

The construction of the Chinese image from the perspective of others in the post-truth era——A Frame and Semiotic analysis of BBC’ s reports of the Beijing Winter Olympics

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Abstract. News reports are significant for constructing a country’s image in the international community. The frame analysis of Western media coverage of China is quite popular. With the arrival of the Beijing Winter Olympics, which stands as another historical moment in the processing of China’s external image, disputed issues in China have surfaced again in the Western media. In the context of the new media, there still exists a research gap on the new characteristics of Western media when reporting China and the resulting recent changes in China’s image. To fill this gap in the literature, based on the semiotic theory and framing theory, this dissertation has selected the 16 reports and their corresponding Twitter comments on the Beijing Winter Olympics which were published by the British news agency BBC in January - February 2022. By utilizing the AntConc to establish corpus and text analysis, it shall investigate from the perspective of others the discourse construction characteristics of Western media and the Chinese image from the three components of communication theme, text content, and audience feedback. The research results have presented that the Western media represented by the BBC cannot eliminate ideological stereotypes in the discourse construction of the "other" (China). The intention of the report is tendentious. Its reporting news frame is based on inherent prejudice and the opinion tendency to incite Public Opinion. Thus, it has resulted in the formation of a Chinese image of “high-pressure coercion” and “ignoring human rights” from the perspective of the other. Therefore, this dissertation adopts China as an example to propose the media cross-cultural international communication strategy of expanding the discourse subject, updating the symbol system and absorbing the folk discourse.

Keywords: Western Media; Beijing Winter Olympics; Chinese Image; Discourse Construction; Framing; Semiotic Theory

1. Introduction

On February 4, 2022, the Tokyo Olympic Games commenced in Beijing, China. Unlike the Summer Olympics held here 14 years ago, China has undergone tremendous changes since 2008. It has reached a new historical height in political, economic, cultural soft power and other aspects. Hence, the Western media have all turned their attention to China. However, due to the shackles and contradictions in ideology and national interests, the biases of Western media in reporting China have not been dispelled. Thus, its reporting and interpretation of China are still following its initial inherent discourse construction and news frame. Therefore, from the perspective of others, China’s international image has been misunderstood, affecting China’s international public opinion environment for an extended period. In the field of international public opinion, the western media has always been at the center of discourse, and the flow of information in international communication has not changed fundamentally. Hence, by taking advantage of this exceptional edge, the western media has radiated their information and values to the world, forming a vast field of public Opinion. Especially in the context of the changing world landscape and the rapid development of new media, the Western media’s discursive construction of China has taken on new characteristics and has had a sustained and profound impact on the cognition and attitudes of audiences around the world and on China’s international image.

The monopoly of information channels will inevitably produce discourse hegemony. Hence, the resulting thinking patterns and stereotypes formed by Western media will not change shortly. In contrast, Chinese media has noticeable lag and disadvantages in communication skills and discourse

systems. It is challenging for a single discourse subject to eliminate the dilemma of communication barriers. Hence, there is an urgent need to broaden the communication channels.

In this world-renowned Olympic event, The BBC, Reuters, and other Western media have conducted tons of reports on the Beijing Winter Olympics. It is common to use framing theory to analyze the influence of news reports on the national image. But studies using semiotics to study the construction of China's national image by Western media reports are in the gap. Researches based on the new media context are even scarcer. Therefore, this article adopts the western mainstream media as its entry point, with the BBC news report and its corresponding Twitter comments on the Beijing Winter Olympics in January-February 2022 as the basis. This dissertation extracts the discourse construction characteristics of western mainstream media in reporting and interpreting China from the academic perspective of semiotics and frame theory. It aims to assist China in obtaining a more comprehensive understanding of the current situation and the international public opinion environment, explore the new paths for the news media to bring out the Chinese stories in the post-truth era, and enhance the ability and vitality of discourse construction. Hence, it will be able to demonstrate a real China to the world.

2. Literature Review

The academic research on the national image has predominantly focused on sociology, political science, cross-cultural research, communication, and linguistics. In communication, its research is usually based on the frame analysis of news reports among different ideological countries. For example, a few studies involve the frame analysis of the news on the Olympic Games reported by other countries' media (M. Tarantino, Stefania Carini, 2010). For instance, some studies zero in on the effects of media frame on a specific Olympics (Kim et al., 2015, Lee, 2019; Xu et al., 2017), and some studies investigate how media frame the audience's perceptions of a specific Olympic Games (English & Murray, 2021, Gutierrez & Bettine, 2020, Kastrinos et al., 2018) ^[1]. Other studies focus on interpreting how news reports' frames affect national image (A. Tsygankov, 2017, Tingting Yang, 2020, Nadezhda Ozornina, Alexander Mannin, 2020). In the past decade, concerning the cross vision of linguistics and communication, and through the construction of corpus, the domestic research results of critical discourse analysis of news report in specific media that utilizes the framing theory are relatively wealthy (Jingxun Liu, 2020, Litao Ni, Lu Liu 2022).

