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## Post-print: The “Visualization” Communication of Leadership Image in the New Media Context

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### Abstract

Leader image, as a personified expression of national image, constitutes a powerful instrument for national image dissemination. Comics, as a mode of expression characterized by high international acceptance and accessibility, serve as an important information carrier for external communication of national image. Animated representations of the country’s leaders have emerged in succession, forming a trend deeply embraced by the public; such ‘visualized’ communication is becoming a new paradigm for the healthy dissemination of national image.

### Full Text

### Preamble

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### The “Visualization” of Leader Images in the New Media Context

**Abstract:** Leader image, as the personified expression of national image, serves as a powerful vehicle for communicating national identity. Comics, as a highly accessible and easily understood medium internationally, represent an important information carrier for external national image communication. Animated depictions of Chinese leaders have emerged successively, forming a popular trend deeply favored by the public. This “visualization” of communication is becoming a new paradigm for the healthy dissemination of national image.

**Keywords:** new media context; leader image; “visualization” communication

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By Mo Zhihua

As spokespersons for the nation, leaders' cartoon images can leverage the advantages of new media to disseminate concepts and values instantly, effectively, and extensively. The current media communication environment and technology are undergoing profound transformations, ushering human communication activities into the "new media era." As noted in the literature, "the emergence and widespread application of electronic media provide the technical possibility for the publicization of information and the comprehensive popularization of image consumption."<sup>[1]</sup> With the rise of postmodern theory and post-structuralism, the "logocentric paradigm" has faced criticism, while the "visuality" emphasized by thinkers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Lyotard has gradually gained prominence, facilitating a transition from the "linguistic turn" to the "visual turn" and heralding the return of an "image-based" era. "Visualization" refers to the process of transforming complex and variable information into "images," which has become a crucial mode of modern information communication characterized by its "global" expressive features. Postmodern consumer society has gradually bridged the gap between highbrow and popular culture, steering modern culture toward democratization and popularization. In the new media context, this evolving communication ecosystem drives a shift in focus "from power politics to image politics,"<sup>[2]</sup> making comics—an expressive form that is lively, trendy, highly internationalized, and easily understood—an effective remedy for establishing China's image as a major power through the "visualized" communication of national leaders.

### 1. Identification of Chinese Leaders' Animated Images

Corporate brand communication relies on the Corporate Identity System (CIS), which refers to the conscious and planned initiative of an enterprise to display and communicate its various characteristics to the public, enabling the public to form a standardized and differentiated impression and understanding of a particular enterprise in the market environment, thereby facilitating better recognition and favorable impressions. This framework comprises three components: Mind Identity (MI), Behavior Identity (BI), and Visual Identity (VI). The animated images of leaders present various political behaviors and activity scenarios, showcasing governance measures, political activities, and the daily lives of leaders during meetings, inspections, and foreign visits, thereby communicating cultural concepts, international relations, and leadership charisma. Following the release of Xi Jinping's cartoon image, China Network commissioned renowned cartoonist Jiao Haiyang to create a series of comics depicting "President Xi's approachable image," vividly and interestingly illustrating his populist style since taking office. These visual representations employ rich comic colors and "moe-ification" techniques to capture facial expressions and movements, with costume designs varying across scenes to include diverse attire such as shirts, jackets, and even sportswear, complemented by witty language descriptions that create an overall style that is both friendly and humorous.

As the saying goes, “a picture is worth a thousand words,” and these cartoon images bridge the psychological distance between leaders and citizens through popular art while providing international netizens with intuitive insights into Chinese leaders’ governance styles.

## **2. Impact of New Media Context on Disseminating Chinese Leaders’ Animated Images**

Context, a concept in linguistics, refers to the linguistic and usage environment. In the new media context, rapidly changing lifestyles demand respect for the laws of new media communication and active engagement in information acquisition and dissemination. The rapid convergence of media has provided new carriers for expression, while new media technologies have dismantled traditional communication structures. The openness and interactivity of the Internet have created favorable conditions for the widespread dissemination of news. As an Internet-based new communication context takes shape, official media actively work to shape positive leader images while netizens spontaneously engage in the political communication of leader images, achieving significant effects in both domestic and international communication and simultaneously enhancing national image. Both audience acceptance and communication effectiveness require deep integration across multiple platforms, striving to align with contemporary and social development trends.

