

Study on China's National Image in International and Chinese Media: An Ecological Discourse Analysis Approach

He Gu

School of Humanities and Law, China University of Mining & Technology, Beijing, Beijing 100083, China

Guhe20031017@163.com

Abstract. Based on the eco-philosophical concept of "pluralism, harmony, interaction and symbiosis" and the theoretical foundation of systemic functional linguistics, this paper conducts a comparative analysis of the ecological image of China and the characteristics of the process of objectification constructed in the news discourse of both Chinese and foreign media under the framework of the analysis of the process of ecologicalization and objectification of China's image. The study finds that both Chinese and foreign media use ecological and material resources to characterize beneficial, neutral and destructive images of China; both Chinese and foreign media focus on the neutral image of China, with a different emphasis on the beneficial and destructive images; on the whole, the proportion of beneficial images constructed by Chinese and British media is higher than that of American media, while the proportion of destructive images constructed by American media is higher than that of Chinese and British media.

Keywords: Systemic Functional Linguistics, China's image, Ecologization and Objectivity Analysis Framework.

1. Introduction

The exploration of national image plays a vital role in enhancing a country's recognition on the global stage, with news media serving as a key conduit for its portrayal. Xu (1996) asserted that national image is fundamentally shaped by its representation in international news. Media influence molds public perception and evaluation of international affairs through selective information portrayal in cross-cultural contexts. National image, reflecting a country's soft power, profoundly affects its strategic role in global politics. Amidst China's growing comprehensive national strength and rising global prominence, the nation has acknowledged the imperative of bolstering its international discourse to craft its future national image. This recognition has positioned national image construction at the forefront of academic research.

Previous research on constructing the national image in news media has adopted varied methodologies and perspectives. China's national image development encompasses a self-crafted image, rooted in its distinct cultural identity and pursuit of global discourse authority, and an externally shaped image, influenced by others' perceptions and political motives (Tan, 2023). Studies on China's portrayal by foreign media generally adopt an external perspective (Chang, 2017; Ran, 2018; Zhou, 2021; Xu, 2022), whereas research on China's self-representation (Meng, 2013; Zhang, 2018) is relatively scarce and lacks comprehensive comparative analysis with foreign media. Existing research often suffers from limited media scope and insufficient comparative depth. Additionally, this field has expanded beyond journalism and communication to include various linguistic theories, suggesting that ecological discourse analysis offers a promising avenue for comparing China's image in both domestic and international media.

This study aims to conduct a comparative analysis of how Chinese and international media construct China's image using the framework of ecological discourse analysis, which is crucial for shaping the nation's global image. This approach, rooted in the ecological philosophy of "diversity, harmony, and interactive coexistence" and based on systemic functional linguistics, examines "China Daily," "The New York Times," and "The Times" as corpus sources. The focus is on portraying

China's image amidst the Sino-US trade disputes, aiming to inform China's future image self-shaping strategies and present a genuine, multifaceted image of the nation.

2. Theoretical Framework

Stibbe emphasizes that ecological discourse analysis requires analysts to adopt an ecological philosophy, applying specific linguistic theories as a basis for text analysis and evaluation. This study is rooted in ecological philosophy and employs systemic functional linguistics as its theoretical foundation. It also utilizes Wei Rong's (2022) framework for ecological contextualization and transitivity process analysis in examining China's image, enabling a comparative analysis of news discourses.

2.1. Ecological Philosophy

In ecological discourse analysis, it is essential to comprehend ecological philosophy — the value system that informs ecological linguistics and integrate it with linguistic theories to construct an ecological framework (Stibbe, 2015; He, 2018b). He and Wei have developed an international ecological philosophy centered on "diversity and harmony, interactive coexistence," which aims to promote a healthy international ecosystem. Influenced by traditional Chinese philosophical thought and key diplomatic ideologies, this philosophy combines dynamic and static elements to provide a holistic and universally applicable ecological perspective. This philosophy has been pivotal in guiding various ecological discourse analyses, seen by scholars as essential in optimizing representations of nature and society in human discourse (He, 2020).

