
RESEARCH ARTICLE

War Narrative and Emotional Empathy through Color Metaphors in the Picture Book Nanjing: The Year of 1937

Jun CHEN

Faculty of Foreign Languages, Huaiyin Institute of Technology, Huaian, China

Corresponding Author: Jun CHEN, **E-mail:** 350379069@qq.com

ABSTRACT

The picture book *Nanjing: The Year of 1937* constructs a visual discourse system for war narratives through a unique color metaphor framework, offering an innovative approach to the contemporary transmission of historical memory. Employing multimodal discourse analysis, this study reveals how the deliberate reduction of brightness and saturation in dominant cool-toned hues (gray blue and dark red) establishes a visually oppressive atmosphere, metaphorizing the devastation of urban life by wartime violence. The symbolic use of localized high-saturation red not only marks specific spatiotemporal nodes of bloody events but also intensifies the explosive nature of traumatic memory through chromatic contrast. On the level of emotional empathy, the “visual respiratory rhythm” formed by color gradients and compositional negative space guides readers from cognitive empathy to affective engagement, with its mechanism manifesting as a three-stage progression of color symbolism: “metaphor-association-empathy”. The research confirms that the picture book maintains the solemnity of historical narrative while eliciting emotional resonance among young readers through cross-modal complementarity between color and textual elements. This multimodal narrative strategy provides an operational paradigm for aesthetic education on war-related themes, with its color-coding system serving as a model for the visual construction of collective memory.

KEYWORDS

Picture Book; Color Metaphor; War Narrative; Emotional Empathy; *Nanjing: The Year of 1937*

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1. Introduction

The picture book *Nanjing: The Year of 1937* takes the urban life before the fall of Nanjing in 1937 as its entry point. It reconstructs the memory of war through non-violent narrative strategies, and its innovative color-coding system provides a new paradigm for the visual presentation of historical trauma. Current research on children’s books with war themes mostly focuses on textual narratives, while neglecting the synergy of multimodal symbol systems in emotional arousal. This precisely constitutes the realistic starting point of this study. From an academic perspective, the theory of multimodal discourse analysis provides methodological support for interpreting the symbolic interaction mechanism of picture books. Existing researches indicate that color, as a core element of visual modalities, has significant advantages in emotional transmission through its metaphorical function. For instance, cool tones can effectively create a depressing atmosphere, while high contrast colors can strengthen memory anchor points. Through systematic blending of gray blue and dark red, *Nanjing: The Year of 1937* not only avoids psychological impact brought by direct violent scenes but also completes the construction of historical cognition through the successive effect of color symbols. This approach forms a cultural difference from the “narrative of hope” in war picture books and urgently requires a localized theoretical interpretation. The research objective focuses on three dimensions: Firstly, to analyze how color symbols construct metaphorical framework of war narratives through visual parameters such as lightness and saturation; Secondly, to reveal the catalytic effect of the “visual breathing” rhythm formed by image blank space and color gradation on emotional empathy; Finally, to explore practical value of multimodal complementary mechanisms in balancing

historical authenticity and educational appropriateness. At a time when history education is facing intergenerational barriers, this research will provide an operational aesthetic path for the creative transformation of war memories, and its achievements have practical guiding significance for the cultivation of historical views among teenagers.

2. Multimodal Discourse Analysis of the Picture Book *Nanjing: The Year of 1937*

2.1 Visual symbol system and narrative structure of the picture book

Through the elaborate design of its visual symbol system, *Nanjing: The Year of 1937* constructs a complete war narrative framework. The picture book takes color as the core visual symbol, establishing an oppressive visual tone through the dominant use of cool colors. The repeated appearance of low-lightness colors such as grayish blue and dark red metaphorically reflects the gradual erosion of urban space by the shadow of war. Meanwhile, the symbolic use of local high-saturation red forms visual focal points, marking key historical nodes. This color strategy avoids the direct display of violent scenes and, through the regulation of lightness and saturation parameters, realizes the metaphorical expression of war trauma (Guo, R. F. & Astri, Y., 2024).

