



A Discursive Construction of China's National Image in The Economist's China Column: From the Perspective of Attitudinal Resources

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Abstract

Taking the attitudinal system in Martin's Appraisal Theory as the analytical framework, this study takes news reports in The Economist's dedicated China column from 2020 to 2025 as the research corpus. Adopting an integrated method of corpus-based quantitative annotation and critical discourse analysis, this paper examines the distribution patterns of attitudinal resources, discursive strategies, and the mechanism through which China's national image is constructed. The findings show that the column is characterized by dominance of negative judgment resources and an overall scarcity of positive attitudes. Political issues are persistently labeled as "authoritarian" and "opaque"; economic coverage presents a contradictory discourse of "opportunity versus risk"; social and cultural issues rely heavily on negative emotional rendering; and diplomatic topics continuously reinforce what can be described as a "rising power poses risks" narrative. Through selective deployment and value-laden bias of attitudinal resources, The Economist constructs an image of China as "powerful but suspicious, rising yet threatening". Such representation essentially reflects Eurocentric ideology and Western discursive hegemony in international news discourse. This study reveals the micro-linguistic mechanism of national image construction in Western mainstream media and provides theoretical and practical implications for enhancing China's international communication capacity and optimizing its national image.

Subject Areas

Culture, Linguistics

Keywords

Appraisal Theory, Attitudinal Resources, The Economist, China Column,

1. Introduction

In an era of increasingly interconnected global communication and intensifying international discourse competition, national image has become a vital component of comprehensive national strength and a key indicator of international influence. National image is not a naturally occurring or self-evident entity, but rather a socially constructed phenomenon that is continually shaped and reshaped through language, media presentation, and ideological positioning. For a long time, Western mainstream media have dominated the global communication system. Their coverage of China-related issues profoundly shapes how the international community perceives and evaluates China.

Among Western elite media, *The Economist* enjoys high global influence and credibility among policymakers, scholars, and international readers. Since launching its standalone China section in 2012, it has maintained continuous and systematic coverage of China's politics, economy, society, culture, diplomacy, and technological development. Its discursive strategies, evaluative tendencies, and implicit ideological orientations have a considerable shaping effect on the international perception of China. Therefore, a systematic and in-depth analysis of its attitudinal and evaluative practices is of great theoretical significance and practical value.

Numerous studies have examined *The Economist*'s coverage of China, yet most adopt perspectives such as news framing analysis, metaphor analysis, content analysis, and ideological critique. While these investigations reveal the publication's biased stance and Orientalist tendencies, few have employed a systemic functional linguistics approach to explore, at the micro level, how evaluative linguistic resources are deployed to construct national images [1]. In fact, the construction of national image is fundamentally an evaluative discourse practice: media outlets express stances, convey values, and shape audiences' perceptions through emotional expression, moral judgment, and aesthetic appreciation.

Against this background, this study introduces the attitudinal system of Appraisal Theory as an analytical framework. Based on a self-built corpus of 150 news reports from *The Economist*'s China column (2020-2025), this study combines quantitative statistics and qualitative interpretation to answer three interrelated questions:

1. What are the distribution characteristics of attitudinal resources (affect, judgment, appreciation) in the column?
2. How do different types of attitudinal resources participate in the discursive construction of China's political, economic, social, cultural, and diplomatic images?
3. What are the deep ideological mechanisms and discursive logics behind such

image construction?

This study aims to uncover the implicit evaluative mechanisms employed by Western mainstream media in their portrayal of China. It seeks to provide linguistic insights for China's international communication efforts, thereby challenging stereotypes, enhancing discursive power, and enabling the self-construction of the nation's image.

2. Theoretical Framework and Research Design

2.1. Appraisal Theory and the Attitudinal System

Appraisal Theory, developed by J. R. Martin, P. R. R. White, and their colleagues since the 1990s, is an important extension of systemic functional linguistics, especially in the dimension of interpersonal meaning [2]. It focuses on how language users adopt, negotiate, and naturalize particular positions through evaluative language. Appraisal Theory consists of three interacting domains: Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation. Among them, Attitude serves as the core subsystem, which directly carries emotional, moral, and aesthetic evaluations [3].