2.2. Ecological Discourse Analysis within Systemic Functional Linguistics

Ecological discourse analysis explores the intricate interplay between language and ecology, revealing language's role in shaping ecological relationships (Huang, 2017) and conveying ideologies and ecological concepts. Systemic functional linguistics is vital to this analysis due to its focus on sociolinguistic symbolism, ideological perspectives, and discourse construction theories. These elements provide both theoretical and operational frameworks for analysis (Miao, 2019). In this study, the transitivity process system, a component of systemic functional linguistics, is employed to investigate the topic. This system categorizes human experiences into processes such as action, mental, relational, behavioral, communicative, and existential, shedding light on the speaker's perception of the objective world. The transitivity process system, inherently ecological, underscores the deep connection between language and ecology, serving as a powerful tool to understand complex ecological systems. The selection of transitivity processes in this study for analyzing news discourse aligns with the human propensity to make lexical and grammatical choices based on meaning, making it a crucial element in constructing and representing China's image in discourse.

2.3. Analytical Framework for the Ecologization and Transitive Processes of China's National Image

The portrayal of China's national image in discourse can be classified into three types, aligned with ecological philosophy and their impact on the international ecosystem's dynamic equilibrium: beneficial, neutral, and destructive. The understanding of ecological potential is predominantly reflected in the semantic configurations within the transitivity process system, categorized into beneficial, neutral, and destructive processes. This study follows Wei's framework for ecological contextualization and transitivity process analysis of China's image, focusing on the relationship between lexical grammatical resources within the transitivity process system and ecological experiences.

3. Research Design

This study employs the Factiva database to extract news articles related to the Sino-American trade disputes. The keyword "China trade dispute" was used to collect relevant articles from three influential English-language mainstream media outlets over the past five years: "The Times" from the UK, "China Daily" from China, and "The New York Times" from the USA. A total of 216, 208, and 252 articles were gathered from each source respectively, creating a comprehensive news corpus.

Using Antconc software, a specialized index focusing on references to China was developed. This index concentrated on linguistic patterns involving China and verbs (China+V semantic configurations), allowing for manual filtering of instances where China is implicated in action-oriented processes. This filtering process yielded 60, 365, and 164 instances of action-oriented references to China from each respective source. The study, within an analytical framework that scrutinizes how China's image is portrayed through these action-oriented processes, categorized the representations of China formed through these China+V semantic patterns. It compares the ecological national image of China by domestic and international media, emphasizing the differences and the specific ecological and transitive processes these media employ to shape the perception of China.

4. Results and Analysis

4.1. General Trends in the Representation of China's Image in Domestic and International Media

This study categorizes the portrayals of China in the context of the Sino-American trade disputes as depicted in "The Times", "The New York Times", and "China Daily", focusing on the the ecological national image of China represented by China+V semantic configurations. The proportions of each portrayal category are illustrated in Figure 1:

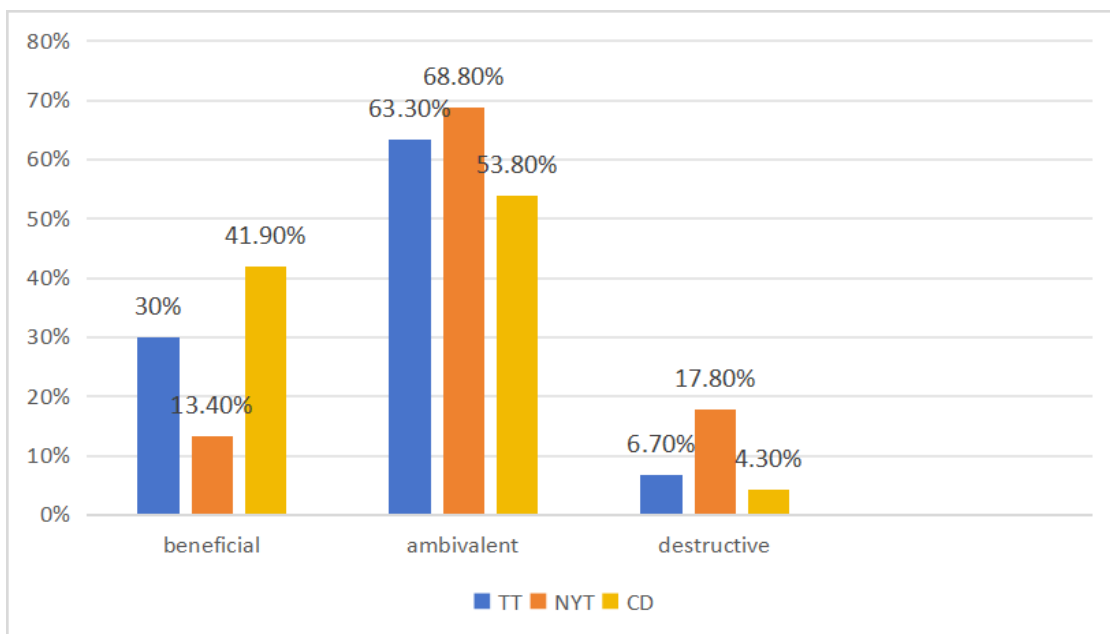


Figure 1. General Trends in the Representation of Ecological China's Image in Domestic and International Media