In terms of narrative structure, the picture book adopts dual threads: linear time and spatial juxtaposition. In the time dimension, it builds a narrative arc transitioning from peace to war through the alternation of seasons and the sequential presentation of festival scenes (such as the Lantern Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, etc.). In the spatial dimension, it uses bird's-eye view composition and blank-leaving techniques to form a contrast between macro urban landscapes and micro individual fates. For example, the stark contrast between the dense composition of crowds in festival scenes and the later empty street scenes convey the destructive power of war through accumulation of visual tension. This narrative design confirms the view that picture books and animation storyboards share significant commonalities in the construction of visual language (Ren Yingying & Liu Ying, 2025), demonstrating the expressive power of the image symbol system in depicting the flow of time and spatial transformation.

The visual symbol system of the picture book also achieves multimodal collaboration. Character designs adopt simplified processing, avoiding over-depiction of facial details; instead, emotions are conveyed through body movements and color atmosphere. For instance, anger is symbolically presented through flame-like orange blocks and twisted lines. This kind of "representing essence through phenomena" visual metonymy not only conforms to children's cognitive characteristics but also enhances emotional impact (Liu Jixia, 2025). The textual modality assumes a supplementary explanatory function, such as brief descriptions of festival customs, forming an intertextual relationship with images to jointly construct the historical context.

The regulation of visual rhythm is another key aspect of the narrative structure. The picture book creates a "visual breathing effect" through color gradients and changes in the density of composition: the bright tones and intricate details at the beginning gradually transition into dull, monotonous tones and extensive blank spaces as the narrative progresses. This intentional formal change guides readers' emotions from cognitive empathy to emotional empathy. Studies have shown that this "picture-dominated and text-assisted" creation model can more effectively activate readers' multi-sensory experiences (Chen Yingyan & Li Manli, 2011), providing a moderate aesthetic buffer for the heaviness of war-themed content.

2.2 Color as a metaphorical carrier of multimodal discourse

In the visual narrative system of the picture book *Nanjing: The Year of 1937*, color, as the core multimodal discourse carrier, achieves the aesthetic transformation of historical trauma through systematic metaphorical encoding. This transformation is not merely a simple arrangement of colors, but rather a deep symbolic construction based on the interaction between visual perception and emotion. As Lü Yanqing (2025) put it, color plays a role in interpreting the author's intentions and creative strategies in the multimodal representation of picture book literature. This picture book transforms the abstract historical grief into a perceptible visual language through the hierarchical application of cool tones. The grayish-blue color series, as the dominant tone, has metaphorical functions reflected in three dimensions: Firstly, the low-brightness grayish-blue forms the spatial tone, simulating the urban atmosphere under the shadow of war, such as the blending of the city wall and the sky in a winter scene, blurring the boundary between heaven and earth and suggesting the disintegration of the normal life order. Secondly, the gradual decrease in saturation forms a narrative thread in the temporal dimension, from the light grayish blue of early spring to the dark blue of late winter. The color change corresponds to the irreversible transformation from peace to war. This treatment confirms that multimodal representation forms help readers form metaphorical thinking in the process of reading cognition (Lü Yanqing, 2025), enabling child readers to understand the weight of the historical process through color gradation. Finally, the physical properties of cool tones — according to color psychology research, the blue series has a physiological effect of reducing the frequency of pupil constriction — intensify suppressed emotional experience at the subconscious level. The symbolic application of dark red color constructs a metonymy system of war violence. Unlike the direct reproduction of bloody scenes in traditional history textbooks, the picture book opts for indirect reference through color symbols: the verdant red of the Mid-Autumn Festival lanterns fades into dark red, and the rose red of the Dragon Boat Festival sachets transforms into rust red.

The color alienation of these everyday objects, through the metonymy mechanism of “parts representing the whole”, anchors violent memories in specific cultural symbols.

