Chinese messaging.
THE NARRATIVE IS A PALLIATIVE	The same sentence says that the narrative offers "emotional relief" [5].	Therapeutic relief → audience response to a narrative	Constructs the discourse as soothing anxiety rather than solving its underlying causes.

In Newsweek, HOUSEHOLD COLLAPSE IS ELIMINATION reproduces the gaming source domain for English-language readers: a household close to financial collapse can be "finished off" by an accident, illness, or bill [2]. The same report uses MEDIA CIRCULATION IS AMPLIFICATION when it states that state-linked outlets "amplified" the conversations [2]. The first mapping explains the socioeconomic target; the second shifts attention to the

transmission and scaling of the discourse.

The New York Times commentary foregrounds two related meta-discursive mappings. OFFICIAL MESSAGING IS DEFLECTION conceptualizes the narrative as redirecting criticism away from domestic leadership, while THE NARRATIVE IS A PALLIATIVE conceptualizes it as providing emotional relief [5]. These mappings do not directly disprove the socioeconomic claims associated with the "Death line." Instead, they reframe the primary analytical question from whether household vulnerability exists to why official Chinese discourse emphasizes it.

Accordingly, the U.S. sub-corpus supports a more limited conclusion than the earlier formulation suggested. Newsweek acknowledges and explains the object-level metaphor, while the New York Times adopts a stronger meta-discursive stance. The common tendency is an increased focus on circulation, framing, and communicative purpose, not a uniform refusal to engage American financial precarity.

5.3 Comparative Synthesis: Asymmetric Meta-Discursive Competition

The patterns identified in Sections 5.1 and 5.2 can be synthesized into a comparative framework. Table 3 summarizes the principal contrasts while preserving variation within the selected U.S. texts.

Table 3. Comparative Dimensions of Metaphorical Construction in the Four Selected Media Texts

Dimension	Selected Chinese state-media texts	Selected U.S. media texts
Primary analytical object	U.S. socioeconomic conditions	Newsweek: household precarity and circulation; New York Times: Chinese official messaging
Dominant metaphor type	Structural and ontological	Mixed object-level and meta-discursive
Principal source domains	Jungle; buffer; scissors; descent; burden	Elimination; amplification; redirection; therapeutic relief
Self/Other construction	Defective institutional arrangements, with an implicit contrast to China	Reporting observer in Newsweek; critical evaluator of official Chinese messaging in The New York Times
Primary rhetorical function	De-contingentization of financial precarity	Explanation of the imported metaphor and, especially in the New York Times, delegitimation through motive attribution
Analytical status	Case-specific pattern in two texts	Case-specific and internally heterogeneous pattern in two texts

The most significant contrast in Table 3 concerns the primary analytical object. The two selected Chinese texts operate mainly at the object level by constructing U.S. socioeconomic conditions. Newsweek combines object-level explanation with attention to circulation, while the New York Times commentary operates mainly at the meta level by constructing the purpose of Chinese official messaging. This differs from comparisons in which both corpora metaphorically construct the same referential object [12]. The term asymmetric meta-discursive competition names this configuration within the present four-text corpus.

The configuration has a coherent but text-specific ideological logic. In the selected Chinese reports, empirical data and institutional history support a claim to structural explanation. In the New York Times commentary, attention to alleged communicative motivation reduces the need to contest each object-level claim directly. Newsweek partly bridges the two levels by reporting both financial vulnerability and the circulation of the term. The result is not evidence of fixed national media logics, but a bounded instance in which texts engage the same discursive event at partly different levels of abstraction.

5.4 Discussion: Vernacular Metaphor Capture and Theoretical Implications

Why did the gaming metaphor prove so portable across these texts? Its source domain encodes a threshold that is binary, consequential, difficult to reverse, and externally imposed by the rules of the game. These entailments map efficiently onto household precarity: crossing the threshold marks a qualitative change from manageable risk to cascading vulnerability. This architecture makes the expression rhetorically useful for structural critique because irreversibility is supplied by the source domain rather than argued anew in every instance.

The movement from grassroots digital

commentary to state-affiliated reporting and then to explicit evaluation in U.S. commentary illustrates vernacular metaphor capture [3, 4, 5]. The term describes the appropriation and institutional recontextualization of a community-generated metaphor after digital circulation has already given it cultural resonance. The case suggests that CMA can benefit from tracing the histories through which metaphors move across platforms, languages, and institutions, while larger corpora are needed to test whether the observed pattern recurs.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how four purposively selected Chinese and U.S. media texts constructed the "Death line" phenomenon. The objective was to identify the conceptual metaphors in each text, compare their rhetorical and ideological functions, and explain the analytical-level asymmetry visible in this bounded case.

For RQ1, the selected Chinese texts used five principal mappings: AMERICAN SOCIETY IS A JUNGLE, SOCIAL PROTECTION IS A DISMANTLED BUFFER, ECONOMIC INEQUALITY IS A SCISSOR GAP, FINANCIAL DETERIORATION IS DESCENT, and POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY IS A BURDEN TO BE PASSED. The selected U.S. texts used HOUSEHOLD COLLAPSE IS ELIMINATION and MEDIA CIRCULATION IS AMPLIFICATION in Newsweek, and OFFICIAL MESSAGING IS DEFLECTION and THE NARRATIVE IS A PALLIATIVE in The New York Times.

For RQ2, the comparison showed that the selected Chinese reports primarily de-contingentized financial precarity by representing it as an institutional outcome. The selected U.S. texts were more heterogeneous: Newsweek explained the object-level metaphor and its circulation, whereas The New York Times foregrounded communicative motive and ideological function.

For RQ3, asymmetric meta-discursive competition describes the case-specific situation in which texts address the same discursive event at partly different analytical levels. Vernacular metaphor capture describes the movement of a bottom-up gaming expression into institutional discourse. These concepts are proposed as analytical hypotheses for further testing, not as established properties of the selected Chinese and U.S. outlets beyond this corpus.

The central limitation is the corpus size. Four purposively selected texts support close case analysis but cannot establish structural differences between the broader Chinese and U.S. media landscapes, stable editorial cultures, or the full range of positions within the named outlets. All comparative claims in this article therefore apply only to the selected texts and outlets. Future research should expand the corpus, include the original social-media posts, compare additional outlets and genres, and track the metaphor longitudinally.

The case ultimately shows that metaphorical contestation can become recursive: one set of texts constructs a social problem, while another constructs the first set's way of constructing it. Critical analysis must therefore attend not only to metaphorical representations of social reality, but also to the meta-discursive frames through which those representations are accepted, redirected, or delegitimated.

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