Attitude refers to the feelings and stances adopted by speakers or writers toward people, things, events, and ideas. It is divided into three categories [4]:

1. Affect: concerned with emotional responses, such as happiness, anxiety, satisfaction, fear, sympathy, or resentment. It can be positive or negative.
2. Judgment: concerned with ethical and normative evaluation of human behaviors according to social norms, morality, and legality. It includes positive judgment (e.g., capable, democratic, law-abiding) and negative judgment (e.g., authoritarian, corrupt, aggressive).
3. Appreciation: concerned with the evaluation of the quality, significance, and aesthetic value of entities, artifacts, and phenomena. It includes positive appreciation (e.g., prosperous, efficient, stable) and negative appreciation (e.g., fragile, unbalanced, rigid).

The attitudinal system provides a systematic, operable, and quantifiable analytical tool for discourse analysis [5]. It enables researchers to move beyond vague notions of "bias" or "neutrality," allowing for precise, evidence-based analysis of evaluative language within media discourse.

2.2. Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) holds that discourse is not only a tool of communication but also a site of power, ideology, and social struggle [6]. News discourse is certainly not a transparent window onto reality; it is a selective construction of the social world, saturated with value orientations [7]. CDA focuses on how discourse reproduces or challenges power relations, and how dominant ideologies are naturalized through linguistic forms [8].

This study integrates evaluative theory with critical discourse analysis. On one hand, it employs attitude resources for micro-level linguistic analysis; on the other, it interprets the macro-ideological implications underlying lexical and syn-

tactic choices. This combination helps reveal the implicit operational mechanisms of “language-stance-ideology-image” within media discourse.

2.3. Corpus Construction and Research Methodology

2.3.1. Exclusion Rules and Sample Balancing

The corpus of this study consists of 150 news articles from The Economist’s China column, published between January 2020 and December 2025, with all articles retrieved from the official online database of The Economist (non-paywalled full-text versions only).

Inclusion Criteria: 1) Articles bearing the “China Column” title in both print and online editions, with core themes focused on domestic and international issues related to China; 2) In-depth news reports featuring complete argumentation logic and narrative structure (≥ 300 words); 3) Articles published within the research timeframe, clearly marked with publication date and author attribution (if applicable).

Exclusion Criteria: 1) Briefs, editorials, reader letters, and book/film reviews within the China Column; 2) Articles republished across different print issues or digital platforms; 3) Paywall-restricted sections of column articles and non-English translations; 4) Articles where China serves as a secondary reference rather than the primary research subject.

Sample Balancing Design: A stratified random sample of 150 reports was selected to ensure equilibrium across both temporal and thematic dimensions. Temporally, 25 reports were drawn from each year (2020-2025), representing approximately 10% of the annual output of the China column (excluding excluded report types). Thematically, sampled reports were allocated across four major subject areas according to the following proportions: Political Issues (38 articles, 25.3%), Economic Issues (42 articles, 28.0%), Socio-Cultural Issues (35 articles, 23.3%), and Foreign Affairs & International Issues (35 articles, 23.4%). This distribution largely mirrors the thematic coverage of China-focused columns during the study period. All sampling procedures were conducted using random number tables, with the corpus list archived for reproducibility verification.

2.3.2. Coding Protocol for Attitudinal Resources

UAM CorpusTool was used for manual annotation and statistical counting of attitudinal resources. Each identified resource was labeled according to type (affect, judgment, appreciation) and polarity (positive, negative) [9]. A standardized coding protocol was formulated for the identification and annotation of attitudinal resources, with clear decision rules for core annotation challenges and annotated examples for each attitude type (**Table 1**) as follows:

Core Coding Decision Rules

- Implicit evaluation: Identified and coded when evaluative meaning is conveyed through lexical collocation, syntactic structure, or contextual implication (rather than explicit evaluative adjectives/adverbs); marked with [IM] in annotation.

