

Self-Shaping and External Shaping Image of the Luban Workshop: A Discourse Analysis of English Media

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Abstract: China has built the world's largest vocational education system and is dedicated to world vocational education through diversified foreign educational programs, among which the Luban Workshop is the best-known brand. This paper uses discourse analysis from the perspective of English media communication to examine the self-shaping and external shaping images of the Luban Workshop. By analyzing reports from Chinese official media, it is found that the Luban Workshop is portrayed as advanced, practical, efficient, mutually beneficial, respectful, and promoting employment and people's livelihood. Analysis of foreign media reports shows a more complicated image, including positive aspects such as technological empowerment, friendly cooperation as well as a negative "strategic tool" image shaped by Western media. In response to the challenges of image shaping, this paper proposes suggestions in terms of optimizing narratives, broadening sources, and responding accurately, aiming to enhance the international discourse power and image of Chinese vocational education.

1. Introduction

China has established the world's largest vocational education system[1]. "A development path and model for vocational education with Chinese characteristics has essentially taken shape, leading to historic and structural changes in China's vocational education landscape"[2]. Through concrete actions, China is "contributing Chinese wisdom and solutions to global vocational education development"[2]and "its shaping influence on the evolution of world vocational education has strengthened." [2]

Higher education institutions are actively participating in the global governance of vocational education, laying a solid practical foundation for promoting China's vocational education experience and enhancing its international influence. China's vocational education sector has established stable connections with over 70 countries and international organizations. A number of internationally recognized vocational education brands, such as the Luban Workshop, Silk Road College, Zheng He College, and Bi Sheng Workshop, have gained greater prominence. The talent training standards and professional development quality of China's vocational education have received widespread recognition. Furthermore, China is intensifying efforts to promote integrity and innovation in international discourse dissemination, strengthening its capacity for international communication, and striving to establish international discourse power commensurate with its comprehensive national

strength and international status. Among this, the shaping of the image of China is an essential part of international discourse power strengthening and, furthermore, the image of China's vocational education is an integral and indispensable part of China's image.

2. Study method

This study introduces the self-shaping and external-shaping images of the Luban Workshop from the perspective of English-language media communication using discourse analysis.

Discourse analysis is commonly used in social science research. "From discursive psychology to critical discourse analysis (CDA), approaches to DA all mobilize analytical strategies and techniques to understand how discourse—defined here expansively as language in context—produces social configurations and contributes to the (re) production of social and political orders." [3] In that sense, "DA aims to identify linguistic mechanisms and processes in the socio-political context in which discourses are produced and/or received to understand their role and potential effects." [3]

The approach involves collecting discourses on the Luban Workshop from Chinese official media such as Xinhua News Agency to analyze the self-construction. At the same time, based on reports on the Luban Workshop from foreign media databases of NOW (News of the World), it analyzes the image of the Luban Workshop from the perspective of external representation, thereby examining the challenges and suggestions for enhancing international image construction.

3. Analysis and Results

3.1 Self-Shaping Image of the Luban Workshop by Official English-Language Media in China

Through searching for "Luban Workshop" on Xinhua News Agency, 23 related reports were found, mainly portraying China as a responsible major power that is flourishing domestically and actively contributing globally.

3.1.1 Image of an Advanced, Practical, and Efficient Enabler

Official reports make strong efforts to depict the technology carried by Chinese vocational education as advanced and practical, directly empowering partner countries.

It (The Indonesian Luban Workshop Intelligent Manufacturing Center) has two functional zones, Electrical Assembly and Smart Production Line, designed to support talent development in Indonesia's electrical and automation industries. (2025-3-1)

"The (Egypt) workshop uses specifically designed equipment to provide trainees with the necessary skills to operate, maintain, and troubleshoot equipment and systems," said Adel al-Sabbagh, a professor with the Faculty of Engineering and supervisor of the Luban Workshop at the ASU. (2024-5-30)

These descriptions use technical terms such as "intelligent" and "advanced" and are specific down to "functional areas" and "operation and maintenance" details, constructing a discourse system that is precise, reliable, and efficient. The implicit message is that the Luban Workshop provides not empty theory, but "hardcore" solutions that can directly enhance local industrial modernization. By emphasizing the advanced nature of the equipment and technology, China is portrayed as an enabler capable of providing skills meeting the urgent needs of partner countries for rapid industrialization and technological upgrading.