In general, most research compared and analyzed the news frame used in reporting in various countries. With the rapid development of the Internet and globalization, new features have been presented on the new media platform in constructing national images. As a result, China's international image has also undergone new development and changes. However, the current research lacks the impact of the news frame in the context of new media on the construction of the national image, especially on the recent changes produced by China's international image in the high-profile international event of the Olympic Games. Methodologically, most of the research is limited to frame theory, and there is a gap in the research that comprehensively discusses Western reports from a perspective of semiotics theory. Therefore, based on the semiotics and framing theory, this dissertation analyzed the new characteristics of western media reports under the background of the new media era and proposed communication strategies to convey Chinese stories to China better.

3. Methodology

3.1 Framing theory

American sociologist Goffman proposed the frame theory in his book titled "Frame Analysis: Experience Organization", published in 1974, where it had answered how to construct a social reality successfully. This theory had originated from the pragmatic philosophers' interrogation of "reality", which was reflected in the influence of personal feelings on the real world. The book defines framing theory as "the psychological base model for diagnosing the outside world" ^[2]. The frame constructs

the social reality through reproduction, and the public can understand and interpret the information content conveyed by external events through the frame. However, in terms of its negative impact, it may cause the public to produce inherent stereotypes and prejudice. Thus, the frame had limited the activities of a subjective understanding of the world and negatively affected cognition of objective reality.

The frame theory has been widely utilized in news media reports. The news reports “box up” part of the facts through framing, “select” part of the facts and subjectively present these social realities. Therefore, in the construction of social reality, both sides of the impartment party shall utilize the subjective interpretation base model to emphasize or ignore a part of the fact. It demonstrates that media agencies make a conscious selection of what to publish. By sifting information, media agencies shape the audience’s perceptions^[3]. At the same time, the audience will be able to subjectively interpret the news reports based on the news frame to form feedback for the news media.

3.2 The Theory of Semiotics

In addition to introducing the framing theory perspective of social psychology into the study of news reporting, in the late 1980s, Van Dijk introduced Saussure's semiotic theory to the field of journalism. Symbols are the combination of signifier and signified, while the symbol of meaning is the third indispensable element in symbol formation^[4]. The meaning refers to an intermediary term in which the signifier connects with the signified and establishes its significance. It has no specific form of existence in the symbol system. However, it exists in realizing communication activities, mutual understanding between communicators and recipients, and the non-linguistic psychological field^[5]. In journalism, the meaning conceals itself in the news discourse. The news discourse is the symbolic expression of romantic ideas presented by news events. The direct connection between signifier and signified has constituted the symbolic meaning of news discourse. Combined with the specific context, it presents the "hidden" ideology behind the symbolic meaning in the news discourse, "metaphor" a particular ideology and transmitting a specific intrinsic meaning.

3.3 Research design

This dissertation adopted purposive sampling and utilized the BBC report on the Beijing Winter Olympic Games as the research object based on semiotic theory and framing theory. By utilizing the textual analysis method, it chose the “Beijing Olympics” and “Winter Olympics” as the keywords. Subsequently, 16 regular reports related to Athlete Awards, epidemic prevention and control, and other topics during the Beijing Winter Olympic Games from January to February 21, 2022, were selected as the source of its target corpus. Utilizing the AntConc corpus statistical tool and taking the “American English 2006: Press Reportage” provided by AntConc as the reference corpus would summarize the very word root and count the top 100 high-frequency content words. At the same time, 2-3 reports under the same topic were selected to horizontally compare the frequency of high-frequency notional words in different news reports and the vibrant colour of their metaphors.

Additionally, the crawler technology was utilized to capture the comments under the corresponding reports released by the BBC on the Twitter platform. A total of 329 valid samples were obtained, and the high-frequency notional words in the comments were extracted for analysis. This dissertation analyzed the discourse construction characteristics of the western media when they reported on China during the Winter Olympics from the aspects of social issues intention, text content presentation, reporting perspective and public Opinion to explore a new path to spread favourable Chinese discourse effectively.

