

A Diachronic Study of the Image of Rural China in American Mainstream Media

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Abstract

Rural revitalization is an important strategy for promoting China's modernization process and is key to the country's future development. As a significant part of national image, understanding how Western media shapes the image of rural China is crucial for addressing Western media's misunderstandings and for objectively promoting rural China. This paper combines corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis to explore and analyze the construction and diachronic changes of the image of rural China in *The New York Times*. It categorizes the coverage of rural China from 1980 to 2024 into three phases and establishes three corpora. Through a diachronic analysis of the keywords, collocations and concordance lines, the study finds that *The New York Times* focuses on issues such as disease, women's status, backward economic conditions, etc., thereby constructing an image of rural areas as impoverished, underdeveloped, and fraught with problems. This image has remained consistent across the three historical phases without significant changes.

Keywords

Rural China, *The New York Times*, Image, Change

1. Introduction

Since the reform and opening up, China has undergone the largest-scale urbanization in the world and has achieved remarkable results and caught the world's attention. The country has placed significant emphasis on rural development, particularly since the 21st century. In 2006, the "Opinions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on Promoting the Construction of a New Socialist Countryside" was issued, which emphasized the importance of building a new socialist countryside as a major historical task in China's modernization process. In 2017, the "Rural Revitalization" strategy was

elevated to a national strategy, becoming the foundation of governance with issues related to agriculture, rural areas, and farmers being prioritized. With the changes in China's urban-rural structure since the reform and opening up, Chinese rural areas have undergone tremendous transformations. As the forefront of significant contemporary changes in China and a key area for exploring future development, the countryside is an essential component of national image construction. Rural revitalization is the essence of the Chinese path, rich with storytelling elements, and serves as a powerful source for narrating China's story to the outside world (Zhao, 2016). Understanding how Western media constructs the image of rural China is significant for mastering discourse power, addressing Western media's misinterpretations, and reconstructing and disseminating an objective and true image of rural China. This study explores the image of rural China constructed in reports by *The New York Times* from 1980 to 2024 and investigates the reasons behind this constructed image, and it aims to address the following three questions: 1) What kind of image of rural China is depicted in reports on rural China in *The New York Times* from 1980 to 2024? 2) Has this image undergone diachronic changes? 3) What are the reasons behind the portrayal and diachronic changes of the image of rural China in *The New York Times*?

2. Literature Review

In the context of rural revitalization, many domestic scholars have conducted research on rural imagery, primarily from the perspective of communication studies, focusing on the image of rural areas presented in short videos (such as Douyin and Kuaishou) (Luan & Su, 2019; Chen & Zhang, 2022). Some scholars have examined the image of rural areas in films and television works (Yan et al., 2023). Others have focused on the rural image in literary works from theoretical perspectives. For instance, Lei (2023) examined rural novels in the 1980s, and Zhang (2022) explored various images of socialist new farmers created in contemporary literature, responding to the "Rural Revitalization Strategy." Additionally, some scholars have examined the image of rural tourism destinations in emerging text media, such as Sina microblog, using content analysis and co-occurrence network methods (Guo et al., 2015). There are also some research on the image of rural China in news media. Zhan and Li (2024) employ content analysis to investigate relevant reports on Chinese villages in *SixthTone* from 2016 to 2023. By measuring formal characteristics and content features of the reports, it summarizes the frameworks and presentation strategies constructed by these reports. Lu et al. (2024) take 506 reports on Chinese rural areas from overseas English newspapers between 1982 and 2023 as the research object and describes the attention of overseas English newspapers to Chinese rural issues through content analysis. Zhu et al. (2024) select reports on the rural revitalization strategy from *China Daily* to construct a basic corpus and explore the construction methods and discourse strategies of China's rural image in the new era in external propaganda news from the perspective of news discourse analysis and the theory of harmonious discourse analysis. From the previous studies, we find that

there are limitations that can be improved in the future study of rural the image of rural China. firstly, most studies focus on the image of rural China presented in different forms of videos instead of newspaper discourses which still needs more attention. Secondly, those studies on rural China in newspaper mainly selected the domestic news media as the research object. Few studies chose the reports on western English newspaper. Thirdly, almost none of the precious research combines the corpus method and critical discourse analysis to study the western media discourse. Therefore, this paper tries to use corpus linguistics and critical discourse to analyze the image of rural China in one of the most important western news media, *The New York Times*.

