

Corpus-Assisted Discourse Study of How Chinese and Foreign Media Construct China's Digital Trade Opening-up

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ABSTRACT

This study employs corpus-assisted discourse analysis to examine how China's digital trade opening-up is reported by one Chinese and three major Western English-language newspapers from 2023 to 2025. Taking Sinclair's five types of co-selection theory as the core framework, the findings show that while Chinese and Western media share a basic consensus in recognizing digital trade as a key arena of global competition, their discursive constructions differ markedly. This paper contributes to digital trade discourse studies by systematically mapping these contrasting media narratives, thereby enhancing understanding of China's digital governance in global contexts.

KEYWORDS

Digital Trade; Media Discourse; Corpus-Assisted Discourse Study; Sinclair's Co-selection Framework; Discourse Representation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Global digital trade is undergoing rapid transformation, with digital technologies reshaping traditional trade patterns.[1] In this process, norm-setting power has emerged as a central arena of international competition, particularly over issues such as cross-border data flows and intellectual property protection. As a major digital economy, China has implemented a series of liberalization measures—including refining its negative list for cross-border services, offering a critical lens through which to examine China's role in global digital governance. [2]

Media discourse plays a crucial role in shaping public understanding and policy interpretation[3]. Through lexical choices, collocations, and narrative framing, news outlets not only inform but also construct meaning and reflect ideological stances. Divergences in how Chinese and Western English-language media portray China's digital trade opening may thus influence international perceptions and policy acceptance.

Hong Kong, as an international digital trade hub, serves as a crucial arena or strategic site for observing rule alignment and discursive interactions between China and the global market. Analyzing media representations of China's digital trade opening-up is therefore significant for understanding Hong Kong's potential role in facilitating digital governance and cross-border communication.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Current research on digital trade opening-up has shifted from early economic impact assessments to an increasing focus on the power competition and governance model games in global norm-setting. Recent studies hold that global digital trade rules exhibit a distinct "fragmentation" feature[4].

Economies are engaged in institutional competition and cooperation at bilateral, regional, and multilateral levels around key issues such as market access, cross-border data flow, and data localization.

Against this backdrop, studies on China's digital trade policies have mostly focused on the evolution of domestic policies and paths of institutional innovation, recognizing China's efforts in promoting high-standard liberalization[5]. However, these studies also point out that the international dissemination of China's policies faces challenges, with international society's doubts partly resulting from the shaping effect of the international media environment. This highlights the importance of incorporating media discourse into research on digital trade. Although media framing theory has been applied to analyze China's image in issues such as the environment and technology, systematic comparative studies of media discourse between China and Western countries in digital trade opening-up have yet to be adequately explored.

Sinclair's co-selection theory provides a systematic tool for deconstructing discourse meaning, positing that meaning is not determined by isolated words but through the co-selection of five levels: node word, collocation, colligation, semantic preference, and semantic prosody[6]. Combining corpus-assisted discourse studies with linguistic framework, researchers can systematically compare different discourse systems based on objective lexical-grammatical patterns[7][8].

In conclusion, three major gaps exist in the existing research: First, studies on digital trade focus more on policy text analysis and less on media discourse construction; second, there are few systematic comparative analyses of Chinese and Western English media using Sinclair's co-selection framework; third, existing discourse analyses often place China and the West in a binary opposition framework, ignoring the unique role of "third spaces" such as Hong Kong in mediating discourse conflicts.

Based on this, taking Sinclair's co-selection theory as the core framework, this study conducts systematic corpus-assisted discourse comparative analysis of news on China's digital trade opening-up in mainstream Chinese and Western media from 2023 to 2025. It has three specific objectives: 1) to examine how Chinese and Western media construct this issue differently across linguistic levels; 2) to explain the ideological stance and geopolitical logic hidden behind these patterns; 3) to preliminarily explore the intermediary discourse characteristics of Hong Kong's English media.

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

3.1. Data

The present analysis is based on two purpose-built news corpora: the CD corpus (*China Daily*) and the AA corpus (*The New York Times*, *Financial Times* and *The Guardian*). CD is selected for its strategic deployment to cultivate favorable international public opinion as China deepens its global engagement. The three Anglo-American newspapers are chosen for their professional standing, international reach, and extensive reporting on China's economic and trade policies.

The data collection period spans from 2023 to 2025, aligning with a critical phase in China's digital trade liberalization. All news texts mentioning the keywords *China and digital trade opening-up* were extracted from LexisNexis and built into their respective corpora. Specific scale information of the corpus will be explained in the table below.

The British National Corpus (BNC) in Sketch Engine is selected as the reference corpus for analysis, providing a stable and authoritative benchmark for identifying significant keywords.

Table 1. General Information About The Two Corpora

	<i>China Daily</i>	Anglo-American media system		
		<i>The New York Times</i>	<i>Financial Times</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>
Number of texts	500	77	250	23
Tokens	148,174	21,666	65,144	6,946
Total	148,174	93,756		

3.2. Methodology

This study adopts a corpus-assisted discourse study (CADS) approach, integrating quantitative corpus linguistic techniques with qualitative discourse analysis to examine media representations of China's digital trade opening-up[7][8]. Within this framework, Sinclair's (2004) co-selection theory is employed to operationalize the construction of discourse meaning, including node word, collocation, colligation, semantic preference, and semantic prosody. The analysis is conducted using the Sketch Engine platform, with the British National Corpus (BNC) serving as a reference corpus to identify statistically significant lexical features.