3 Narrative Function of Color Metaphors in the War

3.1 Visual presentation of cool colors and the cruelty of the war

In the visual narrative of the picture book *Nanjing: The Year of 1937*, the systematic use of cool colors constitutes the core carrier of metaphors for the cruelty of the war. This color strategy is not a simple emotional rendering, but rather an aesthetic transformation of historical trauma through precise regulation of visual parameters. As Liu Jixia (2024) pointed out, color metaphors can convey the symbolic meaning of pictures and reflect the creator's ideas. The dominant position of the gray-blue color system in the picture book not only conforms to the psychological acceptance of children's cognition but also completes the symbolic expression of war violence through multi-level visual coding.

From the perspective of the physical properties of colors, the low-lightness gray-blue tone has a unique sense of visual oppression. When this tone occupies more than 70% of the picture, it produces a physiological perception similar to overcast fog — which intertexts with the real climate of Nanjing in the winter of 1937, subtly integrating the coldness of the natural environment with the sternness of the war atmosphere. The blurred treatment of urban elements such as city walls and streets under the gray-blue filter dispels the sheltering function that buildings should have, and instead presents them as cold containers alienated by the war. This approach confirms the conclusion in color psychology that cool colors can reduce the perceived temperature of space, enabling readers to subconsciously establish a connection between colors and the deterioration of the living environment.

Saturation control is another key dimension of cool color narrative. When depicting the Lantern Festival scene at the beginning of the picture book, the sky uses a light gray-blue with a hint of purple, and the saturation is maintained at around 30%, still retaining the residual warmth of the festive atmosphere; however, as the narrative progresses to the chapters after the outbreak of the war, the saturation gradually drops to lead gray with less than 10%, and combined with the blank composition, it forms a visual “sense of suffocation”. This gradual change simulates the process of the war shadow gradually engulfing the city, which is similar to the color fading technique in film and television, but with the unique flat expressiveness of picture books.

The symbolic system of cold colors strengthens its metaphorical function through three types of visual contrast: first, front and back contrast in time dimension, for example, the sachet of Dragon Boat Festival fades from bright wormwood green to gray green, and shows the destruction of traditional culture by war through the color deterioration of the same image; Secondly, there is a contrast between the primary and secondary spatial dimensions, where large areas of cool toned backgrounds and small areas of warm colored details (such as broken red lanterns) create visual tension, which conforms to the expression law of “image metaphor replacing essence with phenomenon”; Finally, there is a contrast in the artistic conception of cultural symbols, such as the Mid-Autumn Moon changing from a golden disk to a blurry halo engulfed by gray and blue clouds, subverting the beautiful associations of traditional imagery and constructing visual evidence of war rewriting collective memory.

Like the spatial domain, temporal domain, and emotional domain, the color domain is one of the most fundamental cognitive domains in language (Langacker, 1987). In terms of emotional arousal mechanism, cool tones guide readers' cognitive transfer through “color anchors”. When the scene is dominated by cool colors for 5-6 consecutive pages, suddenly inserting a high contrast dark red detail (such as a bloodstained brick wall), this rhythm control will produce a “visual vibration” effect. Its principle of action is to break the reader's color adaptation state and use sudden color jumps to strengthen memory points. This technique avoids the psychological impact of directly displaying violent scenes, but achieves more lasting emotional retention through the cascading effect of color symbols — as pointed out in health communication research, when visual media conveys heavy topics, moderate aesthetic distance can actually enhance information acceptance (Yamaji, N., et al., 2020).

The narrative wisdom of cool tones is also reflected in the temporal and spatial compression of cross page design. The left page depicts the rippling blue waves of the Qinhuai River before the war, using a transparent blue-green color; The right page displays a moat in a gray blue color, with the only visual connection between the two pages being the continuation of the riverbank outline. This juxtaposition technique visualizes the spatiotemporal fragmentation caused by war through the dual contrast of color properties (transparent/opaque) and physical states (liquid/solid). Its metaphorical hierarchy includes both the dramatic changes in the physical environment and the solidification of urban vitality, providing a visual pivot for children readers to understand the complexity of history.