3. Theoretical Foundation

This study combines Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with corpus-based methods to explore and analyze the construction and diachronic changes of the image of rural China in *The New York Times*. CDA primarily focuses on the ideological effects of discourse, aiming to reveal the relationships among discourse, power, and ideology (Fairclough, 2003). It is a research paradigm that integrates discourse analysis and social critique theory (Miao, 2016: p. 4), scientifically analyzing the used discourse to explore the mutual influence between ideology and discourse (Ding & Liao, 2001: p. 305). The theoretical foundation of CDA is rooted in Michel Foucault's discourse theory (Xin, 2005: p. 7). Fairclough (2003) begins his discussion with the term "discourse" and proposes a three-dimensional discourse model, outlining three dimensions of discourse analysis: text analysis, discourse practice, and social practice. This includes the description of linguistic features, the explanation of the production, distribution, and consumption of discourse, and the interpretation and evaluation of social meaning and value (Zhang & Zhang, 2022: p. 3). However, traditional CDA often limits its scope to individual texts and primarily employs qualitative research methods, which are prone to the inherent biases of the analysts (Widdowson, 2000). The rapid advancement of computer technology has led to the emergence of corpus linguistics, opening new avenues for discourse analysis. Corpus-based CDA research has begun to thrive which allows for in-depth extraction of text information while imposing constraints on our subjective cognitive biases, making the analysis more objective (Stubbs, 1996; Baker, 2006). The main methods of corpus discourse analysis include keyword analysis, collocation analysis, cluster analysis, and concordance analysis, providing quantitative empirical support for qualitative discourse analysis (Xin et al., 2021). This study constructs a corpus of "Reports on Rural China in *The New York Times*" and analyzes the image of rural China constructed by the American mainstream media and its underlying reasons.

4. Research Design

4.1. Research Corpus

This study retrieves relevant reports from *The New York Times* using the Lexis

Nexis news database. The search terms include “Chinese countryside” or “rural China” with the search period set from January 1, 1980, to June 30, 2024. A total of 511 reports were retrieved. After manually reviewing the content of these reports to remove duplicates and those that, despite containing keywords related to rural China, are not primarily about rural China, a total of 148 highly relevant reports were selected. Based on these texts, we established the “Corpus of Reports on Rural China in *The New York Times*.” To investigate the diachronic changes in the image of rural China, the corpus was further divided into three sub-corpora according to historical timelines: A (1980-2005), B (2006-2016), and C (2017-2024). Sub-corpus A includes 87 reports, B includes 33 reports, and C includes 28 reports. These periods correspond to significant milestones in the history of rural construction reforms in China. The period from 1978 to 2005 marks the era of rural reform, starting with internal reforms and opening up. The period from 2006 to 2016 marks the era of building a new socialist countryside. The period from 2017 to 2024 corresponds to the era of the rural revitalization strategy, which was proposed by President Xi Jinping in the report of the 19th National Congress in 2017.

4.2. Research Procedures

Firstly, we analyzed the semantic keywords in the three sub-corpora to reveal the main topics and their changes in the reports on rural China in *The New York Times*. Secondly, we used keywords from the three corpora as search terms to analyze their collocations in context. Thirdly, we extracted concordance lines of significant keywords from news reports for in-depth analysis, exploring how *The New York Times* constructs the image of rural China and its perception of the Chinese countryside. Fourthly, we analyzed the reasons why *The New York Times* constructs such an image of rural China in social context. During the analysis process, we primarily used AntConc 4.0 software to search for keywords, collocations, and concordance lines, using the BNC (British National Corpus) as the reference corpus.

