

An Analysis of the Construction of China's National Image in Western Media During the COVID-19 Epidemic from the Perspective of Appraisal Theory

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Abstract

COVID-19 has spread around the world and media reports have become the main way for the public to get information. In the research of news discourse, scholars at home and abroad mainly tend to use stylistics, critical discourse analysis and functional discourse analysis. In addition, for the study of national image construction, most scholars prefer to analyze the different attitudes of Chinese and Western countries by comparing the different reports of the same event by Chinese and Western media. Therefore, this study will carry out a diachronic study on the appraisal resources of western media reports on China within one year since the outbreak of COVID-19 from the perspective of Appraisal Theory, so as to study its impact on the construction of China's national image.

Keywords: Appraisal theory; COVID-19; Western media; National image

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak in China and around the world in 2020 has become a public health event that must be addressed in all the countries. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) classified COVID-19 as a global pandemic. Up to now, COVID-19 has been distributed to more than 150 countries and regions around the world. In this fast developing modern society, media coverage has become the main way for the public to obtain information. The media also played a very important role during the outbreak - the public was informed of the number of infections, learned how to prevent them, and so on.

In recent years, with the overall improvement of China's comprehensive national strength, the eyes of the world have begun to focus more on China. The epidemic has also been the subject of intense coverage by the Western media. Fear is one of the main features in the Western media coverage. "According to a study by Wahl Jorgensen, a professor at the School of Journalism and Communication at Cardiff University in the UK, fear is evident in the coverage of the COVID-19. Of the 9,387 stories published in English-language newspapers during the month of January 12 to February 13, 2020, 1,066 mentioned the words 'fear', 'dread' or other similar words." (Zhang Jianzhong, 2020:17)

At the same time, discrimination and prejudice against China in some misrepresentations damaged the country's image. On January 29, the Australian Daily Telegraph headlined "Chinese children stay at home", and at the end of January the German weekly Der Spiegel ran the cover of "COVID-19 made in China". On February 3, the Wall Street Journal published an article titled "China is the Real Sick Man of Asia", which used the COVID-19 to launch a racist attack on China. It is therefore necessary to understand the construction of

China's image in the Western news media in order to be able to combat the smear campaign against China in time to undermine the political conspiracy.

2. Literature Review and Research Questions

2.1 Domestic and foreign researches on national image

The study of national image has always been a hot topic in academic circles, and there are many scholars and related works at home and abroad. Due to the different research fields of researchers, the perspectives and theories used by scholars to study national image also differ. In this paper, we will review the relevant literature both at home and abroad from the perspective of the connection between national image, economy and politics.

Firstly, in economic terms, the national image is mainly closely related to its products and brands. Schooler (1965) is considered to be a pioneer in this field of research. Based on his empirical research, he found that attitudes towards a particular country would influence its stereotypes about its products. Scholars such as Erickson (1984), Johansson (1985), Kotler and Gertner (2002), and Diamantopoulos (2009) have explored how consumers' image in a particular country affects their perceptions of that country's products and brands, arguing that national image is closely related to national brands.

Secondly, in political science, the study of national image has focused on the subfield of international relations, often considered as the concept of public diplomacy (Leonard 2002; Vickers 2004; Schatz & Levine 2010). According to Kenzhalina (2014), diplomacy aimed to enhance the country's positive international image.

In short, the study of national image originated mainly in the field of economics and later extended to the field of political science. Studies have shown that a country's national image has a significant impact on its products, brand and foreign relations.

2.2 Domestic and foreign researches on the media construction of national image

Domestic communication studies have examined the definition of the national image and how the media constructs the national image from the perspective of the media.

The first type of researches explores the question that what China's image is. Guan Wenhui (2000) analyzed the image of ancient China based on the Marxist theory of national image and praised the significant changes in China's image under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC). Liu Jinnan (2002) and Li Jing (2015) also gave a definition of Chinese image.

The second type of researches is concerned with how the media constructs China's national image. Based on a survey and analysis of the Western media's image of China, Li Xiguang (1996) published a book, *Behind China's Demonization*, which presented the demonization perspective and objectively promoted academic research on national image. Liu Jinnan, Zhou Jihua, and Duan Peng's (2002) *International Communication and National Image* analyzed the nature of the different portrayals of each other's images in the Chinese and American media, and drew a new perspective on the power of international communication.