Table 1. Top ten high-frequency notional words

	Type	Freq-Tar	Keyness (Likelihood)	Keyness (Effect)
1	covid	44	180.312	0.007
2	rights	33	65.715	0.005
3	Xinjiang	31	127.011	0.005
4	Uyghur	20	49.151	0.002
5	skiing	19	77.831	0.003
6	boycott(s)	19	53.247	0.002
7	abuse	18	57.336	0.003
8	ceremony	17	62.188	0.003
9	spectators	16	58.208	0.002
10	Organizers	14	57.344	0.002

4. Result and discussion

4.1 Theme selection of social issues

The intention is embodied in the ideological connotation contained in the news report and reflects the certain reporting tendency and attitude of the disseminator. There can be various perspectives about the same news event, reflecting the ideological field's differences. The following 16 news reports of the BBC involving the Beijing Winter Olympics from January to February 2022 are divided into six categories, namely the ethnic religion, introduction, venue site, democracy and human rights, epidemic prevention and control, and athlete introduction. Four of them are themed on the Winter Olympics and directly address China's issues of ethnic and religious freedom, democracy and human rights. The AntConc corpus analysis tool summarized the high-frequency notional words that appeared in 16 news reports. Then, the words that could not display the tendency of news reports, such as "China," "Beijing," "Olympic," "Sport," and "Winter," were removed, and we discovered that the words (human) rights appeared 33 times, Xinjiang 31 times, Uyghur 20 times, Boycott 19 times and Alleged ten times. Under the central theme of the Winter Olympics coverage, many political words refer to the Western media's consideration of "Chinese Democracy" around the Winter Olympics. In terms of the choice of reports, some reports of BBC and other Western media are often not limited to discussing matters but also integrating social issues with specific political colour into news reports. For instance, the report "Beijing 2022 vs 2008: Two Olympics and two very different Chinas", on the surface, has compared China in 2022 with China 14 years ago during the Winter Olympics. However, the whole article is not based on the new changes in the Winter Olympics and China's development in the past 14 years. Instead, it has compared the alteration of the government's official behaviour around political issues such as Chinese people's freedom of speech and human rights. It often alludes to China in the eyes of western media through the mouth of "Chinese citizens" from a macro narrative and a micro perspective. In the report made by the BBC, the expressions "rights," "abuse," "crackdown," "accused," and "propaganda" has appeared repeatedly in the context of communist governance and official conduct of government. It has subtly placed the government and the Chinese people on the opposite side as a linguistic symbol. It views the "other" (China) as a country with autocratic power, maintaining rule by high-pressure means and restricting human rights and freedom. These words have formed the symbol of China's negative image in the minds of the international public, and China has naturally become an adverse factor in undermining the international order from the eyes of others.

"Winter Olympics 2022: Beijing reports spike in new virus cases" and "Beijing Olympics: Winter Games start amid Covid and boycotts" are news reports on the epidemic prevention and control in Beijing, the host city of the Winter Olympics. However, they have reflected an entirely different

intentional choice. The former has reported Beijing's new cases and epidemic prevention requirements more objectively and neutral. At the same time, the latter focuses on the fact that the government's epidemic prevention policy has limited the freedom of people to watch the Olympics on site. Additionally, it has also significantly covered the political disputes of the Beijing Winter Olympic Games and the human rights issues in Xinjiang. The term "Officials" has displayed different reporting tendencies in the context of two epidemic reports. In the first report, the word "official" has demonstrated that the government's behaviour is more objective and neutral, while in "Beijing Olympics: Winter Games start amid Covid and boycotts," the context formed by the combination of "officials" and "stop any spread" or "warned athletes must..." implies on the mandatory behaviour of the government and creates an atmosphere of "autocracy" in China.

4.2 Text Presentation under the Framing Theory

The BBC's coverage of China's Winter Olympics mainly demonstrates the interpretation frame and questioning frame adopted by the western media in the news reporting. For example, on January 19, 2022, in a BBC report titled "Winter Olympics 2022: China sells Xinjiang as a winter sports hub", the whole article has 1,079 words, of which 45% of the text is focused on the so-called "forced labour" in Xinjiang that is unrelated to the Winter Olympics itself. Through a large number of facts enumeration and hypertext links, "Who are the Uyghurs?", "Uighur camp detainees allege systematic rape", they are citing the contents of the report extensively to conduct an in-depth analysis of the events. However, the extended reading of hyperlinks leads the audience to views such as "China lacks human rights in China", and sensitive political words such as Xinjiang, Uygur, and human rights have repeatedly appeared in many of its reports to divert the attention of the international audience from the Winter Olympics itself such that they can doubt that the Chinese official is attempting to "shift the focus of conflict" with the Winter Olympics and construct the negative image of the government as a "closed dictatorship" and "ignoring human rights". Hence, they have attempted to place the government against its people, demonstrating that the people are under the "powerful oppression" of the government. The superficial meaning of this interpretation frame is the interpretation of the event. Still, the real purpose is to confirm the legitimacy of the inherent prejudice against China in the western eyes through the "confirmatory" language structure to condemn China's behaviour and even the government. Such implicit condemnation will impact the audience according to their intention.