3.1.2 Image of a Mutually Beneficial, Respectful Partner

The reports deliberately downplay one-way aid, instead highlighting "cooperation"

"collaboration" and "adaptation" shaping an image of a partner that respects local needs and seeks mutual development. For example:

"The establishment of this center reflects our proactive efforts to align with Indonesia's industrial development needs. Through this initiative, we aim to advance China-Indonesia cooperation in vocational education and promote mutually beneficial industry-academia partnerships," Chen said. (2025-3-1)

(Madagascar) the curriculum is designed with 25 percent theory and 75 percent hands-on practice, making graduates highly adaptable to industry needs.(2025-7-30)

Phrases such as "align with needs" and "initiative" construct a partner-centered narrative. This indicates that China's actions are not a unilateral output but are based on precise insights and responses to needs. Positioning the training model as "highly adaptable to industry needs" cleverly links the value of the Luban Workshop with the local development goals of partner countries. This discourse strategy aims to dispel possible doubts about "technical colonization" or "cultural export" by portraying the Luban Workshop as a neutral and friendly development tool serving local agendas.

3.1.3 Promoting Employment and the Image of Livelihood Contributors Who 'Teach People to Fish'

Reports repeatedly emphasize the direct effect of the Luban Workshop in improving students' employability, linking its achievements to specific changes in individual lives and the enhancement of national human resources.

"Luban Workshop graduates are highly sought after in the local job market. Even second- and third-year students are already receiving job offers," said Edmond Randriamora, head of the Electrical Engineering Department and a teacher at the workshop.(2025-7-30)

"We don't give them fish, we teach them how to fish," said Li Yunmei, president of Tianjin Light Industry Vocational Technical College. "We assist the Egyptian side in training highly competent and skilled teachers so that they can nurture more talents to contribute to the country's economic development," she explained. (2024-5-30)

Terms like "highly sought after" and "job offers" directly relate to the audience's primary concern about personal livelihood, using tangible economic benefits to demonstrate the program's success. The metaphor of "teaching them how to fish" conveys a universally understandable value in a cross-cultural context, portraying China's vocational education as selfless and wise. The underlying message is that China aims to impart sustainable self-development skills rather than create dependency. By illustrating the causal chain from "individual skill enhancement" to "national human resource strengthening", the image of Chinese vocational education is ultimately anchored as a positive force promoting global shared development and improving people's livelihoods.

3.2 The External Shaping Image of the Luban Workshop by Foreign Media

Searching for "Luban Workshop" in the foreign media database NOW. Up to October 15th in 2025, the frequency of "Luban Workshop" comes in 181. A total of 49 reports from 15 countries and regions were obtained by searching the full text of the reports, of which 9 were clearly cited by Xinhua News Agency, 2 articles in China Daily, 4 from CGTN, 3 from Chinese journalists, four articles were those duplicate reports and irrelevant reports. Thus,the remaining 27 articles are used as the main research object to construct the foreign media report of the Luban Workshop.

3.2.1 Technology Empowerment and Benchmark in Vocational Education

The Luban Workshop is widely described as China's flagship project in vocational education cooperation, aiming to enhance the professional skills of the local workforce through skills training.

Numerous reports, especially those from media in Pakistan, Kenya and Ethiopia, emphasize that the Luban Workshop focuses on areas such as agricultural mechanization, industrial automation, and digital technologies, cultivating highly skilled talent for regions in Africa and Southeast Asia. For instance, Pakistani media reported that it promoted mechanized maize harvesting technology:

The training program centred around the theme of "Application and Promotion of Maize Harvesting Mechanization Technology," aims to enhance the construction of an international industry-academia-research-application platform for agricultural machinery training. (pakistantoday.com.pk 2023-6-16)

While the workshop in Ethiopia is dedicated to advanced skills training in industrial sensor technology, mechatronics technology, industrial control technology and industrial robotics technology:

"It will make our graduates familiar with the 21st century skills and knowledge. It will also be used as a training and research hub for industry practitioners to cope up with the very changing industrial requirements," the ETU President said.

The facility, equipped with world-class technologies in the AI sector, is expected to boost Ethiopia's industrial development aspiration that would see it becoming the manufacturing hub of Africa by 2025. (capitalfm.co.ke 2021-4-29)

These reports generally believe that the Luban Workshop, through pragmatic and "small but beautiful" cooperation, helps fill local technical talent gaps and drives industrial upgrading.