The third type of research focuses on the suggestion of constructing China's image. Zeng Xinyi (2018) argued that the Belt and Road should be used to improve China's image, construct a positive image of China through a propaganda platform, tell a good Chinese story, and spread China's history and civilization to the world. Wang Shuaodong (2017) discussed how to use the Confucius Institute to construct China's national image. In conclusion, in the research related to the construction of national image in the news language, most scholars prefer to analyze the different attitudes between China and the West by comparing the different reports of the same event in Chinese and Western media, and propose the different means and effects of foreign media in constructing China's national image.

2.3 News discourse analysis based on evaluation theory

Evaluation theory was mainly used to assess, construct texts and manage interpersonal orientation and relationships, and was a popular method for exploring, describing and interpreting language, one of the tools for revealing the attitudes of writers and speakers (White, 1998). Evaluation theory is divided into three systems: attitude, intervention and range. Based on the systemic functional grammar of the 1990s, James Martin developed evaluation theory to discuss the interpersonal meaning of a text, mainly by analyzing its lexical features.

Iedema, Feez, and White further popularized the evaluation theory in 1994. The book *Media Literacy* classifies the main genres of news discourse and analyzes the different means by which different authors evaluate an event. In 1998 White applied the theory of evaluation to the paper "Telling Media Stories: News Stories as Rhetoric", which explained the distinctive style of news reporting. On this basis, three interpersonal models of news reporting styles were identified.

In China, research on evaluation theory dates back to 1998. Zhang Delu is credited as the first person to introduce evaluation theory to Chinese readers. Since then, Wang Zhenhua (2001) applied the attitude system of evaluation theory to analyze news about Chinese and English events, and found that the resources of judgment were richer than those of emotion and appreciation, thus concluding that Chinese and English cultures had different attitudes towards the same news. As a result of Wang Zhenhua's research, evaluation theory developed rapidly in China.

Liu Shizhu and Han Jinlong (2004) attempted to apply evaluation theory to news language, especially broadcast news, and discussed the prospect of applying evaluation theory in foreign language teaching. They also proposed a new way of reading news language - evaluative reading.

In summary, first of all, the research on the construction of national image mainly focuses on two aspects of the definition of national image and how to construct it, and suggestions are made. Secondly, the study of news articles based on evaluation theory has built a systematic theoretical framework. However, few of the above-mentioned studies have exposed national image from evaluation theory, especially the chronological study of Western media's construction of China's national image under China's COVID-19. Therefore, in this paper, the authors will study the evaluative resources in the Western media's coverage of China in the year since the outbreak of COVID-19 from the perspective of evaluation theory in order to explore its influence on the construction of China's national image.

3. Research Findings and Analysis

The researchers selected FOX NEWS as the source, the search period was from February 1 to May 31, 2020, and the search keywords were *COVID-19*, *coronavirus*, *China*, *Chinese*, and a total of 246,000 texts involving the COVID-19 outbreak were obtained. Based on the framework of evaluation theory, the researchers selected four news articles published from February 1, 2020 to March 31, 2020, and four news articles published from April 1, 2020 to May 31, 2020, for a total of eight news articles for group comparative analysis. The evaluation resources appeared a total of 5151 times, including 106 cases of attitudinal resources, 187 cases of intervening resources, and 84 cases of range resources, accounting for 2.1%, 3.6%, and 1.6% respectively. The specific characteristics of the distribution are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of evaluation resources among the eight news stories

Evaluation resources	Quantity	Proportion	Total
Attitude	106	2.1%	5151
Intervention	187	3.6%	
Range	84	1.6%	

According to the Table 1, we can see that Western media prefer to use interventions to present different points of view and less attitudes to avoid expressing their feelings about the events directly.

In order to further analyze and compare the use and distribution of evaluation resources in the eight news articles, the researcher listed the number and proportion of three types of evaluation resources in the different time periods of the news stories.

Table 2: Distribution of three types of evaluation resources in the eight news stories

		2020/2/1- 2020/3/31	Proportion	2020.4.1- 2020.5.31	Proportion	Sig.
Total words		2380		2771		
Evaluation resources	Attitude	64	2.7%	42	1.5%	0.027*
	Intervention	100	4.2%	87	3.1%	0.298
	Range	37	1.6%	43	1.6%	0.540

It can be seen from the Table 2 that the overall proportions of the three subsystems are comparable between reports at different stages. In the first stage, intervention resources were the most (4.2%), followed by attitude resources (2.7%), and finally range resources (1.6%). Similarly, in the second stage, intervention resources are also the most (3.1%), followed by range resources (1.6%), and then attitude resources (1.5%). By comparing the two different phases, we found that the news from February 1 to March 31, 2020, compared with the news from April 1 to May 31, 2020, has a lower proportion of attitude and intervention resources. This shows that the second phase of news reporting reduced the reporter’s own influence. When reporting an incident, the reporter is more inclined to describe the incident itself, instead of expressing the reporter's own opinions too much, making the report more objective. Next, the researcher will select specific examples for analysis.

