
Comparative Study on the Discourse System of “Chinese Image” Construction from the Perspective of Western Media--Based on media discourse around January 2025

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Abstract: This study investigates the discursive construction of China’s image in Western media from a critical discourse analysis perspective, with a particular focus on linguistic shifts before and after Donald Trump’s assumption of the U.S. presidency in January 2025. Drawing on Fairclough’s three-dimensional model, the research examines China-related reports from mainstream Western outlets—including CNN, BBC, The New York Times, and The Wall Street Journal—spanning from 2015 to 2025. Through qualitative and quantitative analysis of lexical choices, syntactic patterns, and discourse strategies, the study identifies significant post-inauguration transformations: increased use of neutral and positive vocabulary, a preference for concise and declarative sentence structures, reduced reliance on stigmatizing labels, and greater diversity and authority in information sourcing. These changes reflect an emerging recalibration in Western media’s representational practices, driven by a confluence of internal linguistic dynamics—such as language adaptability and normative accuracy—and external pressures, including economic interests, shifts in U.S. foreign policy, and heightened international scrutiny of media bias. Despite this apparent discursive moderation, the study cautions that deep-seated ideological filters and geopolitical contingencies continue to pose long-term challenges to balanced reporting. By elucidating the linguistic mechanisms and socio-political drivers underlying shifts in Western media discourse, this research offers theoretical insights into the interplay of language, power, and ideology in international news production. It also provides actionable implications for enhancing China’s global communication strategies, including the optimization of discursive framing, real-time media monitoring via AI-driven tools, and the cultivation of culturally attuned international communication professionals.

Keywords: western media; China’s image; critical discourse analysis; linguistic shift; international communication

Online publication: January 26, 2026

1. Introduction

1.1. Resrarch background

The international communication landscape has become a pivotal force in shaping the global image of nations. The rapid flow and dissemination of information subject national reputations to scrutiny and judgment in the court of global public

opinion. Western media, leveraging their advantages in communication technology, resource accumulation, and global network reach, have long dominated discourse in the international arena. For many audiences worldwide, Western media coverage of China serves as a primary window for understanding the country.

Some Western media outlets, influenced by ideological bias and political interests, are filled with a large amount of misinformation and negative coverage in their reports on China. Take the BBC as an example: during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the BBC not only politicized the outbreak by recycling claims about ‘concealment,’ ‘origin,’ and ‘responsibility,’ but also used different filters in its Chinese and English reports- adding a ‘sinister filter’ to its English coverage to maliciously smear China’s anti-pandemic achievements.^[4]

After Trump took office, he implemented measures such as withdrawing economic support for some Western media that have long smeared China. For example, Trump said he was “happy” to cancel economic support for the National Public Radio (NPR) and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS)^[12]; Trump signed an executive order to cut the budget of the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM), leading to the freezing of funds and suspension of employees for media such as Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, Radio Free Asia, and the Middle East Broadcasting Network^[13-15]; the Trump administration instructed the U.S. General Services Administration to cancel all contracts with media including the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Bloomberg, and Politico^[16]. This political change was like a huge stone thrown into the public opinion field, triggering significant changes in the content and language of China-related reports by many foreign media such as CNN, BBC, and The New York Times. For instance, studies have found that among 10 major British and American news media including the BBC, nearly 70% of reports on China’s economy, technology, or environment in 2019 had a negative tone. By 2025, the proportion of negative reports dropped to about 40%, while neutral reports and positive reports on the economy increased (Bi, 2025)^[17]. The BBC also released a documentary titled *More Than DeepSeek: How “Made in China 2025” Drives China’s Rise*, praising the achievements of made-in-China products and acknowledging China’s advantages in technological innovation and institutional systems.^[11] Behind such huge differences before and after lie complex factors in many aspects such as language, politics, and economy, which are worthy of in-depth exploration.

1.2. Research objectives and significance

This study proceeds from a linguistic perspective, deeply analyzing the characteristics of the transformation in China-related reports by multiple Western media, the underlying causes, and the impacts generated, so as to reveal the internal connections between language and international public opinion, as well as political and economic factors.