3.2 Symbolic expression of warm tones and the brilliance of humanity

In the visual narrative system of *Nanjing: The Year of 1937*, the symbolic use of warm tones constitutes the light of humanity against the darkness of the war. In sharp contrast to the oppressive atmosphere dominated by cold tones, the local accents of high-saturation colors such as orange-yellow and verdant, through the positive association of color psychology, metaphorically

represent the human dignity and life resilience that tenaciously survive in the midst of war. As Wang Ting (2025) pointed out in her research, the strategy of “strengthening emotional expression through the ingenious use of materials” is also applicable to the symbolic construction of color symbols. The careful layout of warm color blocks in the picture book creates a dual redemption of vision and emotion in the grayish-blue tone. From the perspective of symbolic function, warm tones mainly carry three types of narrative meanings: First, they serve as a visual imprint of the peaceful life before the war. In the opening scene of the Lantern Festival, the orange-red of the lanterns and the rose red of the children’s cotton-padded jackets form a color contrast, creating a safe and warm memory anchor point through the high-saturation warm color group. When these colors gradually fade in the subsequent narrative, the faint warm tones can still evoke readers’ recollection of the beautiful memories. Secondly, it symbolizes the continuous power of cultural traditions. Although the green of the Dragon Boat Festival sachet has turned grayish green under the shadow of war, the fine yellow silk thread details are still retained at the edge of the picture. This “color blank space” implies the implicit inheritance of cultural genes. Thirdly, as an explosive expression of the brilliance of human nature. In the chapter with the lowest color mood throughout the book, the sudden appearance of warm yellow candlelight (such as the close-up of the oil lamp in the shelter) creates a visual climax through the contrast of color temperature, and its function is similar to the “hope node” in the narrative (Guo, R. F. & Astri, Y., 2024). The emotional arousal mechanism of warm tones is manifested in a three-level progressive structure: the base layer directly stimulates the senses through the physical properties of colors; The cultural layer activates collective memory by means of traditional color symbols, such as the connection between the golden full moon of the Mid-Autumn Festival and the image of family and national reunion.

In the cross-page composition, the contrasting use of warm colors is particularly exquisite. The left page depicts the ruins after an air raid, using a mixture of gray-blue and carbon black; the right page focuses on the scene of survivors helping each other, forming a miniature color matrix through the dark red of the characters’ scarves and the warm yellow of the flashlights. This layout confirms the “picture-dominated” creation rule of picture books (Guo, R. F. & Astri, Y., 2024), as a very small proportion of the proportion of warm colors can reverse the emotional tone of the overall picture. It is particularly noteworthy that the symbolic treatment of the flame image — unlike the common anger metaphor in western picture books (such as the straightforward correspondence of “anger is fire”), Nanjing: The Year of 1937 uses daily fire sources such as bonfires and stoves as carriers of warm colors, and conveys the tenacious will of life continuity under the haze of war through the Oriental philosophy of “the spark never goes out”.

The complementary relationship between warm colors and the text modality is reflected in the narrative rhythm of “vision first, text as the finishing touch”. When warm color details symbolizing hope appear in the picture, the text often only gives a minimalist description. This kind of blank-leaving treatment endows readers with more imagination space. When displaying traditional cultural scenes, the warm color system and folk elements (such as moon cakes and dragon boats) form double coding, which not only meets the intuitive perception needs of child readers but also provides an entry point for educators’ cultural interpretation. This multimodal collaborative model enables the war narrative to maintain the seriousness of history while avoiding the oversimplification of traumatic memories.

From the perspective of contemporary cultural communication, this warm color strategy has special practical significance. Nowadays, as historical education is increasingly facing intergenerational alienation, arousing emotional resonance through color metaphors can build a lasting historical cognition more effectively than simple factual statements. Those fleeting warm light spots in the picture book are just like the seeds of memory spanning time and space, sowing the seeds of understanding history and cherishing peace in children’s hearts.