French scholar, Michel Foucault's theory of discourse right holds that discourse is right, and all truth is only the truth within a specific frame, structure and system. The construction of the discourse expresses the so-called truth, but the truth is just the truth of discourse. For a long time, the Western discourse has held the initiative in the international community. Under the hegemony of the discourse, does the Western media allow China to refute it? In the BBC report titled "Winter Olympics: Games officially underway after the opening ceremony in Beijing", released on January 14, 2022, We can see that on the controversial issues faced by China, the doubts of the west account for 76% of the text, while China's refutation of this account for only 24%, and it often appears in a single expression, lacks strong evidence support for China, and China is unable to argue under the discourse hegemony. Coincidentally, in the report "Beijing2022: human rights and athletic activists", 76.8% of the text questioned China's human rights violations with the help of several famous western sports athletes, and China's refutation only accounted for 24.2%.

Moreover, China seems to have no say in most western media reports. Western media has consciously chosen the content they wish to report. Under such reporting frame, the western media has presented a one-sided reality. The possibility of falsifying reporting increases significantly, and the truth seems to be less critical and confusing. If a stubborn frame is inconsistent with the facts, people will abandon the facts and retain the frame (Goffman,1974, Tuchman,1978, Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). This means that they turn a blind eye to those facts to hide and distort essential truths ^[6]. The profound value of this frame has reflected the identity construction of western media to other countries in the world, reflected the contradictions between the "I" groups in different political

concepts and opposite China as "others", and reflected the inherent prejudice and stereotype of western media on the image construction of others under the influence of ideology.

4.3 Public Opinion in the Post-Truth

With the rapid development of social media, mainstream media has moved into social platforms. Twitter has attracted BBC and other Western media to enter Twitter with its enormous pool of users and graphic functions to post and forward news reports. The BBC has posted some reports of the Beijing Winter Olympics on Twitter, and the audience's comments are intriguing.

Due to Beijing's local climate and weather conditions, there is not enough natural snow for events such as alpine skiing. Hence more artificial snow is needed. However, in the three reports made by the BBC, "fake snow" is often utilized instead of "artificial snow." "fake" has derogatory meanings, such as counterfeiting and forgery. The extensive usage of it in the report will gradually form a negative language symbol in the audience's minds. It has aimed to depict the international image of China as a weak ice and snow foundation. According to the Twitter comments of the BBC Beijing Winter Olympics, the term "fake" has appeared nine times, among which its collocation with "Snow" has appeared twice. Hence, the media intends to guide the public's opinion tendency deliberately.

In addition, the media's extensive use of harmful and intense emotional expressions in handling reports will affect public Opinion views on things to a greater extent and are more likely to receive the audience's attention. The audience's interest has often been utilized as an entry point for BBC criticism. In the report titled "How will the Beijing Games be remembered?", "The Chinese government" and "The Communist Party" often appear in the context of "strict control and autocracy". The article utilized solid emotional words such as "human rights, abuses, lamenting, disruption, controversy, allegations, crackdown, bizarre, nationalist and orchestrated", which, to some extent, are disgusted by the readers to report the China Winter Olympic Games. It seems to be attempting to remind the audience that China is always a "communist country". As of May 5, the highest number of comments in the BBC Winter Olympics report reached was 281. This conflicting and antagonistic report has aroused the reading interest of the audience. To a certain extent, public Opinion in the post-truth trend can also aggravate the tendency of Western media in topic intention and the incitement of reporting. Thus, it will promote them to continue utilizing their original reporting frame and news discourse. Under the tendentious reports of the media, it incited the "mob". Hence, there are several negative words such as "scandal (7), propaganda (3), cheating (2), genocide (2), fraud (2), boycotted (2), failed (2), disappointed (2), authoritarian (2)" that appeared in the audience's Twitter comments. These negative words have severely influenced China's international image in the international public opinion.