### **2.1 Diversified Communication Forms and Open Thematic Content**

New media, built upon Internet, broadcast television, and wireless mobile communication networks, has given rise to multimedia forms such as Weibo, WeChat, and mobile clients, creating a truly networked system for leader image dissemination. The news reporting matrix has expanded from PC terminals to “two micros and one terminal” (Weibo, WeChat, and mobile apps), incorporating rich visual materials including high-definition photo collections and videos. Reporting forms encompass animation, audio-visual content, and H5 technology, with platforms offering distinct advantages through clear themes, strong visual impact, and easy comprehension. The marriage of traditional media and the Internet has made reporting themes and content more open and diverse, enabling more comprehensive and transparent interpretations of leader images. In April 2014, Qianlong Net published an animated infographic news piece titled “Xi Jinping’s Time in Europe,” which for the first time revealed animated images of Xi Jinping and Peng Liyuan holding hands. The utilization of the “First Lady” image adds harmony and completeness to the national image, perfectly expressing the beautiful cultural concept in Chinese tradition where “woman” (女) and “child” (子) combine to form “good” (好).

### 3. Paths for “Visualization” Communication of Leader Images in the New Media Context

China’s external communication influence is growing daily. Whether in social development or scientific fields, media communication has undeniably entered an audience-centered era. Communication methods evolve according to audience needs, and the construction and dissemination of leader images are progressively improving. In the new media era, the “visualization” of leader image communication should integrate the advantages of both new and traditional media, adopting more documentary and convenient approaches to cater to audience psychology, establishing personalized leader images to resolve dilemmas in national image construction and dissemination while satisfying audience desires for knowledge and entertainment.

#### 3.1 Mainstream Media Leadership and Scientific Positioning of Leader Images

In today’s new media era characterized by information diversification and varied communication methods, leader images represent not merely matters of personal portrait rights but, more importantly, national image. This context includes inappropriate commercial exploitation by unscrupulous businesses that “process” leaders’ photos for commercial use. National leader images must not be subject to arbitrary infringement or distortion by commercial entities, and citizens should actively curb such practices and prevent the spread of such content. “Visualization” communication in new media requires correction by traditional authoritative forces, with mainstream media playing a leading role in scientifically and comprehensively positioning leader images by planning positive and popular cartoon images that are then diffused to audiences through opinion leaders in new media, achieving effective two-step flow communication. The shaping of leader images requires redefinition through mainstream media communication and fermentation of discussion on new media platforms to adapt to audience acceptance habits and achieve favorable dissemination effects. The new media era does not signify the loss of traditional media functions but rather emphasizes the integration of old and new media, with new media leveraging the momentum of traditional mainstream media. Simultaneously, new media communication features high degrees of two-way interactivity, creating an open space for official-civilian discourse interaction and the blending of positive and negative voices.

#### 3.2 Introducing “Moe Thinking” to Bridge Distance with Audiences

Images represent the most suitable medium and carrier for popular discourse, and visualization provides the most effective pathway for popularized ideological expression. Consequently, image hegemony also constitutes a deconstruction and subversion of traditional elite discourse hegemony.[5] Presently, new media has broken the temporal and spatial barriers of traditional media communication, resolving contradictions such as information blockades and distortion caused by conventional dissemination methods and optimizing the communication environment. For China, disseminating animated leader images represents

a proactive initiative in external political communication that leverages the symbolic advantages of “visualization” to overcome international language barriers and seize media discourse power.

Since Xi Jinping assumed leadership, Peng Liyuan has frequently appeared on the international stage as China’s “First Lady.” In April 2013, Weibo user “@Xueyuan Zhijia” published a series of original “moe-style” cartoons of Peng Liyuan depicting her accompanying Xi Jinping on foreign visits, meticulously documenting her uniquely “Chinese-style” attire and showcasing China’s profound traditional culture and the elegant charm of Eastern women to the international community. This generated strong social repercussions and deeply embedded the image of the “Mother of the Nation.” Chinese leaders are conveying an image of a peaceful, friendly, and responsible major power through their strong personal charisma, dispelling alarmist international rumors.

The infographic “Where Has President Xi’s Time Gone?” first released by Qianlong Net and widely disseminated by numerous websites inventoried the General Secretary’s schedule and, for the first time, presented cartoon images of President Xi Jinping. By “moe-ifying” the standardized, procedural expression methods inherent in news and the serious, authoritative, and unapproachable leader image, and combining this with information visualization features, the illustration series was widely circulated across major websites, making news more humorous, interesting, and popular. These “moe-ified” cartoon images instantly bridged the distance between the General Secretary and the public, dramatically reducing any sense of distance and embedding his approachable image deeply in people’s hearts. Compared with lengthy discourses, cartoon images enable more rapid and effective communication that is concise and easily understood. This visualized communication approach gains greater public recognition, effectively improving news dissemination efficiency and enhancing communication effects, thereby making political communication more optimistic.

*Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.*

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