This study helps to enrich and expand the theoretical framework of discourse system research in international communication, providing new ideas and methods for follow-up scholars to study the discourse strategies of Western media. By deeply understanding the characteristics and changing laws of the Western media discourse system, China can more effectively enhance its international discourse power, shape a positive, authentic, and three-dimensional international image, and occupy a more favorable position in the international public opinion field.

1.3. Research methods and innovations

This study employs the research method of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to systematically examine the differences in the construction of China’s national image by Western mainstream media before and after the Trump administration took office. As an interdisciplinary research approach, Critical Discourse Analysis can reveal the complex interactive relationships among language, power, and ideology (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 1993)^[18,19]. Drawing on Fairclough’s three-dimensional analysis model, this study conducts analyses from three dimensions: text, discourse practice, and social practice (Jingling Huang, 2024)^[9].

At the textual level, this study will focus on linguistic features such as lexical selection, transitivity, modality, and classification systems. For example, it will analyze how the media weakens the agency of the Chinese government through specific vocabulary (such as “crackdown” vs. “campaign”) or passive voice (Li Qingming, Wu Hua, 2019)^[8]. Meanwhile, combined with content analysis, it will conduct quantitative statistics on reporting themes (such as politics, economy,

diplomacy) and emotional tones (positive/neutral/negative) to enhance the objectivity of the analysis (Jingling Huang, 2024)^[9].

At the level of discursive practice, the analysis focuses on intertextuality and discourse strategies, including sources of information (specific/semi-specific/unspecified) and forms of reported speech (direct/indirect quotation) (Fairclough, 1995)^[18]. For instance, examining how Western media convey implicit stances through selective quoting of expert opinions or anonymous sources (Li Qingming & Wu Hua, 2019)^[8], or how they reinforce specific narratives using rhetorical devices such as hypophora (posing and answering questions) and parallelism (Jingling Huang & 2024)^[9].

At the level of social practice, this study integrates political and economic contexts (such as the evolution of Sino-US relations and ideological differences) to explain the deep-seated motivations for discourse production (ALIYA Aini, ZHANG Zhengkun, 2024). For example, the shift in the United States' China policy during the Trump era may have exacerbated media's hype of the "China threat theory" (Li Dan et al., 2022), while economic competition or cultural biases may also influence reporting frameworks (Van Dijk, 1993).

The research corpus consists of China-related reports from Western mainstream media such as The New York Times and The Washington Post before and after Trump's administration (2015–2025). Key texts were selected through purposive sampling, and tools like NVivo were employed for coding and thematic categorization (Wang Xiangzheng et al., 2022). Through comparative analysis, this study aims to reveal the evolutionary patterns of how Western media construct China's national image and the underlying logic of power and ideology.

2. Theoretical foundation and research tools

2.1. Related linguistic theories

Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) argues that language is not isolated but a social practice intertwined with social structures and power systems. For example, the frequent use of expressions such as "human rights issues" or "democratic deficit" may appear to address the topics of human rights and democracy, yet it constructs a negative image of China, reflecting the ideological stances and power demands of the West.

When reporting on China's technological development, for instance, some Western media fail to mention the efforts and contributions of Chinese researchers, yet claim the so-called "technology theft," which violates the Quality Maxim and thus becomes a discourse approach to construct China's negative image. Meanwhile, Multimodal Discourse Analysis focuses on the integration mechanism of language with images, sounds and other semiotic resources—in China-related news videos, some media may select specific scenes, match corresponding background music and add tendentious comments to strengthen the negative discursive construction of China.

2.2. Corpus construction

This study compiles China-related reports from major Western media outlets (CNN, BBC, The New York Times, The View) in the period before and after the Trump administration, covering the political, economic, cultural and social fields to ensure the comprehensiveness and representativeness of the research.

In the corpus selection stage, strict screening criteria were adopted: first, the information sources were verified to exclude unsubstantiated and fabricated content; second, purposive sampling was used to select materials that can reflect the dominant tendencies of Western mainstream media discourses on China. Metadata (including publication date, theme and source) were annotated for the corpus, and AntConc and WordSmith were used for corpus storage, indexing and preprocessing, so as to provide a solid foundation for the subsequent linguistic analysis and comparative research.