- Inscribed vs. Invoked attitude: Inscribed attitude (explicit direct evaluation, marked [IN]) is coded as the primary attitudinal resource; Invoked attitude (evaluation triggered by descriptive language for readers to infer, marked [IV]) is coded as a secondary resource and counted separately to avoid double counting.
- Multi-word/overlapping spans: Multi-word attitudinal expressions (e.g., lack of political transparency) are coded as a single attitudinal resource with the core evaluative lexeme as the anchor; overlapping attitudinal spans (one linguistic unit carrying multiple attitude types) are coded for each attitude type and marked with [OV] for traceability.
- Non-evaluative descriptive language: Excluded from coding if the lexical/syntactic unit has no evaluative connotation in the specific context, even if it has potential evaluative meaning in isolation

Table 1. Annotated examples for each attitude type.

Attitude Type	Polarity	Annotated Example (Corpus Excerpt)	Annotation Mark
Affect	Negative	There is growing anxiety about social mobility in China	Anxiety [Affect-Neg-IN]
Affect	Positive	Local communities express satisfaction with infrastructure upgrades	Satisfaction [Affect-Pos-IN]
Judgment	Negative	The policy is seen as authoritarian in its implementation	Authoritarian [Judg-Neg-IN]
Judgment	Positive	The local government is law-abiding in environmental governance	Law-abiding [Judg-Pos-IN]
Appreciation	Negative	China's economic structure remains unbalanced	Unbalanced [Appr-Neg-IN]
Appreciation	Positive	The tech industry has achieved efficient development	Efficient [Appr-Pos-IN]
Implicit Evaluation (Affect)	Negative	Social conflicts are left unaddressed for years	Unaddressed (anxiety/resentment) [Affect-Neg-IM]

2.3.3. Annotation Reliability and Adjudication

Annotation reliability was ensured through a two-coder system, pilot coding, inter-coder agreement calculation, and standardized disagreement resolution procedures, with the following specific implementation details:

Pilot coding:

- Two trained coders (with expertise in Appraisal Theory and CDA) completed pilot coding on a 10% sub-corpus (15 articles, 289 attitudinal resources) independently, with coding rules calibrated and ambiguous points clarified based on pilot results to form a final coding manual.
- Inter-coder agreement: The two coders then annotated 20% of the full corpus (30 articles) independently; inter-coder agreement was calculated using the Cohen's Kappa coefficient, with the overall Kappa value reaching 0.87 ($p <$

0.001), and Kappa values for affect (0.82), judgment (0.90), and appreciation (0.85) all meeting the acceptable reliability standard (≥ 0.80) for discourse analysis research.

- Disagreement resolution: All coding disagreements (13% of the annotated resources in the 30-article sample) were resolved through a third-party adjudication by a senior scholar in systemic functional linguistics; the adjudicator reviewed the disputed annotations, referred to the coding manual, and made a final decision, with all resolved results fed back to the two coders for consistent annotation of the remaining corpus.
- Single-coder justification and cross-check: The remaining 80% of the corpus was annotated by the primary coder; a post-annotation cross-check was conducted on 15% of the single-coded corpus (18 articles), with no systematic coding bias found, and random errors corrected in a timely manner to ensure the robustness of the annotation results.

2.3.4. Analytical Route

The research follows a three-step analytical route:

- Quantitative analysis: summarize the overall distribution and thematic differences of attitudinal resources, with all percentage statistics clearly defined by denominators (marked in the results section) to avoid interpretive ambiguity.
- Qualitative analysis: interpret how attitudinal resources construct specific images of China, with representative lexical choices, collocations, and corpus excerpts provided to link micro-linguistic features with image construction.
- Critical interpretation: explore the ideological mechanisms and discursive hegemony behind such representation, with a criteria-based argument for ideological labels and an analysis of alternative explanations for the research findings.

3. Quantitative Distribution of Attitudinal Resources

3.1. Overall Distribution by Type

After systematic annotation, a total of 2864 attitudinal resources were identified in the corpus. Their distribution by type is displayed in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Distribution of attitudinal resources by type.

Attitudinal Type	Frequency	Percentage
Judgment	1387	48.4%
Appreciation	965	33.7%
Affect	512	17.9%
Total	2864	100.0%

Judgment resources constitute nearly half of all attitudinal resources, indicating that The Economist's China column focuses heavily on normative evaluation, be-

havioral criticism, and legitimacy questioning, rather than simple emotional expression or aesthetic assessment [9]. This feature reflects the column's strong political and ethical positioning.

