

A Study on China's National Image Shaped by The Washington Post

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Abstract: As an important source of information on China, The Washington Post plays a critical role in shaping China's national image in the United States and the world. This paper aims to investigate the image of China's national image shaped by the news reports in The Washington Post in recent years, and conducts a critical discourse analysis. This paper proposes a "cross-cultural" dialogue strategy to strengthen dialogue and exchanges between China and the United States, and provide feasible suggestions for shaping China's national image.

Keywords: Washington Post; China's National Image; Critical Discourse Analysis

Fund Project:

China's national image shaped by foreign media's China-related epidemic reports - taking the Washington Post under Biden as an example

Project Number: USYQNZX21-28

Project Category: 2021 Special Training and Research Project for Young Teachers in University of Sanya

Introduction

From the perspective of international communication, "the national image is the image formed by a country in the international news flow, or the image presented by a country in the news speech reports of other countries' news media."^[1] The Washington Post is a prominent newspaper in the United States that has a significant impact on public opinion. Media coverage has a significant impact on shaping national image and public opinion, and plays a crucial role in public diplomacy. The news report is an essential aspect of media coverage, reflecting the cultural identity and values of a country and influencing how other countries perceive it. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate the image of China's national image shaped by the news about China in The Washington Post and analyze its impact on China.

1. Theoretical Background

Critical Discourse Analysis emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, focusing on specific social issues and viewing discourse as an integral part of social practice. "Critical Discourse Analysis aims to reveal the relationship between language, power, and ideology."^[2] Critical Discourse Analysis emphasizes the importance of analyzing language in its social context. This means examining the historical, cultural, and institutional factors that shape the use of language and how it is received by different groups of people.

Norman Fairclough combines a variety of linguistics, semiotics, and sociological theories, including systemic functional grammars, to propose a Three-Dimensional Framework. "The first dimension is text analysis, which analyzes the linguistic characteristics of specific discourse instances, including analyzing vocabulary, semantics, grammar, etc. in the text; the second dimension is discourse practice analysis, which interprets and analyzes the generation of text discourse. It serves as a bridge between text analysis and sociocultural practice analysis, and studies what objective conditions and historical backgrounds the objects of discourse are produced; the third dimension is sociocultural practice analysis, which is based on power and ideological theory."^[3]

2. Case Analysis and Discussion

“International news collected by foreign correspondents of mainstream media actually has many similarities with domestic news. They are in line with mainstream values and deep-rooted cultural traditions of the United States.”^[4] In terms of reporting on Chinese society, The Washington Post, like any other news outlet, take a variety of approaches depending on the specific topic being covered and the perspectives of the journalists involved. On the discourse practice level, among the the reports about China in The Washington Post in 2022, 69% of the news contains political content, 14% of the news reproduces news facts from the Associated Press and editorial board, 71% of the opinion pieces were published by reporters and staff writers, and 15% was reported by anonymous sources.

The Washington Post has reported on various aspects of Chinese culture over the years. The newspaper’s coverage of Chinese culture is diverse, covering topics such as literature, art, music, film, and cuisine. Here are some examples of The Washington Post’s reporting on Chinese culture. On the text analysis level, The Washington Post reports on social and cultural trends within Chinese society, such as changing attitudes towards marriage and family, evolving fashion and beauty standards, and popular music and entertainment trends. The Washington Post highlights human interest stories that provide a glimpse into everyday life in China, such as stories of individuals who have overcome adversity or unique cultural practices that are not widely known outside of China. It also reports on political and economic issues that affect Chinese society, such as government policies that impact social welfare programs, economic growth or access to education and healthcare. The Washington Post also conducts investigative reporting on issues such as human rights and environmental protection within Chinese society.

In a 2018 article titled “What to see and do in Beijing, China’s cultural capital,” The Washington Post highlighted some of the top cultural attractions in Beijing, such as the Forbidden City, the Temple of Heaven, and the Beijing Opera. In a 2019 article titled “How China is using soft power to change the world,” The Washington Post reported on China’s efforts to promote its culture and values abroad, including through initiatives such as the Confucius Institute and the Belt and Road Initiative. In a 2021 article titled “China’s digital yuan tests consumer appetite for state-backed crypto,” The Washington Post reported on China’s efforts to develop a digital currency and its potential impact on the country’s financial system.