3. The linguistic features of China-related reports by multiple foreign media before January 2025

3.1. Vocabulary usage

3.1.1. Selective use of negatively connoted terminology

In their coverage of China-related topics, some Western media outlets frequently employ terminology with negative connotations in place of neutral or positive expressions. For instance, in reporting on Xinjiang, CNN has used the term “internment camps” instead of China’s official designation “vocational education and training centers,” thereby framing counter-terrorism and de-radicalization measures as “human rights violations.”^[20] Similarly, in covering trade relations, The New York Times has used phrases such as “unfair competition” to characterize China’s role in global trade. Such lexical choices may encourage negative interpretations of China among readers, potentially impacting its international image and foreign trade environment.

^[20]Beginning in 2016, evidence began to emerge that the Chinese government was operating a vast system of internment camps set up throughout Xinjiang, in which Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities were extrajudicially detained.

3.1.2. Emotionally charged vocabulary in reporting

Certain Western media outlets also tend to use strongly emotive language in their coverage. During the 2019 Hong Kong amendment bill protests, for example, the BBC described police actions to lawfully curb violence as a “violent crackdown,” while giving limited attention to acts of arson and assaults on civilians by some protesters. A headline from a November 2019 BBC report directly stated “Hong Kong police crackdown on protesters.” The term “crackdown” is typically associated with suppressing rebellions or terrorism, and its use here could imply excessive use of force by the police. This kind of wording may frame the enforcement of law as “suppression of freedom,” potentially provoking controversy over legally grounded measures to maintain social order.

4. Syntactic structures

4.1. Complex sentence structures to create ambiguity

In China-related coverage, some Western media outlets frequently adopt complex sentence structures (e.g., long sentences, passive voice), which may obscure the actors of actions and key factual details. For instance, in its reports on China’s COVID-19 entry policies, The New York Times used the headline “Think covid’s messed up your travel plans? Try getting into China”^[21], depicting scenarios such as “Leave your partner and children behind. Quarantine for up to a month...”. The outlet also employed elaborate expressions that frame China’s science-based COVID-19 prevention measures as inhumane in nature. The New York Times first commented on China’s COVID-19 response efforts and then raised questions about its tightened entry control measures, with such complex linguistic expressions tending to obscure the core fact that China’s policies were formulated to protect public health and safety. Such sentence structures may blur the key information of the coverage, which could lead readers to form perceptions consistent with the media’s inclined viewpoints.

4.2. Leading question structures

Western media often use narrative framing to preset positions and amplify negativity. For example, The Wall Street Journal’s report on China’s “gray-zone” actions in the South China Sea portrays China’s island construction, maritime patrols, and presence expansion as efforts that challenge the regional order and shift the balance of power.^[22] Such framing guides readers to interpret China’s lawful territorial administration and rights-defending activities as destabilizing, thereby reinforcing negative perceptions.

5. Discourse strategies

5.1. Labeling strategies

Western media often label China to create negative stereotypes. Some forces spread anti-China smears via think tanks' biased "expert views"—this is an organized and premeditated public opinion attack, aiming to mislead the international community's perception of China^[23]. Meanwhile, the historical orientalism in U.S. national discourse has long seen China as an "exotic other," with labels like "yellow peril," "red peril" and "little brother"—all discriminatory stereotypes distorting China^[24]. Repeating these labels, Western media push one-sided views to solidify negative impressions.

5.2. Source manipulation of information

In terms of sources of information, Western media manipulates and cites one-sided and unreliable sources to enhance the credibility of their reports. Some foreign media often quote comments from anti China organizations, anonymous individuals, and other sources in their reports on China. These sources often lack factual basis and their views are often driven by political purposes or biases. For example, in reports related to Xinjiang, some Western media ignore facts and maliciously spread rumors that the Chinese government is implementing "systematic human rights violations" in Xinjiang, fabricating rumors and false information about Xinjiang, attempting to mislead international public opinion, undermine Xinjiang's prosperity and stability, and contain China's development^[25].