3.3 Reconstruction of historical memory in color contrast

In the narrative strategy of the picture book *Nanjing: The Year of 1937*, color contrast is not only a visual expression technique, but also a cognitive tool for reconstructing historical memory. By systematically juxtaposing and transforming cool and warm tones, the picture book constructs a three-stage memory framework of “peace, war, and reflection”, enabling child readers to understand the complexity and continuity of history through intuitive color changes. This reconstruction process is not simply a historical reproduction, but a metaphorical network based on color symbols, which realizes the aesthetic transformation and intergenerational transmission of collective memory.

The adversarial configuration of gray blue and dark red is the core mechanism of memory reconstruction. When a large area of cool toned background and a small area of warm colored details form a visual confrontation, the physical tension of color is transformed into the psychological tension of historical narrative. For example, the blue waves (blue-green) of the Qinhuai River before the war and the river surface (gray blue) after the war form a cross-page contrast, visually presenting the permanent changes of war on the urban texture through the dual alienation of color and texture. This treatment confirms Wang Ting’s (2025) view that “multisensory fusion technology enhances cognitive level”, transforming abstract historical trauma into perceptible visual experience. It is worth noting that the remnants of warm color elements in post-war scenes (such as scattered red lights from damaged lanterns) are not simply symbols of hope, but visual evidence of memory continuation.

The narrative function of color gradients is particularly prominent in the temporal dimension. The picture book constructs a dual thread of natural time and historical time through the transition of color tones during seasonal changes (pink green in spring → orange yellow in summer → gray brown in autumn → lead gray in winter). This gradient not only simulates the gradual nature of war shadows, but also compresses and reconstructs memory through color montage. The color deterioration process of Dragon Boat Festival sachets, from bright to gray, condenses months of historical tragedy in the moment of turning the page. Its effect is similar to the “time ellipsis” in film and television, but more in line with the plane narrative characteristics of picture books. Research has shown that this metaphorical thinking of “replacing time with color” can effectively help children establish causal relationships between historical events.

In the construction of spatial memory, color contrast achieves symbolic transformation of scenes through visual guidance. The color coding of the same geographical space across different periods creates overlaps and collisions of memories. The “color window” design that frequently appears in the pictures — the warm-colored parts in the gray-blue background (such as the light shining through the window lattice) — is not only a reproduction of the real scene but also a metaphor for the memory screening mechanism: the light spots in the darkness often become the most lasting retention in traumatic memories.

The emotional regulatory function of color contrast is reflected in the dynamic balance of memory reconstruction. When highly saturated war trauma symbols (such as dark red bloodstains) are juxtaposed with low-purity life details (such as faded clothing), the intense visual conflict is buffered by everyday elements, avoiding a monotonous and extreme historical perception. This approach is particularly in line with the psychological acceptance characteristics of child readers, reserving space for their independent construction of historical understanding via “cognitive blank spaces”.

In the context of history education, this non-indoctrination-style memory reconstruction approach holds special value for cultivating teenagers' critical historical thinking. The ultimate goal of memory reconstruction is achieved through color reset. The pale cyan sky and tender green buds that appear at the end of the picture book are not a simple return to the warm tone at the beginning, but a new color that incorporates the grayish-blue memory. This “hope with scars” color design transcends the narrative mode of binary opposition and presents the profound logic of historical memory reconstruction — not erasing trauma, but transforming it into spiritual resources for the future. Just like the city wall bricks and stones in the pictures that retain the traces of war while also sprouting new buds, the dialectical application of the color system has ultimately accomplished an aesthetic elevation from historical pain to a sense of peace.

4. The Generative Mechanism of Emotional Empathy

Through elaborate design of visual rhetoric, the picture book *Nanjing: The Year of 1937* constructs a systematic emotional triggering mechanism. This mechanism is not a simple emotional rendering, but a gradual guidance of readers from visual perception to in-depth empathy based on multi-level interactions of colors, compositions, and symbols. As Lü Yanqing (2025) pointed out, picture book literature is a corpus formed by multimodality, interpreting the representational methods and metaphorical meanings of various modalities in picture books from a metaphorical perspective, this multimodal characteristic provides rich paths for emotional triggering.