5. Results and Analysis

5.1. Keyword Analysis

Keyword analysis is a quantitative research method that involves statistical analysis in comparison with a reference corpus, and the keyword frequencies are obtained through statistical measures like log-likelihood or chi-square (this study uses log-likelihood). Keywords have significant importance in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as they provide an entry point for CDA. Only through correct, effective, and in-depth interpretation of keywords can the essence of discourse be revealed beyond linguistic phenomena. This study uses the BNC as the reference corpus and AntConc to conduct keyword statistics on the three sub-corpora, listing the top 70 keywords by keyness and categorizing them (see

Table 1-3).**Table 1.** Keywords in corpus A (1980-2005).

classification of keywords	Keywords
people	Chinese, peasants, farmer, family, villagers, people, officials, authorities, <i>Hong, Deng, Mao, Zhu, Zhang, Zhao, hu, chen, Li, liu, they, baby</i> , she, Ms., her, women, females, wife, daughter, daughters
disease	AIDS, blood, HIV, virus, sars
rural description	rural, local, production, poor, revolution, grain, wheat, farming, food, crackdown, agricultural, small, township, land, rice, cultural, birth
location	village, province, countryside, land, areas, Beijing, Peking, Henan, Shanghai, factory, Sichuan, provincial, Guangdong, Japan
verb	said, infected, sold

Based on Corpus A, it can be seen that the majority of the keywords are nouns (57), followed by adjectives (6), and the fewest are verbs (4). Among the nouns, the most common are those related to people (28), including 10 specific names, with 8 related to women. The verb “said” ranks fifth in keyness (175.02) with a frequency of 637 occurrences. This indicates that during this period, the reports on rural China were mostly narrative in style, telling stories of specific individuals in specific locations, with extensive use of direct or indirect quotations. The high proportion of female-related terms among the people-related keywords suggests that *The New York Times* paid particular attention to the stories of rural women in China. Keywords related to diseases also accounted for a significant portion, such as AIDS, which mainly reported on the high incidence of AIDS in rural China and the poor sanitary conditions. SARS is another major keyword, focusing on the origin and rural transmission of the disease. The verb “infected” further illustrates the high concern for diseases in rural China. The verb “sold” is closely related to the sale of blood in rural areas, indicating that selling blood was considered an important route of AIDS transmission, also reflecting the poverty and backwardness of these regions, where selling blood was a means of subsistence. Part of “sold” and the nouns “baby” involve the trafficking of rural children and women, reflecting the tragic lifestyle in rural China as well. Descriptions of the countryside involve grains like wheat, rice, and their yields. Most of the adjectives describing the countryside are linked to poverty, with “poor” ranking 37th in keyness, appearing 99 times. A few articles relate to rural culture. Keywords related to locations include many specific cities, provinces, or countries, mostly describing the more backward rural areas of some provinces or the contrast between rural and urban areas.

Table 2. Keywords in corpus B (2005-2016).

classification of keywords	Keywords
people	villagers, farmers, police, residents, son, party, communist, people, family, peasants, authorities, daughter, they, parents, migrant, deng, Ms., officials, huang, yang, tang, bride, su, Vietnamese, wife, lin
rural description	land, urban, yuan, local, old, plant, cultural, news, blind, tea, custom
location	China, village, province, Wukan, Beijing, cities, factory, scene, areas, Huizhou, Shanghai, Zhejiang, Dongzhou
verb	say, said, protest, protests, raped, stolen, visit

Corpus B, keywords related to people, such as “villager,” “farmer,” and “peasants,” have the highest keyness and frequency. The high proportion of specific names indicates a strong narrative nature of the texts, using storytelling to evoke emotions. The keywords related to women have decreased compared to Corpus A, mainly including “wife,” “daughter,” and “Ms.” The keyword “migrant” has newly appeared, indicating that during this period, *The New York Times* focused on the state of urbanization in China and the lives of migrants in cities. Unlike Corpus A, some politically related keywords appear among the people, such as “police,” “communist,” and “authority.” Additionally, the verbs “protest (s)” appear, indicating that the US media is particularly concerned about protests in rural China. The verb “raped” also appears, mainly reporting incidents of sexual assault against women, while “stolen” reports on cases of child abduction and trafficking. “Say” and “said” continue to indicate that most reports remain narrative, involving direct and indirect quotes. In the descriptions of the countryside, keywords related to diseases are almost absent, suggesting that AIDS and SARS are no longer focal points of the reports. Instead, land, planting, culture, and customs become the focus of the reporting.