3.2.2 "Soft Power" and a Bridge for Friendly Cooperation

Foreign media view the Luban Workshop as an important tool for China to expand its international influence and cultural exchange. Some reports point out that the workshop not only imparts technical skills but also promotes understanding of Chinese technology and methods through the dissemination of language and culture.

Cooperation in cultural and educational exchange programs like the Confucius Institute and Luban Workshop will further deepen the ties between the nations, ensuring they not only collaborate on a governmental level but foster people-to-people connections. Multilateralism and the pursuit of common interests of developing countries were reaffirmed as their shared goal in international settings.(capitalfm.co.ke,2023-10-20)

Kenya deems the Luban Workshop as cultural and educational exchange programs along with the Confucius Institute and emphasizes it as people-to-people communication.

He Pakistani Luban Workshop project selected and cultivated high-quality licorice, comfrey and cistanche, which are of high quality and have high yields in Multan.....Dr. Liang Yu, pharmacology professor at Tsinghua University and one of the mentors of the project, emphasized that the cultivation of traditional Chinese herbs abroad is crucial for the global expansion of TCM. (dailytimes.com.pk,2024-6-8)

The Luban Workshop's promotion of traditional Chinese medicine in Pakistan inevitably involves cultural dissemination and exchange, forming an important part of the projection of soft power.

3.2.3 The image of a "strategic tool" and "instrument of ideological expansion"

The image of a "strategic tool" is a core negative image that The Washington Post intends to construct and emphasize, which is also the focal point of its reporting. The reports explicitly define the Luban Workshop as "an arm of diplomacy" and "a new offensive", portraying it as a piece in China's systematic construction of a "China-led international new order" globally, especially along the "Belt and Road". It is no longer just vocational education but part of a national strategy to "enhance international production capacity cooperation". Besides, the Luban Workshop is also

depicted as a platform for exporting ideology and models. The reports directly point out that the Luban Workshop aims to "position China as an alternative force and model to the U.S.". This implies that vocational education is tasked with exporting the "China mode" showcasing China's technological and management prowess to justify the superiority of its political system and development path. Furthermore, the Luban Workshop is vilified as a "Trojan horse" for public opinion contests and shaping pro-China narratives: The sharpest accusation is that the Luban Workshop, by "accumulating goodwill", more effectively serves China's "ideological goals". The report cites Ethiopia and South Africa's "gratitude" toward China and their "disdain" for the West as evidence, suggesting that the successful operation of the Luban Workshop leads these countries to align with China on sensitive issues such as Xinjiang and the pandemic, thus achieving "political influence through economic means".

Australia also attends the camp to satirize the Luban Workshop to be the tool to "improve foreign public sentiment toward China" and "gain influence in the Pacific". Another report in Australia revealed Australia's vigilance toward the Luban Workshop, mainly due to concerns that China's technology and training for Indonesia could create dependency, and that this role should instead be taken over by Australia and the other Quad countries, exposing Australia's distortion regarding China's global technological expansion.

4. Challenges and Suggestions

Based on the national development strategy and the concept of international cooperation, China's official media focuses on the technical practicality, mutual benefit of cooperation and people's livelihood value of the workshop, aiming to convey the image of China as a responsible power and promote the "Belt and Road" cooperation consensus. Among foreign media, those in developing countries start from their own development needs and focus on the actual skills improvement and industrial upgrading dividends brought by workshops; while some Western media, influenced by geopolitical games, ideologically transform normal vocational education cooperation and misinterpret China's intentions to develop foreign cooperation with "zero-sum thinking". This difference not only reflects the different perceptions of development opportunities in different countries, but also highlights the collision of multiple discourse systems in the international public opinion field, suggesting that China needs to further strengthen storytelling in its external communication and enhance the international community's rational understanding of cooperation projects.

4.1 Challenges of Shaping the Image of Vocational Education in China

On the internal shaping level, the Luban Workshop itself has shortcomings in brand positioning, operational management, and narrative strategy, which internally constrain the enhancement of its international image. The brand narrative and value communication need to be further deepened, and the storytelling approach is relatively traditional: the current content sometimes appears somewhat formulaic, and there is insufficient exploration of stories that can evoke emotional resonance, such as skill development, personal growth, and improvements in people's livelihoods, making the brand image less vivid and approachable. Cultural integration and two-way communication need to be strengthened. While the Luban Workshop emphasizes the export of Chinese vocational education standards and models, how to better incorporate local cultural elements to achieve genuine "two-way communication" rather than "one-way output" is an important issue it faces in the field of humanities. This relates to whether it can overcome cultural barriers and achieve deep mutual understanding.