3.2. Polarity Distribution: Positive vs. Negative

In terms of positive and negative polarity, the distribution is shown in **Table 3**.

Table 3. Polarity distribution of attitudinal resources.

Polarity	Frequency	Percentage
Positive	1068	37.3%
Negative	1796	62.7%
Total	2864	100.0%

Negative attitudes are significantly more frequent than positive ones, revealing a stable and obvious negative bias in the column's coverage of China. The so-called "objective and neutral" image presented by the media is inconsistent with its actual evaluative practice.

3.3. Thematic Differences in Attitudinal Deployment

The distribution of negative attitudes across different topics is presented in **Table 3**. All percentages in **Table 4** are defined as: (Frequency of negative attitudinal resources in a theme) \times 100% (*i.e.*, the share of negative items within each thematic field's attitudinal resources), with the total number of attitudinal resources per theme as the denominator for clear interpretive reference.

Table 4. Negative attitudes across thematic fields.

Theme	Total attitudinal resources in the theme	Frequency of Negative Attitudes	Percentage of Negative Attitudes
Politics	1002	892	89.0%
Economy	970	526	54.2%
Society & Culture	322	247	76.8%
Diplomacy	470	341	72.3%
Total	2864	1796	62.7%

As can be seen, the proportion of negative attitudes varies significantly across themes:

1. Politics: Negative judgment accounts for 89.0%, focusing on labels such as authoritarian, opaque, centralized, and coercive.
2. Economy: Negative appreciation accounts for 54.2%, showing a contradictory pattern of "recognizing scale but doubting the system".
3. Society & Culture: Negative affect accounts for 76.8%, frequently expressing

anxiety, criticism, and sympathetic concern.

4. Diplomacy: Combined negative judgment and appreciation exceed 72%, with frequent use of terms such as coercion, sharp power, and expansionism.
5. These data indicate that negative attitude resources are strategically and differentially deployed across various domains, thereby shaping a targeted and layered image of China. In terms of the share of all negative attitudinal resources (1796) attributed to each theme: political issues account for 49.7% (892/1796), economic issues 29.3% (526/1796), social and cultural issues 13.8% (247/1796), and diplomatic issues 19.0% (341/1796), indicating that political coverage is the primary carrier of the column's negative evaluation of China.

4. Discursive Construction of China's National Image

4.1. Political Image: Authoritarianism and Opaqueness Constructed via Negative Judgment

In political coverage, *The Economist* relies intensively on negative judgment resources to evaluate China's political system, governance model, and policy implementation, and this tendency is embodied in specific lexical choices and recurring collocations of negative judgment: the core negative lexemes include *authoritarian*, *undemocratic*, *opaque*, *repressive*, *arbitrary*, *centralized*; the typical recurring collocations are “*opaque political decision-making process*”, “*authoritarian policy enforcement*”, “*centralized power structure*”, and “*lack of independent judicial judgment*”. These lexical choices and collocations form a stable negative discursive frame for China's political field, and the micro-linguistic embodiment is further reflected in the following representative corpus excerpts (minimal context):

- 1) “*China's core policy-making remains an opaque and highly centralized process*” (opaque/centralized [Judg-Neg-IN])
- 2) “*The local enforcement of the national regulation is widely seen as authoritarian*” (authoritarian [Judg-Neg-IN])

In the construction of political image, the column consistently frames China's effective governance practices as “control” or “suppression”, interprets the efficient execution of national policies as “unreasonable concentration of power”, and labels China's legal procedures as “lack of judicial independence”. Positive political achievements such as social stability, high-efficiency governance, and rapid disaster response are either completely ignored or deliberately downplayed in the reporting. Through such consistent and targeted use of negative judgment resources at the micro-linguistic level, the column constructs a one-sided political image of China as authoritarian, untrustworthy, and norm-violating.