Table 3. Keywords in corpus C (2017-2024).

classification of keywords	Keywords
people	her, she, ms, farmer, mr. son, wang, lu, xi, residents, li, liu, family, gao, tang, Dr. migrant, yang, zhang, communist, parent, villagers, farmer, officials, Mao, husband, jinping, miao, zhou
disease	blood, virus, covid, aids, pandemic, coronavirus, viruses, sars
rural description	poverty, statue, salt, bats, sodium, online, land, animals, yoga, farming, boom, foam, production, tech, delivery, bag, income, chicken, sun, extreme, creature, outbreak

Continued

location	China, village, countryside, Nanchang, Beijing, Shanghai
verb	infected, boom, went

Compared to Corpus A, the keywords have not changed significantly, despite the thirty-year span between Corpus A and Corpus C. In **Table 3**, Corpus C again shows a considerable number of disease-related keywords, with AIDS remaining a major focus, and the stories being largely similar. Moreover, due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, keywords related to the coronavirus and the pandemic appear at a very high frequency. Despite the passage of over a decade since SARS, it reappears as a keyword in Corpus C, with a frequency of 13 occurrences, comparable to the coronavirus. Similar to Corpus A, the verb “infected” is also a keyword in Corpus C, indicating the close connection of disease topics with rural China.

Among the keywords related to people, specific names still dominate, and the reports remain narrative, focusing on stories. The names of leaders appear more frequently. In the primary descriptions of the countryside, “poverty” continues to be a main theme, with the word “poverty” ranking 15th in keyness, with a keyness score of 69.557. “Income” is also closely linked to “poverty,” emphasizing the low income in rural areas. Keywords related to agriculture and livestock, such as “farming,” “production,” “chicken,” and “animals,” are also prominent in the descriptions of rural areas.

Keywords related to locations include both rural and urban areas, such as “Beijing” and “Shanghai,” aiming to highlight the contrast between cities and countryside. Of course, there are some noticeable changes in the keywords of Corpus C. Words like “boom,” “tech,” and “delivery” appear, linking rural China with prosperity, technology, and logistics, showing a depiction of rural modernization. However, overall, the perception of rural China reflected in the keywords of Corpus C has not changed much, despite the significant changes that have occurred in rural China over the past thirty years.

5.2. Collocation Analysis

Collocation strength can be measured using various methods; this paper employs mutual information (MI) for measurement. MI reflects the degree of attraction between the node word and its collocates. The higher the MI value, the stronger the collocation strength between the two words. [Hunston \(2002: p. 71\)](#) suggested that collocates with an MI value greater than 3 can be considered strong collocates. In this study, the node words are “rural,” “countryside,” “farmer,” and “peasant,” with a span of 5 words. **Table 4** lists the collocates with an MI value greater than 3 in the three sub-corpora.

From Corpus A in **Table 4**, it can be seen that “rural,” “farmer,” and “peasant” each have “poor” as the collocate, indicating that the primary image of the

countryside depicted by *The New York Times* between 1980 and 2004 was one of poverty. The collocates “women” and “family” with “rural” reflect its attention to the status of rural women and family life. The collocation of “million” with “peasant” illustrates the large number of rural people.

Table 4. Strong collocates in the three corpora.

corpora	node words	collocates
corpus A	rural	China, women, families, poor
	countryside	staggering, Chinese
	farmer	poor, township
	peasant	poor, million
corpus B	rural	China, area
	countryside	Chinese, incomes
	farmer	land, acre, protest
corpus C	peasant	enage
	rural	areas, China, villages, AIDS, spread, communities, regions, development
	countryside	flourishes, penetrating, wanes
	farmer	poor, firms, freed, land
	peasant	earn, child, policy, joyous, collectivized

In Corpus B, the collocation of “incomes” with “countryside” indicates that the income of rural populations was a focus of the reports. The collocation of “protest” with “farmer” shows that the American media was particularly concerned with farmers’ dissatisfaction.

Corpus C exhibits more collocates than Corpus A and Corpus B, indicating that the themes of reports on rural China in Corpus C are more diverse. Some relatively positive words such as “flourish,” “development,” “firms,” and “joyous” appear, highlighting the development and changes in rural China. However, “poor” remains a strong collocate with “farmer.” Additionally, collocates such as “AIDS,” “Child,” and “policy” indicate that the newspaper still focuses on issues like disease and family planning in rural areas.