The combined analysis of the graphical data and news corpus indicates that all three media sources shape three distinct portrayals of China: primarily neutral, followed by beneficial, and least frequently, destructive. "The Times" and "China Daily" predominantly exhibit a neutral portrayal, followed by beneficial and then destructive representations. In contrast, "The New York Times" most commonly presents a neutral portrayal, followed by destructive, and then beneficial. This indicates that while all three media predominantly depict a neutral image of China, they also include beneficial and

destructive portrayals to varying extents, highlighting significant differences in their nuanced portrayal of China. "The New York Times" is particularly notable for its emphasis on the destructive aspects of China's image, often portraying the country as failing to fulfill promises and facing numerous challenges in trade disputes, sometimes with a negative slant in ostensibly neutral reporting. "The New York Times" is particularly notable for its emphasis on the destructive aspects of China's image, often portraying the country as failing to fulfill promises and facing numerous challenges in trade disputes, and its neutral reporting discourse often carries negative connotations. "The Times" tends to offer neutral, factual representations of China, with less focus on the other two categories. "China Daily", as a primary channel for China's international communication, aims to promote a beneficial image of China. It realistically portrays China's challenges and efforts in overcoming trade dispute difficulties, suggesting practical measures for China to address these issues based on real-world conditions.

4.2. Characterization of China's Image in International and Chinese Media: An Ecological and Transitivity Process Perspective

The journalistic narratives of three media entities primarily engage with the ecological and transitivity systems, selecting among the domains of action, psychological, relational, and communicational processes. This entails portraying China's roles and perceptions within the context of trade disputes, thereby highlighting the ecological significance of its actions, thoughts, relationships, and communications in forming an ecologized image of China. We will now examine how both international and Chinese media depict this ecologized image and its transitivity processes.

4.2.1 Ecological and Transitivity Process Characterization of China's Positive Image

"The Times" adopts a linguistic strategy that emphasizes beneficial action, followed by psychological, communicational, and relational processes, mainly shaping China's image as a responsible and significant player in trade disputes.

(1)China intends to uphold multilateralism and globalisation, especially when the US is on the retreat.

(2)China does not want an increase in Tariffs and feels they will do much better if they make a deal.

(1)The term "uphold," used in the context of action processes, signifies China's unwavering commitment to global cooperation, projecting the image of a responsible international contributor.

(2)The use of "want" indicates an emotional psychological process, revealing China's aversion to trade conflicts and its preference for peaceful resolutions. This portrays China as favoring peace over conflict. These beneficial processes collectively present China as a driver of global economic growth and a protector of the international economic order, committed to fostering a global community with shared future prospects, thereby exerting a strong positive global influence (Liu, 2020).

"The New York Times" incorporates beneficial processes to a moderate extent in its portrayal of China's favorable image. Its narrative primarily includes beneficial action, followed by psychological, relational, and communicational processes. This encompasses China's ongoing efforts to increase openness in trade markets and promote fairness during disputes, as well as the gradual fulfillment of its commitments in trade agreements with the U.S.

(3)For now, Mr. Trump and his trade advisers are mostly defending China's efforts to live up to the trade deal, saying China has been taking crucial steps to open its agricultural markets and financial system.

(4)China emerged as a manufacturing powerhouse over the past two decades.

(5)China pledged as part of the Phase 1 trade agreement with the United States three years ago not to seek an advantage in trade by pushing down the value of its currency.

(3)The action process "take" demonstrates China's concrete steps in liberalizing its agricultural markets and improving its financial system.

(4)The "emerge" process, in relational terms, positions China as a rising force in manufacturing.

(5)The term "pledge," used in communication processes, signifies China's sincere commitment to equitable trade practices. These processes collectively depict China's positive role in protecting American economic interests while seeking new development through internal reforms.