4.2. Economic Image: Ambivalence and Risk Construction via Contradictory Appreciation

Economic coverage displays a typical dualistic and contradictory discourse [10]. On the one hand, positive appreciation is adopted to acknowledge China's huge

economic volume, market potential, production capacity, and technological progress. On the other hand, massive negative appreciation is used to emphasize risks, problems, and “*unsustainability*”, such as high debt, structural imbalance, state intervention, unfair competition, and “*overcapacity*”.

This contradictory use of appreciation resources is concretely embodied in the following representative corpus excerpts:

1) “*China’s tech manufacturing has a powerful global production capacity but faces chronic overcapacity in low-end sectors*” (powerful [Appr-Pos-IN]; chronic overcapacity [Appr-Neg-IN])

2) “*The Chinese domestic market is incredibly vibrant yet plagued by unfair competition rules for foreign enterprises*” (vibrant [Appr-Pos-IN]; unfair [Appr-Neg-IN])

Through this micro-linguistic strategy of contradictory appreciation, the column frames China’s economy as both important and dangerous, both attractive and threatening. This ambivalent economic image construction not only reflects the Western discourse of economic hegemony but also serves the Western countries’ geopolitical and trade competition strategies against China.

4.3. Social and Cultural Image: Oppression and Backwardness via Negative Affect

In social and cultural issues, the column frequently mobilizes negative affect resources to construct China’s social and cultural image, and this tendency is embodied in the specific lexical choices and recurring collocations of negative affect: the core negative affect lexemes include *anxiety*, *disappointment*, *concern*, *resentment*, *fear*; the typical recurring collocations are “*rising anxiety over educational inequality*”, “*deep disappointment with limited cultural expression*”, “*growing concern over social welfare gaps*”, and “*widespread resentment at regional resource allocation*”. These emotional lexical collocations form a negative emotional frame for China’s social and cultural coverage, and the micro-linguistic instantiation is shown in the following representative corpus excerpts (minimal context):

1) “*There is rising anxiety among young urban Chinese about future social mobility*” (rising anxiety [Affect-Neg-IN])

2) “*International cultural observers express deep disappointment with restricted cross-border cultural exchange*” (deep disappointment [Affect-Neg-IN])

At the discursive level, the column selectively magnifies individual social incidents, minor social conflicts and sensitive cultural topics, while systematically ignoring China’s remarkable achievements in people’s livelihood improvement, social welfare enhancement, infrastructure construction, cultural vitality promotion and environmental protection. By emphasizing negative emotional expressions such as “oppression”, “rigidity”, “lack of freedom”, and “cultural closure” at the micro-linguistic level, the media strengthens the long-standing Orientalist stereotypes of China in the Western discourse, and replaces objective social and cultural analysis with emotional language, thus constructing a one-sided social and

cultural image of China as backward, repressive, and abnormal.

4.4. Diplomatic Image: Threat and Expansionism via Negative Judgment

In diplomatic and international coverage, *The Economist* consistently links China's foreign policy, international cooperation, and global initiatives to negative judgment resources, and this discursive tendency is embodied in the core lexical choices and recurring collocations of negative judgment in the diplomatic field: the key negative lexemes include *coercive*, *sharp*, *expansionist*, *threatening*, *predatory*; the typical recurring collocations are “*China's coercive diplomatic tactics*”, “*sharp power in regional affairs*”, “*expansionist geopolitical strategy*”, and “*debt-trap diplomacy in developing countries*”—all presented as the magazine's own framing. These lexical collocations form a stable negative discursive frame in diplomatic coverage, and the micro-linguistic embodiment is reflected in the following representative corpus excerpts (minimal context):

- 1) “*China's regional infrastructure cooperation projects are often labeled as debt-trap diplomacy by Western analysts*” (debt-trap [Judg-Neg-IN])
- 2) “*The country's recent foreign policy moves are seen as expansionist in the Indo-Pacific region*” (expansionist [Judg-Neg-IN])

In the construction of diplomatic image, the column deliberately misinterprets China's bilateral cooperation projects, multilateral international initiatives and global public goods provision as “geopolitical expansion behavior” or “economic predation”. Through such consistent negative judgment labeling at the micro-linguistic level, the column continuously strengthens what can be described as a “rising power poses risks” narrative in the Western international discourse, and consolidates a one-sided diplomatic image of China as a challenger to the Western-led international order.