Overall, the collocates reveal that throughout these three phases, the image of rural China portrayed by *The New York Times* has consistently been one of poverty and problems, although in the third phase, there is also an acknowledgment of rural development and prosperity.

5.3. Concordance Line Analysis

Concordance line analysis is central to corpus research methodology. It can reveal

discourse patterns and hidden discursive meanings that keywords and collocates cannot. From the keywords in Corpus A, it is evident that there are numerous keywords referring to women. By examining the concordance lines of these keywords, it is clear that most descriptions related to women attempt to reveal gender discrimination and the difficult situation of women in rural China. **Table 5** lists some typical examples of concordance lines for female-related keywords. Examples 1 and 2 reflect issues of abuse, abduction, and trafficking of women; Example 3 illustrates the helpless situation of women and their sense of worthlessness; Example 4 reports on the phenomenon of female infanticide and severe gender discrimination in rural areas; Example 5 shows the issue of girls dropping out of school due to long-standing gender bias; and Example 6 is about the trading of wives.

Table 5. Examples of concordances in corpus A.

No.	left context	hit	right context
1	which prohibits slavery in all forms, to protect women	women	from this systematic abuse, to uphold their right to marry freely, and to prosecute the traffickers and batterers.
2	abductions of	women	were rising 30 percent a year
3	whose customs and language reinforce	women's	feelings of worthlessness and helplessness
4	presumably largely because of	female	infanticide and discrimination against young girls in the first half of the century.
5	The preponderance of	female	dropouts reflects centuries-old biases, but also practical considerations
6	That has created a strong incentive to buy a	wife	and save the cost of the festivities.

By examining the concordance lines of specific personal names in Corpus A, we find that most of the personal names are male. This indicates that the narrative stories generally feature men as the main characters and women as subordinate roles, which is why there are a significant number of female-referencing keywords such as “women,” “his wife,” “daughter,” etc. Although *The New York Times* attempts to highlight the situation of women in rural China and criticize rural gender inequality, the way it reports actually reflects its own gender bias.

An important characteristic of the themes in Corpus B is the emergence of words related to politics. By examining the concordance lines of these words, it can be observed that most of them deliberately highlight negative situations occurring in rural China. **Table 6** lists some typical concordance lines. Example 1 describes the government dispatching police to quell protests. Example 2 directly points out conflicts between police and farmers, emphasizing the chaos in rural

areas. Examples 3 highlight villagers' resistance to some policies, reflecting issues such as inappropriate policies, poor management in rural areas. The word "communist" is also a high-frequency term in reports from this period. From the concordance lines, some instances are neutral statements, but some carry a biased tone. For instance, in Example 4, where farmers dismiss officials and demand free elections, it implicitly suggests a lack of democracy and official misconduct.

Table 6. Examples of concordances in corpus B.

No.	left context	hit	right context
1	But by Sunday local officials had dispatched	police	officers and workers to break up the protest.
2	as many as 20 people were killed by the paramilitary	police	this week, in an unusually violent clash that marked an escalation in the widespread social protests roiling the Chinese countryside
3	In December, in the	protest	in Dongzhou, residents say as many as 30 people were killed when security forces opened fire on crowds of villagers
4	which gained international attention in 2011 when villagers expelled local	Communist	Party officials and demanded free elections.

Apart from the usual negative keywords related to disease and poverty, Corpus C also features positive keywords associated with technological advancement, such as "boom" and "tech," which seem to portray a progressive rural image. However, concordance line analysis reveals that this is not entirely the case. There are 22 concordance lines with "tech" as a keyword, but only 7 of them express a positive significance of technology usage in rural areas. These 7 lines (e.g., Examples 1 and 2 in **Table 7**) mainly discuss the application of technology in rural settings, such as using technology in farming to increase yields or leveraging platforms like Taobao and JD.com to boost agricultural product sales.