"China Daily" often reflects China's diplomatic ideologies and values, highlighting its position on major international issues and matters related to China, in line with global trends and addressing international concerns with unique perspectives (Yan, 2016). It primarily uses beneficial processes to craft China's advantageous image, utilizing linguistic resources that focus on beneficial action, followed by psychological, relational, and communicational processes. This approach creates an image of China making substantial progress in various economic sectors, significantly contributing to global stability and prosperity.

(6)China is attempting to protect the global economy's stability.

(7)More important, China is not afraid of a trade war, because it can use it to deepen reform and opening-up.

(8)Executives and industrial leaders told officials that China is an indispensable and almost irreplaceable partner in the global market.

(9)China has reiterated that it doesn't want to be dragged into a trade war with the United States but is capable of safeguarding its interests if it is forced into one.

(6)The phrase "attempt to protect," used in the action process, communicates China's proactive role as a builder of global peace and an advocate for fair trade.

(7)The term "afraid," in the psychological process, reflects China's confidence and determination in transforming challenges into progress.

(8)The relational process "is" emphasizes China's status as a leader and key player in the global economy.

(9)"Reiterate," employed in communication processes, underscores China's dedication to an independent development path, favoring cooperation over confrontation with the U.S., and portraying China as a peace-loving nation resilient in the face of power.

4.2.2 Characterization of China's Destructive Image in Ecological and Transitivity Processes

"The Times" hardly employs linguistic elements that suggest a destructive image of China, primarily using terms associated with destructive actions. For example:

(10)China threatens to overtake America in the fields that will define the next wave of innovation, from 5G networks to artificial intelligence.

(10) The use of "threaten" implies China is perceived as challenging America's dominance in advanced technology fields. While this portrayal is negative, it is relatively mild, depicting China's assertive stance rather than an aggressive intent. It also hints at potential misinterpretations of China's political stance, suggesting no actual desire from China to challenge or supplant the United States.

The New York Times presents the highest proportion of destructive images, using linguistic tools that emphasize destructive actions, followed by relational, psychological, and communicational processes. Its coverage spans global security issues, including the COVID-19 pandemic and espionage cases.

(11)Since China ascended to membership in the World Trade Organization in 2001, he said, it had failed to turn into a market economy in the mold of Western nations, as many hoped.

(12)China is engaged in a wide range of unfair trade practices, including subsidizing domestic manufacturing, impeding the sale of foreign goods and stealing intellectual property.

(13)But discussions fell apart last weekend, when China called for substantial changes to the negotiating text that both countries had been using as a blueprint for a sweeping trade pact.

(14)For years, Democrats in Congress have been warning that China is an economic aggressor bent on undermining American industry.

(11) and (14) feature "China+V" destructive processes within projection clauses, reflecting the speakers' viewpoints and attitudes. For instance, "had failed" implies a perception of China's market economy as unfair and non-transparent;

(12) "is engaged in" suggests involvement in practices harmful to international trade interests, portraying China as a disruptor of global trade norms;

(14) "is" directly labels China as an economic aggressor from the perspective of some American Democratic politicians. These portrayals indicate a trend in American journalism where claims of "absolute objectivity" and non-bias often mask evident stances and biases. "The New York Times" criticizes China's market economy, overlooking China's efforts in fostering multilateral economic and trade cooperation and opposing trade protectionism. The publication also employs a strategy of responsibility avoidance, shifting blame for escalating trade tensions.

Influenced by strong political biases, "The New York Times" characterizes China as a treacherous, predatory, and unfair competitor through these destructive processes.

"China Daily," China's primary international newspaper, serves as a crucial portal for the global understanding of China. It takes on the role of countering misinformation and reducing negative perceptions of China. Analyzing its news discourse is particularly important in understanding reported speech, a key aspect of journalistic integrity (Xin, 2006). "China Daily" reports on destructive images of China portrayed by other sources, using linguistic tools that emphasize destructive actions, relational processes, and equally weighted psychological and communicational processes.

(15) While leading Democrats have come to the view that China has abrogated its role as a responsible global stakeholder.

(16)The US president tweeted Friday that China is an "enemy".

Likewise, (15) and (16) use projection clauses with sourced speech and attitudes to depict destructive processes, citing sources like American Democrats, the U.S. government, and the President.