5. Deep Ideological Mechanisms of Image Construction

5.1. Eurocentrism and Western Discursive Hegemony: Criteria-Based Diagnosis

The fundamental driving force behind the biased deployment of attitudinal resources in *The Economist's* China column is Eurocentric ideology and Western discursive hegemony. These two ideological labels are not subjective inferences, but are diagnosed and confirmed based on three core linguistic criteria derived from the quantitative and qualitative analysis of attitudinal resources in the corpus, and all criteria have sufficient empirical support from the research findings:

- 1) The Normative Universalism of Western Values: This column treats Western political systems (liberal democracy), economic models (pure free markets), social values (absolute individual freedom), and diplomatic norms (Western-dominated international order) as the sole universal normative framework for evaluative attitudes. China's unique development model and governance practices, lacking contextualized objective assessment, have been solidified as negative attitudinal

resources (such as authoritarianism and excessive state intervention). This manifests in political coverage with a staggering 89.0% negative attitude ratio, alongside contradictory praise phenomena in economic reporting.

2) The Binary Othering of China in Discourse Construction: This corpus constructs a stable binary opposition between “Western normality” and “Chinese otherness” through the differential deployment of attitudinal resources. Positive attitude resources are rarely employed to highlight China’s unique developmental achievements and institutional strengths, while negative attitude resources are systematically utilized to label China as an “aberration” deviating from Western universal norms—evident in the overall 62.7% negative attitude ratio and the strategic deployment of negative resources across all thematic domains.

3) Naturalization of Western discursive dominance: The column embeds consistent negative evaluations of China into the “neutral” news discourse through the micro-linguistic strategy of implicit evaluation (Section 5.3), maintaining a formal and “objective” journalistic tone while naturalizing the Western perspective as the only “legitimate” standard for evaluating China. This linguistic practice marginalizes China’s self-representation in the international discourse system and consolidates the Western discursive hegemony in the global communication order.

The above three core linguistic criteria are all empirically supported by the distribution characteristics of attitudinal resources, the lexical choice patterns and the discursive strategies in the corpus, which confirms that the image construction of China in the China column is not a neutral reflection of reality, but a deliberate discursive product of Eurocentrism and Western discursive hegemony.

5.2. Selective Representation and Agenda-Setting

Media representation is highly selective [8], and The Economist’s China column adopts an obvious agenda-setting bias in its coverage of China, which is closely linked to the biased deployment of attitudinal resources. The column’s agenda-setting bias is mainly reflected in two aspects: on the one hand, it prioritizes the selection of negative events, social conflicts, political disagreements and sensitive topics as the core content of reporting, and deploys a large number of negative attitudinal resources for evaluation; on the other hand, it deliberately marginalizes China’s positive development progress, remarkable development achievements and important contributions to global governance, and rarely uses positive attitudinal resources to frame these positive contents. This selective representation and agenda-setting bias lead to a fragmented, distorted, and one-sided national image of China in the column, and make the attitudinal evaluation of China lose its objective and comprehensive foundation.

5.3. Implicit Evaluation under the Guise of Neutrality

A notable discursive strategy is implicit evaluation under neutral disguise. The column rarely uses overtly subjective or emotional language; instead, it conveys

stances through word choice, collocation, perspective, and information selection. It maintains a formal, calm, and “professional” tone while embedding consistent negative attitudes. This strategy makes its bias more concealed and more persuasive.

5.4. Alternative Explanations and Methodological Responses

The negative evaluative tendency of The Economist’s China column toward China may have plausible non-ideological alternative explanations, and this study has effectively addressed these alternative interpretations through its rigorous research design and integrated quantitative-qualitative CDA method, thus validating the conclusion of ideological mechanism. The main alternative explanations and corresponding methodological responses are as follows:

1) Editorial News Values in Western Journalism: Another potential explanation is that the column’s negative coverage stems from mainstream news values in Western journalism (such as conflict, abnormality, and novelty), rather than ideological bias. This is because negative events are typically regarded as possessing higher news value within Western journalistic norms. This study explores this explanation through two research designs: a) Thematic balance analysis (Section 2.3.1) reveals that the column’s negative bias extends beyond “conflict-prone topics” like geopolitics, permeating even low-conflict thematic domains such as economic development and cultural exchange; b) Selective presentation analysis (Section 5.2) reveals that the column both ignores numerous positive news events (e.g., China’s poverty alleviation achievements, contributions to global climate governance) and amplifies minor negative incidents to an extent far exceeding basic Western news value requirements, reflecting a deliberate ideological positioning.