Example 1: Xi [Jinping], you **can’t believe** what he says because his interests are in the Communist Party, **not** in the good of his own people or the people around the world," Sasse explained.

In Example 1, Nebraska Republican Senator Ben Sasse states that lying is a characteristic of the Chinese system and publicly states that Xi Jinping’s interests belong to the CPC, not the Chinese people or the people of the world. This implies that he believes that Xi Jinping is not dealing with the COVID-19 from the perspective of the people, but from the interests of the CPC. The “can’t believe” intervention resources used by reporters belong to the negation in the dialogue contraction resources. They are implicitly subjective terms to guide readers’ thinking and lead people to misunderstand Xi Jinping’s decision. There is also a logical fallacy here - poisoning the well.

Example 2: **While** there have been skeptics all along, China's decision to downplay its numbers **could** have **deadly** consequence for the rest of the world.

In Example 2 above, the reporter uses the word "while" to denote the range resources of concessions and objections. He enlists the support of readers with opposing viewpoints first by introducing a positive point of view and then rejecting it, thereby aligning with potential readers. The use of "could" opens up the dialogue for other voices, indicating that the journalist's position is only one of many possibilities and increasing the objectivity of the story. The use of the word "deadly" indicates the extent and amount of range resources to describe the consequences of China's lying about the number of infections. In reality, however, it has not been proven that China concealed or deliberately misrepresented its numbers during the epidemic, resulting in the spread of the epidemic around the world. The inappropriate statements by journalists can lead to misunderstandings about China and blame China for the spread of the epidemic around the world.

Example 3: We **have no reason to believe** the number of COVID-19 cases reported by China is **accurate**.

Now the health of every individual and economy around the world is threatened because of Chinese attempts to hide the truth.

In Example 3, the reporter's use of the phrase "we have no reason to believe" falls into the category of a pronouncement in an intervention resource, referring to the reporter's obvious intervention or involvement, a clearly subjective expression that emphasizes China's concealment of the truth. It also places the responsibility for the worldwide spread of the epidemic on China.

Example 4: "Spokesman speaks **stupidly** on behalf of China, trying **desperately** to deflect the pain and carnage that their country spread throughout the world," Trump wrote.

In Example 4, Trump uses "stupidly" and "desperately" as two of the attitude resources for evaluating the behavior of the Chinese spokesperson. As President of the United States, his public statements represent the voice of a nation. His use of these words is in fact a stigmatizing act that will not only lead the American public opinion, but will also worsen U.S.-China relations.

Example 5: Trump **unapologetically** uses phrase "Chinese virus" as clash escalates with China over its origins.

In Example 5 above, Trump uses the term "Chinese virus" instead of COVID-19. Although the first case of COVID-19 was found in Wuhan, China, there is no evidence that the virus originated in China. Trump's choice to still use this name is actually a racist and xenophobic attack. The journalist uses the word "unapologetically," which belongs to the attitude resources of evaluation, to evaluate Trump's attitude. The reporter also chose to use a derogatory term to describe Trump's behavior, which implies that the reporter disapproves of his actions. Trump should stop calling COVID-19 a Chinese virus and apologize for his actions.

Example 6: In a classified report sent to the White House, the officials said that China's public record of COVID-19 infections was **deliberately** deceptive and incomplete.

In Example 6 above, the journalist uses the intervention resource "said" to form a dialogue with an external authoritative voice, a dialogue extension resource. The attribution of quotations to "officials" acknowledges that quotations are only a possibility, and present a relatively neutral scenario for the reader, without any obvious position or value judgment on the part of the journalist. The word "deliberately" modifies two pejorative words, "deceptive" and "incomplete," which lead the reader to believe that the official report exacerbates the public's suspicion and distrust of China.

Example 7: **Even now**, the Chinese Communist Party **refuses** to admit **fault** and **instead** proclaims itself the model of how to contain the virus. Chinese leaders have spread **venomous propaganda** that COVID-19 originated in the U.S. – **even though** the vast majority of the evidence indicates the disease originated in a "wet market" in Wuhan.

