The Presentation and Evolution of China's National Image in Foreign Media: A Review of Relevant Literature

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Abstract: This paper systematically reviews the research on China's national image constructed by foreign media. The review finds that foreign media's construction of China's image is characterized by diversified research perspectives, complex image presentations, diverse influencing factors, and evolving research methods. The paper points out prospects for future research, such as expanding the scope of research objects, deepening cross-cultural comparative studies, and integrating new technologies and methods, aiming to provide theoretical support and practical guidance for enhancing China's international image and strengthening its international communication capabilities.

1. Research Background and Significance

Research on China's image has attracted scholars from various fields such as translation studies, linguistics, international politics, international communication, and art, yielding insightful, forward-looking, and enlightening results. Scholars recognize the significant importance of exploring national image from the perspective of news media reporting and representation. According to retrieval data from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), from the publication of the first paper on national image in 1994 to September 7, 2023, there have been 1,903 core journal articles with titles containing the keywords "China's image", "China's national image", or "China's international image". These studies indicate that the construction of China's image primarily involves four dimensions: literary works, film and television productions, textbooks, and news media. Given the immediacy, breadth, and repetitiveness of media communication, the image it constructs can continuously deepen people's understanding of a country. Therefore, this paper focuses on foreign media, systematically reviewing relevant research concerning China's national image within them.

2. Current State of Research on Foreign Media's Construction of China's Image

Based on papers retrieved from Chinese databases, among those studying national image from the perspective of media representation, except for a small portion analyzing the image of other countries in Chinese media, the majority of research focuses on China's image in foreign media, with the highest proportion concerning its image in American media. The following review of the construction

of China's image in foreign media, as found in Chinese databases, is organized according to different research methodologies.

(1) Research Based on Specific Cases

Early national image research often focused on individual issues or sudden events, such as reports on China's accession to the WTO, U.S.-China Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR), the Sino-US mid-air collision, mining accident reports, or reports on the Forbidden City theft case. The characteristics of such research are focused subjects and strong precision. Through detailed analysis of the textual content of reports, they can vividly reflect China's image in foreign media regarding specific issues or within short timeframes. The continuous accumulation of numerous events can form a multi-dimensional image of China. However, viewed individually, case studies are insufficient to provide an image of China over a period or a comprehensive image, and it is difficult to grasp the changes and trends of China's image.

(2) Research Based on Agenda-Setting Theory

Beyond initial case studies on reporting, some scholars began researching China's image from the perspective of agenda-setting in communication studies. One of the earliest representative studies, starting from the media's "agenda-setting" function, classified and quantitatively analyzed headline content, reflecting China's image in major US newspapers in the 1990s from three aspects: reporting volume, content, and trends[1]. Furthermore, Si Guo'an and Su Jinyuan categorized 338 China-related reports from *The New York Times*. They found that for issues not involving US interests, *The New York Times* was basically able to report objectively; whereas for issues involving US interests, the newspaper's reporting often proceeded from its own fundamental interests[2].

(3) Research Based on Framing Theory

The subtlety of framing lies in its ability to covertly construct reality, impose interpretations, and influence audience reactions and public opinion after an event enters the public agenda. Huang Min's study on reports regarding the RMB exchange rate issue in the U.S.' *The New York Times* found that the newspaper not only politicized this economic issue but also imbued it with strong moral implications, shaping a selfish and despicable image of China. Another representative study is by He Xiangyu and Xu Xin, who selected China-related reports from *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* over the two years 2020-2021 as their research object[3]. Using news framing theory, they conducted statistical analysis on the themes, quantity, sources, genres, main events, and context of the reports. Through content analysis and discourse analysis, they found that in the post-pandemic era, the newspaper presented China's image as that of a responsible major power, a cooperative and mutually supportive partner, and a respectable neighbor responding calmly in the face of natural disasters.

(4) Research Based on Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) examines the ideological meanings behind linguistic structures by analyzing the linguistic features of discourse and the socio-historical context in which they are produced, thereby revealing the complex relationships between language, power, and ideology. Its purpose is to uncover the hidden ideological meanings within discourse, especially those taken-for-granted biases, discrimination, and distortions of facts, and to explain their social conditions and role in power struggles. The following analyzes from different angles.

From the Perspective of Intertextuality

Drawing on Norman Fairclough's CDA framework, Zhong Xin studied British newspapers during the 2012 London Olympics and found that intertextuality in the discourse successfully constructed a multi-dimensional negative image of China[4]. Later, Zhong Xin, also from the perspective of intertextuality, analyzed the image of China in the discourse of UK-China trade reports in *The Times* from 2001 to 2010[5]. The research showed that *The Times* explicitly categorized China as the Oriental "Other" within the neoliberal economic model—requiring help, transformation, or even replacement by the West. Pan Yanyan and Dong Dian, starting from the perspective of intertextuality

in CDA and Appraisal Theory, analyzed the image of China in US media reports on China-Russia joint military exercises[6]. They found that US mainstream media constructed China's image by using vocabulary with negative appraisal meanings and emotions, and skillfully employing direct quotes, indirect quotes, or marked indirect citations, thereby positioning China as a country that does not follow the rules.