Another 13 lines (e.g., Examples 3 and 4 in **Table 7**), although closely related to technology, actually describe the overall technological development in China, especially in urban areas. This indirectly highlights rural poverty and backwardness. The remaining two lines (Examples 5 and 6 in **Table 7**) describe the negative impacts of technology. Example 5 discusses the financial risks brought by technology, while Example 6 mentions that despite the introduction of technology, it has little significance for farmers.

Therefore, although some positive keywords appear in Corpus C, they do not effectively portray a modernized and continuously developing rural China. A similar phenomenon is observed in the concordance lines for "boom". Some lines merely emphasize the prosperity of urban areas to contrast with rural backwardness, as in

Examples 7 and 8. Others have no relation to economic prosperity, such as Example 9, which reports on the commercialization of selling blood, and Example 10, which talks about rodent infestations bringing diseases—both depicting negative images.

Table 7. Examples of concordances in corpus C.

No.	left context	hits	right context
1	So Jiang turned to high-	tech	chicken surveillance. He outfitted his chickens with wearable legbands
2	Remaking of the World.”BLOCK-CHAIN CHICKEN FARM” and Other Stories of	tech	in China’s Countryside by Xiaowei Wang248 pp.
3	movements—“a chicken Fitbit of sorts”—and worked with a	tech	start-up to record the data on a block-chain.
4	The population may be aging, but it still provides a vast market in which	tech	start-ups can blossom.
5	By making online loans so readily available to Chinese households,	tech	may compound the risk of financial crisis.
6	but the farmer neither understands the technology nor owns it; it’s provided by a	tech	firm that in the first year of their collaboration ordered 6000 chickens
7	China’s	boom	made its metropolises wealthy. ...farming communities...remained poor.
8	Chinese have been left behind by the country’s economic	boom	...Many struggle with poverty and depression.
9	Henan had nurtured a	boom	in commercial blood harvesting, recruiting hundreds of thousands poor farmers to sell blood
10	White-footed mice population	boom	and infect huge numbers of ticks with the bacteria that cause Lyme.

From the analysis of keywords, collocates, and concordance lines across three stages, it can be seen that the coverage by mainstream American media of rural China is generally negative. This coverage has shaped an image of rural China as impoverished, backward, gender-discriminatory, disease-ridden, mismanaged. This negative image has not changed significantly over the 44 years from 1980 to 2024. Although a few reports between 2015 and 2024 have portrayed a progressive and developing rural image, the overall portrayal remains unchanged.

Considering the current state of rural development in China, the narrative inertia of mainstream American media, and the external publicity from our media, it can be concluded that *The New York Times’* perception of rural China is primarily based on the following two reasons. First, the uneven development of rural

China and selective reporting by the media. China is vast, and the level of rural revitalization development varies significantly across regions. The industrial and ecological development in the eastern regions is significantly higher than in other areas, and the disparity in affluent living and ecological livability levels is also widening (Liu et al., 2024). As a result, American media often select rural areas that are relatively underdeveloped for comprehensive coverage, thus shaping a negative rural image. Combined with the long-standing stereotypes of rural China in Western media and the lack of in-depth investigation and research into rural China, these negative impressions are difficult to change.

Second, insufficient media coverage of rural revitalization in China. Historically, the achievements of urbanization have been the focus of external media publicity. Although in recent years, media outlets like *China Daily* have been actively constructing a positive image of a harmonious, green, and people-centered new era for rural China (Zhu et al., 2024), most reports still regard rural areas as mere supplements and appendages to the urbanization process. They do not see rural areas as an important part of a diverse social structure and lack a thorough understanding of the actual implementation effects of certain policies (Zhan & Li, 2024). This makes it challenging to break through the barriers of Western-centric viewpoints in the short term.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research combines corpus-based methods with critical discourse analysis to present the constructed image of rural China in *The New York Times* and its diachronic changes over time, and explores the reasons behind these portrayals. The study finds that *The New York Times* predominantly depicts a negative image of rural China as impoverished and problematic, and this portrayal has not significantly changed from 1980 to 2024. The primary reasons include regional imbalances in rural development within China, selective reporting focusing on underdeveloped rural areas, and emotional narrative techniques crafting a negative image. The study suggests that further efforts are needed in external communication to equally emphasize rural and urban developments, promoting positive aspects of rural areas while deeply understanding and addressing rural issues for comprehensive solutions.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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