In Example 7, the reporter states that so far, China has refused to admit that it was wrong and has also maliciously propagated that the virus originated in the United States. In this example, the reporter chose to use the negative emotional resources "venomous" and "propaganda. The word "propaganda" means "an idea or statement that may be false or exaggerated and is used to gain support for a political leader, party". So it is a derogatory term in Western media. The journalist chose two pejorative terms to describe China. First, there is no accurate evidence that the virus originated from China, nor is it proven that the spread of the virus around the world is China's fault. Second, the Chinese government has not issued an official statement that the virus originated from the United States. Therefore, this journalist is trying to smear China with his own personal opinion.

Example 8: The Chinese Communist Party's record is **clear** – it chose to sacrifice **thousands of** its own citizens and threaten the health and economy of the entire world to try and **save face**. For that, the Chinese Communist Party "**will be nailed on the pillar of shame for eternity.**"

In Example 8 above, the reporter uses irony. He began by stating that China's record is clear, but added that China chose to sacrifice thousands of its own citizens to save face, thereby threatening the health and economy of the entire world. Finally, he states that the CPC “will forever be nailed to the pillar of shame”. The entire paragraph is critical of China's behavior. But he does not directly prove that China sacrificed its people during the epidemic, and he treats China's efforts to control the epidemic as an attempt to save face. This rhetoric has reached the level of stigmatization and poisoning the well.

Example 9: Every day at White House news conferences about coronavirus, **brainless** reporters **waste** the public's time with complaints that the administration calls the Chinese “coronavirus Chinese”. On Wednesday, an ABC reporter did it.

In Example 9, the journalist uses the negative emotional resource of "brainless" to describe the journalists who "complain every day at press conferences that the government calls COVID-19 the 'Chinese virus'" and also considers it a waste of time, implying that the journalist agrees that COVID-19 is called the "Chinese virus" and does not consider it a form of racial discrimination. WHO made it clear in 2015 that geographic location could not be used to name diseases and that the name COVID-19 was internationally accepted. However, the term "Chinese virus" is still used in Western media reports, and the name has come to carry xenophobic and racist connotations.

Example 10: Meanwhile, Chinese Communist Party officials **desperate** to avoid **embarrassment** put their own citizens at risk by making **every** effort to maintain business as usual. They **duped** the World Health Organization (WHO) into **complicity**, as the WHO announced that Chinese officials found “no **clear** evidence of human-to-human transmission of the novel coronavirus,” **despite** testimony from the Chinese doctors demonstrating otherwise a month earlier.

In the above example, the journalist suggests that Chinese officials should be trying to save face by keeping business as usual, putting the Chinese people at risk, and deceiving the WHO. This is the negative judgment resource in the attitude resources used to evaluate Chinese behavior. The WHO's announcement that "Chinese officials found no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission of the virus" was also seen as complicit in China's efforts to "deceive" the world. But in fact China initially had no evidence that the virus could be spread from person to person. But when this was confirmed and the outbreak in Wuhan was realized, the government immediately ordered a complete lockdown of the city, and there was no need to keep things as they were to avoid embarrassment.

4. Conclusion

The aforementioned study found that from February 1 to May 31, 2020, the majority of Western media coverage of the outbreak in China was negative, characterized by two main aspects: (1) since the outbreak first occurred in Wuhan, China, it is believed that the virus spread out from China; (2) it is believed that China deliberately concealed the facts or misrepresented the number of infected people at the beginning of the epidemic, leading to the current situation of the epidemic spreading all over the world.

At the same time, the Western media published a large number of false reports during the outbreak. Intervention resources were the most numerous, followed by attitude resources, and the least number of range resources. The number of intervention and attitude resources experienced a downward trend, with a significant decrease in the number of attitudinal resources, indicating that Western media were more objective and impartial in their reporting.

Looking at the Western media's coverage of the epidemic in China, it is easy to see that firstly, the Western media selectively report on the epidemic and protective measures in China, violating the right to know of their

own people and causing them to underestimate the epidemic to a certain extent. Secondly, the Western media often report with a prejudiced and even discriminatory attitude, which damages China's image.

Given that the news media guide public opinion through news reports and influence people's perceptions and attitudes in a subtle way, the media's role is crucial in the process of disseminating major public emergencies. However, some Western media take advantage of the public's fear and release false information or extreme statements, which are harmful to society and require the relevant departments to strengthen management and delete the false information in a timely manner.

Therefore, the Chinese government should spread the knowledge of epidemic prevention and control to the public in a timely manner. Experts in various fields should also work with the media to help journalists filter information. At this particular time when the whole world is in a state of panic, it is all the more necessary for journalists to provide truthful and objective news reports and to transmit effective information to the world in an accurate and timely manner.

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