6. Changes in the diction of china-related reports by multiple western media after trump took office

After Trump took office, the diction in China-related reports by Western media has undergone significant changes. These changes are reflected in multiple aspects such as vocabulary, syntax, and discourse strategies, and are closely related to the underlying social, political, economic, and cultural factors.

6.1. Lexical level: tendency towards objectivity and positivity

6.1.1. Increased use of neutral vocabulary

After Trump took office, many Western media increased neutral vocabulary in China-related reports. Eureporter's peacekeeping coverage used neutral terms like "lofty," "conducive to," "peaceful development"^[26] and statistics to highlight China's contributions^[27]; previously, BBC etc. used negatives like "casually," "show off"^[28], but now it runs lines like "China's peaceful development is a lofty cause in human history, conducive to global peace and progress," showing more truth. CNN's cultural reports now use "treasures," "ancient" (vs. past focus on cultural conflict ignoring Chinese culture's charm^[29]), with lines like "Few places can capture the imagination like China"^[30] for objectivity.

6.1.2. Moderate introduction of positive vocabulary

Some Western media have moderately introduced positive vocabulary in their China-related reports. When covering China's AI technological innovation achievement DeepSeek, The New York Times used words such as "advanced", "match", and "exceed", to some extent acknowledging China's progress in the tech field. For example, in a report on the development of China's 5G technology, it stated: "But DeepSeek's research results show that China has possessed advanced AI capabilities to match or even exceed the models of U.S. AI companies like OpenAI. Technical breakthroughs by U.S. firms may be easily replicated by Chinese enterprises, even completed within just a few weeks^[31]."

Similarly, in its report on DeepSeek, Opinion magazine used words like "Surprise" and "rivaliser". It noted: "Surprisingly, the latter (DeepSeek) was trained at a cost ten times lower than previously required, and the model can rival OpenAI's latest reasoning models, which can generate text, solve complex mathematical equations, and draw housing plans^[32]."

6.2. At the syntactic level

6.2.1. Increase in concise sentence patterns

Western media now uses more simple and active sentences in reports on China, boosting clarity. Take CNN's coverage of China's livelihood policies: it once used complex structures that obscured policy details and effects, but now adopts concise active sentences like "The Chinese government introduces policies to improve people's lives" for clear information delivery. When reporting on China's poverty alleviation achievements, it directly states: "Over the past 70 years, China has lifted more than 800 million people out of poverty, the greatest poverty reduction feat in the history of the People's Republic of China^[33]." This avoids past misunderstandings from complex sentences.

6.2.2. Dominance of objective declarative sentences

Western media have adopted objective declarative sentences instead of leading sentence structures when reporting on China's diplomatic activities, presenting facts truthfully. In the past, when covering China's diplomatic actions, Western media often used non-objective descriptions, such as "Soldiers casually use mobile phones, and children show off newly learned Mandarin"^[34] — this kind of phrasing presupposed the irrationality of China's diplomatic actions. Now, multiple foreign media outlets have started to objectively state China's diplomatic stance and actions^[35]. This has enhanced the objectivity and credibility of reports, enabling international audiences to understand China's diplomacy more authentically.

6.3. Discourse strategies

6.3.1. Reducing label - making and stereotype - building

Western media have cut down on labeling China, recognizing the diversity and complexity of its development; when covering China's political system, they no longer one-sidedly interpreted it with labels like "authoritarian model" but mentioned the system's positive roles in boosting economic development, protecting people's rights and interests and driving social progress. For example, during the Two Sessions of China in 2025, Momar Dieng, the director of the Senegalese News Agency, said that the Two Sessions allowed the world to see how a large country with a population of 1.4 billion achieved sustainable development through scientific planning, adding that with far-sighted leadership, Chinese leaders led the people to work for current achievements and the Two Sessions showed the transparency, efficiency of China's governance and its responsible governance system.^[36]

6.3.2. Diversification and enhancement of credibility of news sources

In China-related reports, Western media have started to cite multiple authoritative sources to enhance the credibility of reports. In the past, some foreign media overly relied on unreliable sources such as anti-China organizations and anonymous individuals. Now, they have begun to reference data from international organizations and objective analyses by experts and scholars^[37].