From the Perspective of Metaphorical Framing

Liang Jingyu and Li Dejun analyzed the image of China in social and legal reports of *The Economist*[7]. Using framing theory, they conducted an in-depth analysis of the metaphorical framing in the discourse. They found that on the surface level, the use of various metaphorical frames reflected different emphases; on the deep level, foreign media's evaluations of China's marriage and birth policies, aging issues, and urbanization process constructed a negative image of China. Zhao Yonghua and Lu Junyu, from the perspective of metaphor, analyzed the image of China constructed in *The New York Times*' COVID-19 related reports concerning China[8]. They found that the newspaper primarily used three frames—war metaphor, drama metaphor, and competition metaphor—to construct a national image of China "boasting about anti-epidemic victory," "fabricating anti-epidemic propaganda scripts," and "competing for world leadership."

From the Perspective of Multimodal Metaphor

Zhao Xiufeng and Zhang Hui[9], and Zhao Xiufeng and Feng Dezheng[10] studied the image of China in *The Economist* cartoons from the perspective of multimodal metaphor. They found that the main source domains projected onto the target domain of China in *The Economist* were the dragon, panda, Great Wall, etc., used to construct an image of China as fearsome, closed, and hypocritical. The choice of source domains can be traced back to traditional Western stereotypes about China, tinged with backwardness, stubbornness, and peculiarity.

(5) Research Based on Corpus Methods

Some scholars have introduced corpus methods to explore the image of China constructed by foreign media. Liang Jingyu, from the perspective of CDA, used corpus methods to count the frequency of metaphors in 124 reports from the China column of *The Economist* in 2016[11]. It was found that *The Economist* used metaphorical framing of ironic and negative appraisal to talk down the Chinese economy. Wang Hui and Xin Bin, also combining corpus methods with CDA, analyzed the image of China in reports related to "the US withdrawal from the TPP" from the perspective of metaphor[12]. The analysis showed that US media used metaphors to construct images of China such as "America's enemy" and "a supporting role intending to seize America's leading role." Liu Wenyu and Mao Weiwei used a combination of corpus and CDA to study the image of China in print media from 16 African countries[13]. They found that African media constructed a diverse Chinese national image, both positive and negative, manifested as a "strong China," "a China as friend or partner," and "a worrying China."

(6) Studies Based on Images in Newspapers and Periodicals

In addition to analyzing news discourses, some scholars have also conducted analyses on images in newspapers and periodicals. By examining more than 50 years of covers of *Time* magazine, Du Rui found that *Time* has been caught in a recurring struggle over "whether China is a friend or an enemy"[14]. In this oscillation, the China image it constructs is based on the starting point of "whether China meets the cultural expectations of Europe and the United States". Cai Fuyao analyzed 50 covers of the German weekly *Der Spiegel* from 1949 to 2013 that involved Chinese symbols[15]. Statistics showed that the most frequently used symbolic signs in *Der Spiegel* are the dragon, the Chinese national flag, terracotta warriors, and tanks. Among the 50 sample covers, the Five-Star Red Flag (five-pointed star) appeared seven times, mostly as a background symbol, which is a highly iconic sign. Furthermore, Jia Wenjian's research also discussed the covers of *Der Spiegel*, depicting an image of China where intellectual property rights have not been protected, whether in the era of

Confucius or the era of Mao Zedong[16].

By analyzing the content of 53 China-themed covers of *The Economist* (Asia-Pacific Edition) from 2007 to 2016, He Jing found that in the process of shaping China's image, *The Economist* has not only endowed China-themed covers with communicative and semiotic significance but also, to a certain extent, made them a tool for expressing political stances[17].

3. Research Conclusions and Prospects

Based on the above review, the construction of China's image in foreign media presents the following characteristics: First, the research perspectives are diversified. Scholars have approached the subject from multiple angles, including case studies, agenda-setting, frame theory, critical discourse analysis, corpus methods, and image analysis, providing multi-dimensional interpretations for understanding China's image in foreign media. Second, China's image is complex. It includes both negative images such as "threat" and "rule-breaker", and positive images such as "economic power" and "responsible major country", reflecting the complexity and dynamics of foreign media's cognition of China. Third, the influencing factors are diverse. The construction of China's image in foreign media is affected by multiple factors, including national interests, ideological differences, geopolitical relations, cultural traditions, and stereotypes. Fourth, research methods are constantly evolving. From simple case descriptions and narratives in the early stage to the integration of quantitative analysis, qualitative analysis, corpus tools, and other methods later, research methods have become increasingly mature and scientific, enhancing the depth and breadth of the research.

Although current research on the construction of China's image in foreign media has achieved rich results, there is still room for further expansion: To begin with, the scope of research objects needs to be expanded. Existing studies focus more on media in Western developed countries, while paying relatively less attention to media in other regions (such as more countries in Africa, Latin America, and Eastern European countries). Secondly, cross-cultural comparative research can be deepened. Media from different cultural backgrounds differ in constructing China's image. In the future, cross-cultural comparative research can be strengthened to analyze the mechanism of cultural factors in image construction, providing more targeted strategies for China's international communication. Thirdly, new technologies and methods can be integrated. With the development of technologies such as artificial intelligence and big data, more advanced text analysis tools and models, such as machine learning algorithms, can be introduced to conduct more efficient and accurate analysis of massive media data and explore potential laws of image construction. Through continuous and in-depth research, we can better understand the logic of foreign media's construction of China's image, providing theoretical support and practical guidance for enhancing China's international image and strengthening its international communication capabilities.

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