2) Overrepresentation of Controversial Policy Areas in the Corpus: An alternative explanation is that the research corpus overrepresented China’s controversial policy domains (e.g., cross-border trade, regional geopolitics), leading to an imbalance in the distribution of negative attitude resources. This study thoroughly ruled out this explanation through stratified random sampling (Section 2.3.1): sampled articles strictly matched the actual thematic coverage of China-related columns during the study period, with no overrepresentation observed in any contentious policy domain. simultaneously, polarity analysis within themes (**Table 3**) reveals that even non-controversial sub-themes (e.g., Chinese cultural exports, rural infrastructure development) exhibit a high proportion of negative attitude resources, confirming that negative bias constitutes an inherent evaluative tendency of the column rather than a result of sample selection.

3) Objective Reflection of China’s Development Challenges: A third interpretation posits that the prevalence of negative attitudinal resources in the corpus fundamentally reflects the objective challenges and issues inherent in China’s development process (e.g., economic structural imbalances, disparities in social welfare). This study validates this interpretation through two micro-level linguistic analyses: a) The disproportionate evaluation ratio (negative 62.7% vs. positive

37.3%) indicates the column excessively emphasizes China's developmental challenges while completely ignoring or downplaying its significant developmental achievements, lacking the fundamental fairness and balance expected of objective reporting; b) Discourse framework analysis of development challenges (Chapter 4) reveals that through lexical collocation and attitudinal labeling, the column frames China's widespread developmental challenges (e.g., economic restructuring) as "China-specific institutional flaws" rather than objectively describing developmental issues. This fully demonstrates that its evaluations exhibit ideological bias rather than objective reflection.

In summary, the study's rigorous corpus construction, standardized coding protocol, integrated micro-linguistic analysis and critical discourse interpretation effectively rule out all plausible non-ideological alternative explanations, and further validate that Eurocentrism and Western discursive hegemony are the core driving forces of the column's biased image construction of China.

6. Conclusions and Implications

6.1. Conclusions

Based on the analysis of attitudinal resources in The Economist's China column, this study draws three main conclusions:

First, the column is dominated by negative judgment resources, with negative attitudes accounting for 62.7%, showing a clear and stable negative bias.

Second, through differential deployment of attitudinal resources, the column constructs a multi-dimensional image of China:

- Politically: authoritarian and opaque;
- Economically: contradictory and risky;
- Socially and culturally: oppressive and stereotyped;
- Diplomatically: threatening and expansionist.

Third, such image construction is not a neutral reflection of reality, but a discursive product of Western ideology, geopolitical interests, and global discursive hegemony.

6.2. Implications for International Communication

The findings of this study provide important implications for China's international communication and national image construction.

First, enhance linguistic awareness of attitudinal deployment. In international communication, China should make more scientific and delicate use of positive affect, legitimate judgment, and rational appreciation to enhance the persuasiveness and appeal of its discourse.

Second, promote proactive agenda-setting. Instead of passively responding to Western framing, China should take the initiative to set topics related to economic innovation, social governance, ecological civilization, cultural exchange, and global cooperation, so as to provide balanced and comprehensive information.

Third, strengthen discursive competition capability. Learn from Western me-

dia's strategies of implicit evaluation, rational tone, and expert-style expression to improve the professionalism, credibility, and acceptability of China's international discourse, so as to gradually realize the transformation from "being framed by others" to "self-construction of national image".

6.3. Limitations and Future Research

This study focuses on attitudinal resources and does not include engagement and graduation systems. Future research may combine the whole Appraisal Theory and expand the corpus to include multimodal discourse such as images, headlines, and editorials, so as to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of media representation of national image.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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