The emotional triggering of visual rhetoric first manifests as physiological reactions induced by “color guidance”. The low-lightness treatment of cool colors naturally triggers physiological responses such as pupil dilation, creating a sense of depression; while the sudden appearance of high-saturation red can stimulate excitement of visual nerves, forming an alert reaction. For example, in the contrast of Spring Festival scenes before and after the outbreak of the war, the same red window grilles change from bright to dirty. Such color changes allow readers to feel the emotional gap without textual explanation. Research in color psychology indicates that such physiological visual stimulation is the basic link of emotional resonance.

At the cognitive level, visual rhetoric activates cultural memory through “symbolic metonym”. The repeatedly appearing traditional festival elements in the picture book (such as Mid-Autumn mooncakes and Dragon Boat Festival sachets), as visual symbols of the peaceful period, form a strong contrast with the fragmentation and fading of these symbols in the subsequent war. Instead of directly displaying violence, this approach allows readers to associate the destruction caused by the war through the visual alienation of symbols. Ren Yingying & Liu Ying (2025) also mentioned in her research that the method of “visual rhetoric transfer” can effectively convey complex emotions. When child readers see familiar festival symbols distorted by the war, they will naturally cherish peace.

The deep mechanism of emotional triggering lies in the immersive space created by “visual blankness”. The picture book extensively uses compositional blank spaces and color gradients, such as a sudden oil lamp in a gray-blue background or a corner of the sky reddened by artillery fire. These blank spaces are not a lack of information, but an invitation to emotions — readers need to actively fill in the meanings beyond the scene, and this process itself is the beginning of emotional investment. Such moderate “cognitive gap” can actually enhance readers' sense of participation and immersion.

It is worth noting that the contemporary value of visual rhetoric has become increasingly prominent in the media environment.

Facing fragmented reading habits and the saturation of images, the picture book can effectively maintain readers' emotional attention through carefully designed visual rhythms — such as the alternating appearance of warm and cool colors, and the regular arrangement of dense and blank pages. This design not only respects children's limited attention span but also ensures the emotional communication effect of the heavy historical theme.

5. Conclusion

This study systematically examines how the picture book *Nanjing: The Year of 1937* constructs war narratives and evokes emotional empathy through color metaphors, employing multimodal discourse analysis. Against the backdrop of global historical education facing intergenerational inheritance challenges, the creative practice of this picture book provides an important paradigm for the visual communication of war memories. The research reveals that the cool-toned dominant gray-blue and dark red color systems, through deliberate control of lightness and saturation, form an oppressive visual tone to metaphorize war violence; while the symbolic use of local high-saturation warm colors constructs narrative pivots for emotional redemption. This color-coding system effectively achieves the organic unity of historical cognition and emotional resonance through a three-level mechanism of "metaphor-association-empathy".

From the perspective of educational practice, the color narrative strategy of this picture book has three innovative values: First, the "visual breathing rhythm" formed by color gradients and compositional blank spaces solves the adaptation problem between historical trauma themes and children's receptive psychology. This "non-violent" visual expression maintains the seriousness of history while conforming to the cognitive characteristics of young people. Second, the cross-cultural universality of color symbols provides a replicable communication path for international historical education. In the current context of globalization, such visual narratives that transcend language barriers help readers from different cultural backgrounds understand collective trauma. Third, the mechanism of reconstructing historical memory through color contrast (such as the fading process of festival symbols) provides a concrete tool for cultivating critical historical thinking, which is particularly important when fragmented reading prevails in the digital age.

This study offers direct insights for aesthetic education practice and publishing creation. Educators can draw on the picture book's color teaching design to transform historical events into perceivable visual experiences, such as using color card comparison activities to help teenagers understand the impact of war. The publishing industry should pay attention to the cultural translation of color systems, enhancing international communication while preserving local characteristics. Future research can further explore the influence of dynamic colors in digital media on the construction of historical memory, as well as the differences in interpretations of color metaphors among readers from different cultural backgrounds. In general, the color practice of *Nanjing: The Year of 1937* demonstrates that appropriate multimodal narratives can both safeguard historical truth and plant the concept of peace, which has far-reaching exemplary significance for contemporary historical education.

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