The Washington Post has reported on Chinese pandas in various ways over the years. Generally, their coverage of Chinese pandas has been positive and has emphasized their cultural significance and cuteness. Here are some examples of The Washington Post’s reports. In a 2016 article titled “China’s new panda cubs are freaking adorable,” The Washington Post reported on the birth of twin panda cubs at the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding. The article included photos and videos of the cubs and described their significance as a symbol of China’s soft power.

In a 2019 article titled “China welcomes two new panda cubs at a breeding center,” The Washington Post reported on the birth of two panda cubs at the China Conservation and Research Center for the Giant Panda in Sichuan province. The article described the importance of the birth for China’s efforts to conserve the endangered species.

Overall, Sociocultural context analysis emphasizes exploring the dialectical relationship between discourse and society through the above-mentioned analysis of text level and discourse practice. The Washington Post’s coverage of Chinese culture is nuanced and diverse, and tends to emphasize the significance of cultural exchange and cooperation between China and the United States. It’s reporting on Chinese pandas has tended to emphasize their cultural significance and cuteness, and has generally been positive. However, the newspaper also reports on negative aspects, which can contribute to a more complex and balanced view of China’s culture and society.

3. Shaping China’s image and seeking “cross-cultural” dialogue

“The return of media discourse communication to the essence of dialogue is also the objective needs and realistic demands of media communication’s own development. Whether it is the general trend of world development or the logic of individual existence, dialogue is the ultimate goal”.^[5] Only by seeking “cross-cultural” dialogue in news communication and telling Chinese stories well can we shape China’s image well. China shapes its national image through its state-controlled media outlets. Here are some ways that China uses media to shape its national image.

3.1 Strengthen the economic dialogue and tell China’s economic stories

Our foreign publicity media should tell China’s economic stories objectively and comprehensively to foreign audiences. Neither should we only report how fast the economic recovery is, nor should we deliberately magnify the difficulties we faces during its economic recovery. Chinese media outlets should highlight the country’s economic, technological, and cultural achievements to promote a positive image of China as a rising global power.

Chinese media must tell the economic stories objectively and impartially in a way that Western readers can understand and are accustomed to, so as to win their respect. For example, when we report on the steady recovery of China's economy, we must also report on our efforts to achieve this goal, as well as the hardships of ordinary people from a micro perspective. Chinese media should also report that, as the world's second largest economy, China's economic recovery brings not a threat to the world, but an active commitment to the responsibility of an economic power. Chinese media should report on the country's social progress, such as improvements in public health, education, and poverty alleviation. This promotes a positive image of China as a country that cares for its people and is working to improve their lives. Chinese media outlets should actively promote positive news, such as stories of innovation, social progress, and environmental sustainability. This helps to shape a positive image of China in the minds of its citizens and the international community.

3.2 Build an equal discourse system and tell Chinese cultural stories

Chinese media emphasizes the country's commitment to peace and cooperation, particularly in international relations. It often portrays China as a responsible and reliable global partner. Chinese media highlights the country's rich cultural heritage, such as traditional art forms, music, and cuisine. This promotes a positive image of China as a country with a long and rich history.

China should engage in equal dialogue with the United States, show the international community China's traditional "harmony culture", take the initiative to show the world the story of international cooperation, and demonstrate the Chinese spirit of unity as one and the concept of a community with a shared future for human health. The works of Chinese-American literary writers reduce the hegemonic discourse with American prejudice with the help of text discourse. Overseas Chinese and students are closer to the center of public opinion, and they should strengthen their cultural confidence and resonate with China's official media. Domestic media should make full use of all kinds of social platforms, including publicity films and short videos with English and other relevant foreign language subtitles, and make use of media platforms frequently used by Western media audiences to convey Chinese culture in a way popular with Western people. "Overseas social media platforms should encourage the creation of diversified video types. On the one hand, various functions of video platforms should be constantly improved to make the shooting and editing of videos more convenient and diversified. On the other hand, we should start from the content itself and dig deep into the excellent traditional Chinese culture, so as to create a profound and meaningful national image of China."^[6] These are important forces in shaping the national image.

Conclusion

Based on Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional framework for critical discourse analysis, this paper analyzes news reports about China on Washington Post in recent years. The Washington Post's news on China plays a critical role in shaping China's national image in the United States and the world. The news reports present a diversified and complex image of China, highlighting the significance of cultural exchange and cooperation between China and the United States. China needs to seek "cross-cultural" dialogue, and tell Chinese stories well to the international community, which is essential for shaping China's national image.

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