A decentralized approach "combined with appropriate incentives has been a powerful ingredient behind China's success in fighting poverty," said Kremer, who received the 2019 Nobel Prize in Economics, together with MIT professors Esther Duflo and Abhijit Banerjee for their "experimental approach to alleviating global poverty."

7. Linguistic factors and driving mechanisms of diction changes

7.1. Internal linguistic factors

Language Dynamism & Adaptability: Language evolves with society and communication needs. As global public opinion pursues truth and audiences want better info, Western media adjust China-report language, dropping extremes for friendlier expressions.

Linguistic Norms & Accuracy: Media must uphold norms and accuracy. Past Western media's inaccurate China-smear language became obvious; now they use accurate, objective words (e.g., precise terms for China's policies/

achievements) to keep credibility.

7.2. External driving factors

Economic Interests: Divestment pressures Western media. Objective China coverage (e.g., Bloomberg using “infrastructure cooperation” for Belt and Road) attracts Chinese audiences, cooperation and ads.

International Public Opinion Pressure: Global demand for objective journalism rises; social media debunks false reports, pushing media to adjust. But geopolitics may make them resume negative coverage.

8. Implications for china’s international communication

8.1. Language strategy references

China may draw on Western media’s post-shift precise wording to build a positive, objective international discourse system. When describing its development, policies and global cooperation, it should use proper terms (e.g., “innovation breakthroughs” for scientific strengths, “win-win cooperation” for diplomacy) for accurate information transmission, avoiding vagueness.

It should also follow international communication norms: prioritize conciseness, clarity and logic, avoid complex jargon; tailor language to audiences (Western-style for Western readers, culturally fitting for Asian/African ones). Use concise, logical language (simple SVO structures in news, structured paragraphs in policy promotion) to enhance dissemination efficiency and comprehension.

8.2. Response strategy proposals

Establish a Western media language monitoring mechanism: use big data and AI for real-time wording tracking, build a specialized platform to collect and analyze China-related reporting data, apply natural language processing to deeply analyze vocabulary, syntax and semantics, and promptly identify public opinion risks or opportunities.

Cultivate professional international communication talents with solid language foundations, in-depth knowledge of target regions’ culture/politics/society, and cross-cultural skills; improve their capabilities via training and exchanges. Actively use diverse communication channels (prioritize social media and short-video platforms alongside traditional media) with high-quality content. Strengthen cooperation with international media, voice China’s stance in international communication, and participate in formulating international communication rules.

9. Conclusion

9.1. Research findings summary

This study analyzes language shifts in Western media’s China reporting post-Trump from a linguistic perspective, identifying significant changes in vocabulary, syntax, and discourse strategies. At the lexical level, neutral terms increased and positive terms were introduced; syntactically, simple/active/objective declarative sentences rose; discursively, labeled descriptions decreased and news sources diversified. These shifts are driven by language internal dynamics, economic interests, and international public opinion changes. While short-term stability exists, long-term challenges remain from Western ideological biases and political uncertainties.

9.2. Research outlook

Future research can expand the corpus to more Western media and diverse China-related content (e.g., social media, conference statements) for full discursive trait capture. It should integrate linguistic theories (e.g., cognitive linguistics) to explore links between Western media language and global factors. Also, strengthen empirical research on China’s

communication strategies via cases/evaluations to offer targeted guidance for boosting its global communication.

Funding

Funding was provided by Tangshan Normal University's University-Level Research Project: A Multimodal Study on Pragmatic Identity Construction in Japanese Internet Slang (Project No.: 20251123088), Scientific research projects of the A Study on the Discourse Construction of Hebei Image in Western New Media Reports Based on Corpus (Grant No.: QN2025882), Hebei Provincial Sports Science and Technology Research Project: Research on the Translation of Excellent Sports Culture in Hebei Province in the Context of the "Sports Powerhouse" Strategy in the New Era (Project No.: 2025WJ02)

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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