On the external shaping level, challenges mainly stem from the complexity of the international public opinion environment and the difficulties the Luban Workshop encounters in adapting to local

needs. The complexity of the international public opinion environment brings challenges of one-sided interpretations: some Western media, when reporting on the Luban Workshop, offer partial interpretations, possibly focusing only on its intention of cultural "export" while relatively neglecting its positive roles in improving local labor skills, promoting economic development, and enhancing people's livelihoods. This can easily arouse doubts about the Luban Workshop's motives in the international public opinion sphere. There is also the risk of geopolitical politicization. Besides, the "over-politicized" narrative framework casts a shadow over the Luban Workshop's global acceptance.

4.2 Suggestions for Shaping the Image of Vocational Education in China

4.2.1 Optimizing Communication Narratives: From "Technology Export" to "Growing Together"

Currently, official media narratives emphasize "mutual benefit and win-win", but terms like "advanced technology" and "intelligent systems" are still easily interpreted as one-way technology transfer. It is recommended to adjust the narrative framework as follows: First, emphasize "co-research and co-creation". Official media not only showcase the technologies and equipment provided by China, but also highlight the process of jointly developing courses with local educational institutions and enterprises, tailored to local industry needs. For example, more coverage could be given to cases where Chinese and foreign teachers work together on lesson planning and adapt teaching plans based on local realities. Second, tell "Human Stories". Official media should reduce descriptions of macro-level achievements and increase in-depth reporting on specific participants such as local students, graduates, and partner school teachers. Through their real-life stories of skill enhancement, career development, and improved livelihoods, the concept of "teaching a man to fish" can be vividly illustrated, enhancing the emotional resonance and credibility of the reports. Third, connect to global common issues. Official media should link the achievements of the Luban Workshop more closely with the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, such as quality education, decent work and economic growth, industrial innovation, to enhance the legitimacy and value of the project within internationally recognized discourse systems.

4.2.2 Broadening Information Sources: Building a Diversified International Communication Presence

Over-reliance on official sources can limit communication effectiveness. Efforts should be made to proactively construct a communication network that includes multiple stakeholders. First, empowering "third-party" advocates. China actively invites government officials, university leaders, business employers, renowned scholars, and outstanding graduates from partner countries to provide evaluations. These localized, non-official voices are more persuasive and can effectively neutralize the "propaganda" perception. For example, media systematically collects and shares affirmations from partner university presidents about the project's suitability, or employers' "praise for graduates" abilities. Second, encouraging independent dissemination by teachers and students. The Luban workshop supports and guides Chinese teachers teaching at the Luban Workshops and local students learning there to share snapshots of learning, work, and life through personal social media accounts to create a bottom-up, more authentic and multidimensional communication matrix. Third, conducting joint research and international exchanges. China government releases evaluation reports on the effectiveness of the Luban Workshops jointly with well-known foreign research institutions or media, or host international vocational education forums, placing the Luban Workshops on a global open dialogue platform for vocational education cooperation, enhancing its academic and professional reputation.

4.2.3 Precise Response and Agenda Setting: Actively Addressing Negative Framing

For foreign media skepticism and negative framing, flexible and precise response strategies are required. When facing accusations of being a "strategic tool", the Luban Workshop avoids falling into the trap of geopolitical debates. Responses should always focus on the professionalism of vocational education and contributions to local livelihoods, using concrete data and examples, emphasizing the project's "educational" and "developmental" attributes over its "political" ones. China regularly releases operational data of the Luban Workshops, such as criteria for program offerings, graduate employment rates and salaries, and local procurement ratios in cooperative projects, addressing suspicions of "strategic intent" with an open and transparent approach. An annual "Luban Workshop Social Responsibility Report" can be produced and published. Besides, China makes differentiated regional communication strategies. In developing countries, the Luban Workshop focus on communicating the image of promoting employment, empowering local communities, and technical adaptation. In developed countries and countries with concerns about China, the communication focus can shift towards global skills development, youth innovation capability cultivation, and solutions for common challenges, downplaying geopolitical competition implications, and emphasizing its constructive role in the global vocational education network.

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