For example, (15) "has abrogated" conveys the view that China is perceived as neglecting its global peace and development responsibilities; (16) "is" categorizes China as an "enemy," representing a significant threat to the United States.

4.3. The Ecological Representation and Media Characterization of China's Neutral Image

"The Times" predominantly portrays China in a neutral manner, adopting an impartial stance. The discourse analysis reveals a hierarchy of linguistic devices: neutral action verbs are most prevalent, followed by relational, communicative, and psychological processes. The emphasis is on China's role within the global trade system and its reactive strategies in trade disputes.

(17)China hit back against American levies on \$250 billion of its exports with retaliatory tariffs on US goods worth \$110 billion.

(18)China has pledged to retaliate if President Trump goes ahead with his threat to impose more tariffs on its exports.

In (17), the phrase "hit back against" illustrates China's decision to respond to international provocations with retaliation. (18) uses "pledge" in a communicative context to signify China's formal commitment to counteract U.S. actions. Although "retaliate" has negative connotations, its usage in this context reflects China's intention to protect its national interests and the global market, suggesting a positive aspect and depicting China as a nation adhering to international principles and defending itself when necessary. This portrayal presents China as somewhat passive in trade disputes.

Similarly, "The New York Times" characterizes China in a neutral manner, albeit often with subtle negative implications. The linguistic tools predominantly include neutral action verbs, complemented by relational, communicative, and psychological processes. The focus is on China's specific challenges within international trade disputes and its interactions with the U.S.

(19)Last year, as retaliation for Mr. Trump's tariffs, China stopped buying soybeans from American farmers, which resulted in a big hit to soybean exports.

(20)They say higher Chinese tariffs and strict investment limits are justified because China is still a developing country and well behind the United States in any economic respects.

In (19), "stop doing" refers to China's decision to halt soybean purchases in response to increased tariffs, framing a neutral stance through legitimate actions. However, phrases like "result in" and "big hit" subtly suggest that China's actions resulted in economic losses. (20) employs "is" in a relational context to label China as a "developing country," but the claim that China is economically far behind the U.S. lacks objectivity.

"China Daily" aims for a balance between objectivity and perspective in its reporting, carefully employing neutral processes to depict China's image. Its discourse incorporates a mix of neutral action and psychological processes, as well as relational and communicative elements, to portray China as a nation facing significant challenges internationally and committed to ongoing efforts.

(21) As for China, to overcome the impact of the trade war on its economy, it should deepen its reform and further open up its economy.

(22) China is also pursuing complementary domestic reforms.

In (21), "deepen" signifies China's dedication to intensifying reforms and opening its economy to mitigate the negative impacts of trade disputes. (22) uses "pursue" to express China's determination to resolve trade frictions through domestic reforms. These narratives emphasize China's response to complex challenges and its proactive stance, fostering an image of a nation with a clear understanding of its capabilities and readiness to address difficulties. Accurate reporting on national circumstances and developmental levels contributes to presenting a comprehensive, objective, and nuanced picture of China, enhancing global understanding and potentially reshaping perceptions of China worldwide.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Discourse is shaped by social constructivism (Fairclough, 1992). Nations craft their interactions with ecological factors within the international ecosystem through discourse, aiming to influence international relations (He, 2017). An in-depth analysis of news discourse from both domestic and international media reveals that these outlets predominantly construct three ecological images of China: neutral, beneficial, and destructive, as manifested through corresponding processes within the ecological transitivity system. Domestic and international media, influenced by their unique journalistic principles and political stances, exhibit distinct tendencies in their use of lexical-grammatical resources and in the portrayal of China's image. Based on these findings, the study presents several recommendations for national external communication media:

1. Foreign media, particularly from the United States, often demonstrate inconsistent reporting stances, commonly adopting responsibility avoidance strategies that distort the truth. It is crucial to remain alert to these inaccuracies, to expose them promptly, and to actively counter such misrepresentations.

2. Reduce overt political biases in reporting is important. It is recommended to verify facts through a range of international perspectives and genuine reflections of public sentiment, rather than overly relying on subjective assertions guided by prescriptive "should" statements.

Future research will further explore comparative analyses of China's image as "other-shaped" and "self-shaped." The goal is to quickly convert China's developmental strengths and comprehensive national power into a discourse advantage (Yan, 2016), countering the "demonization" of China's image by certain countries and promoting the establishment of an international discourse system with Chinese characteristics.

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