5. Conclusion

Through the thorough analysis of the 16 BBC news reports that involved the Beijing Winter Olympics, the result indicates that the western media represented by the BBC could not eliminate the stereotype of ideology in the discourse construction of the "other" (China). Its theme reports possessed the intentions of tendentiousness, and its content had utilized the frame with inherent bias. It also possessed the opinion tendency of inciting the public opinion feedback and various other negative characteristics. Therefore, it had resulted in the constructed image of China from the perspective of the other to present a false image that was misunderstood by the international community, such as "dictatorship, high-pressure coercion, lack of freedom of speech and neglecting of human rights". On the one hand, the differences in ideology and values had determined the Western media's political bias when reporting on China. On the other hand, the long-term inherent frame and Chinese stereotypes prejudice of the international media led by the United States was deeply rooted. Therefore, in searching for a discourse breakthrough, China must present a favourable Chinese story by expanding the discourse subject, updating the symbol system, and absorbing folk discourse. Subsequently, through the observation and review of the "mirror image of the other", China needed

to obtain a new vision outside the “self” and convey to the world a spectacular Chinese image of the dual unity of the “other” and “self”. Specifically, China can expand its communication path in the following three ways.

5.1 Collaborative construction of multiple matrices to expand the perspective of the discourse subject

In exploring the path of presenting China stories and establishing an excellent image of China, the news media have to utilize new media to broaden the identity of discourse communicators, form multiple mouthpieces, establish a discourse communication matrix, and let the world hear the diversified voices. During the Beijing Winter Olympics, athletes from all over the world utilized TikTok, Twitter and other new media platforms to share what they experienced and witnessed in China. This has expanded the communication channels. Thus, it has enabled more people to understand a comprehensive and stereoscopic China from the social media platforms through their own eyes.

5.2 The advancement with times of the symbol system and enhancement of the ability to dispel doubts

Symbols consist of linguistic and non-linguistic symbols. Linguistic symbols comprise both text and language. In terms of language symbols, new techniques such as hyperlinks can present the context of news events to provide more evidence for opinions. The non-linguistic symbol is mainly manifested in the spread of visual symbols and auditory communication symbols. The visual symbol is a crucial carrier of discourse construction. It weakens the "propaganda" colour of a single text manuscript with an intuitive and visual presentation. It also deepens people's recognition and understanding of the meaning conveyed by symbols through metaphorical means such as comparison and association. In this Winter Olympics, “Bing Dwendwen” and “Xue Rongrong” has incorporated more modern and international elements based on traditional elements of “Panda” and “lantern”, which formed the unique and abundant Chinese language and visual symbols that had won the continuous attention of the audience around the world. Although there are significant differences between China and the West in the ideological field, this does not mean that there is nothing in common between them. China needs to continuously expand and update the symbol system to keep pace with the advancement of times. China also needs to swiftly discover the greatest common divisor between "the self" and "others" and utilize symbols, metaphors and various other means to seek more value recognition to establish a unified international image of duality.

5.3 Multi-absorption of folk discourse, getting rid of the shackles of western media

In the path of international communication, the media reports have to be expressed more authentically, absorb the discourse expression skills of countries all over the world, pay attention to the folk discourse on social networks, reduce the reporting style of stereotyped preaching, vividly spread accurate and objective news to the international community, and enhance the ability of external communication. Concurrently, it is necessary for us to swiftly withdraw from the frame of the western media, identify a new path for the Chinese media to master the discourse power and improve the long-term biased reports and stereotypes of the western media on China. As such, we will be able to let the whole world hear China's voice.

In today's diversified world, the Olympic Games and sports should not become the focus of contention among countries in the ideological field. However, they should become an intermediary for promoting development and peace and building global dialogue, just like how ping-pong diplomacy had promoted worldwide peace and stability. In particular, as the mouthpiece of all countries, the national news media should actively strive to get rid of misunderstanding, weaken ideological prejudice and conflict, promote friendly exchanges among countries worldwide, and successfully establish a global equal dialogue pattern.

6. Limitations

However, the current application of framing perspective in media and communication studies suffers from the shortcomings of notable individualists and voluntarists^[7]. In addition to the possible limitations of the frame analysis of news reports, the sample size of available BBC coverage of the Beijing Winter Olympics is relatively tiny. The finding reflects the discourse construction features of the Western mainstream media BBC towards China in a certain period, whereas the perspective is only based on the Chinese side. Further research can be elaborated more from the perspective of pluralism and openness, which can better analyze the national image from the perspective of others from a more neutral international perspective.

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