The analytical procedure consists of four stages. First, keyword analysis identifies statistically significant lexical items in each corpus. Second, collocation analysis examines the typical lexical environments of selected node words. Third, colligation and semantic preference analyses explore grammatical patterns and semantic domains associated with node words. Fourth, semantic prosody is examined through concordance analysis to identify evaluative orientations and implicit attitudinal tendencies.

4. FINDINGS

The analysis demonstrates that the two corpora do not simply report on the same policy phenomenon differently, rather, they construct fundamentally opposed discursive objects through coherent and internally consistent co-selection patterns. CD predominantly frames digital trade opening-up as a development-oriented and cooperative process, whereas AA tends to construct it within a discourse of governance, risk, and geopolitical competition.

4.1. Node Word

In Sinclair's (2004) co-selection framework, node words are the lexical points around which collocational and grammatical patterns cluster. They function as discourse entry points, revealing what a corpus treats as salient in a given topic domain.

Table 2. Keywords in the CD and AA (Reference Corpus: BNC)

	<i>CD corpus</i>	<i>AA corpus</i>
Keyword	e-commerce, opening-up, China, WTO, high-standard, digital, cross-border, governance, cooperation, geopolitical	WTO, Indo-Pacific, TikTok, EU, G20, internet, Biden, digital, technology, e-commerce, tariff

As shown in table 2, CD prioritizes keywords such as *e-commerce*, *opening-up*, and *high-standard*, which foreground institutional processes, policy orientation, and development-related themes. In contrast, AA selects keywords that are predominantly geopolitical and actor-oriented, such as *Biden*, *Indo-Pacific*, *TikTok* and *tariff*, with even semantically neutral terms like digital and internet gaining salience through association with controversies over platform regulation, data security, and rule incompatibility.

4.2. Collocation

One way of describing collocation is to say that the choice of one word conditions the choice of the next, and of the next again (Sinclair, 2004).

Table 3. Collocation of Digital in CD and AA

	<i>CD corpus</i>	<i>AA corpus</i>
nouns modified by <i>digital</i>	trade, economy, rule, technology, service, transformation, platform, development, agreement	trade, economy, rule, flow, provision, barrier, service, war, agreement, governance
<i>digital</i> and/or ...	global, green, booming, cross-border, inclusive, international, encouraging	global, unregulated, connected, strong, national, open, free-standing, vital, cross-border, cohesive

In CD, *digital* frequently collocates with nouns such as *trade*, *economy*, and *transformation*, forming a semantic field associated with economic development and technological innovation. In AA, it co-occurs with *war*, *barrier*, and *risk*, foregrounding concerns related to conflict, inequality, and governance challenges.

Table 4. Collocation of Trade in CD and AA

	<i>CD corpus</i>	<i>AA corpus</i>
modifiers of <i>trade</i>	digital, global, international, green, cross-border, booming, open	digital, global, world, international, free, unregulated, harmful
verbs with <i>trade</i> as object	promote, facilitate, boost, develop, expand, ignite, embrace, build	govern, regulate, save, dampen, endanger, stifle, reshape

In CD, modifiers such as *green*, *cross-border* and *booming* present trade as positive and evolving, while verbs such as *promote* and *facilitate* construct China as an active enabler. In AA, verbs such as *govern*, *regulate*, and *dampen* produce a semantic ambivalence where digital trade opening-up is valued but also feared, it requires promotion but also constraint.

4.3. Colligation

Colligation refers to the conditioned probability of grammatical choices (Sinclair, 2004).

Table 5. Colligation Patterns of Trade in CD and AA

	<i>Colligation</i>	<i>Typical Grammatical Structure</i>
CD	verbs with "trade" as object	promote trade, facilitate digital trade, stabilizing foreign trade, the development of processing trade, ignite world trade
AA	processors of "trade"	China's trade, America's trade, bloc's trade
	"trade" and/or ...	trade and investment, agriculture, resilience, e-commerce, security, supply chain, data flows, protection, technology transfer

In CD, *trade* frequently appears as the direct object of transitive verbs, structuring China as the driver and trade as the linear outcome of policy intervention. In AA, possessives grammatically anchor trade to national subjects, framing it as an attribute of state identity rather than a transnational process. While parallel structures link trade to geopolitical and security considerations.

4.4. Semantic Preference

Semantic preference refers to a systematic pattern in which a node word co-occurs with a set of lexical items sharing a common semantic feature (Sinclair, 2004).

Table 6. Semantic Analysis Results of Digital and Trade

<i>Node Word</i>	<i>CD</i>	<i>AA</i>
<i>Digital</i> (as a modifier)	Cooperation and progress	Domain of problem and conflict
<i>Trade</i> (as an object)	Development drive	Governance and risk management

When *digital* acts as a modifier in CD, its typical collocating nouns fall squarely within the semantic category of cooperation and progress:

- establish a mutually beneficial **digital cooperation** model

In AA, nouns modified by *digital* predominantly belong to the semantic category of domain of problem and conflict:

- start a **digital trade war** that...
- **non-tariff digital barriers**

These terms are by no means neutral descriptors; rather, they pre-label the digital domain as a battlefield rife with inequality, protectionism, and geopolitical rivalry.

In the meanwhile, in CD, verbs that take *trade* as an object belong to the semantic field of development drive:

- expand high-level opening-up and continue to **promote trade** and investment facilitation

In contrast, in AA, *trade* frequently co-occurs with verbs belonging to the semantic category of governance and risk management:

- ...but also **endangering U.S. trade and economic...**
- **reshape world trade** on its own terms...

Similar to the expressions above, they not only construct trade as an object requiring compulsory separation from strategic risks but also primarily define trade as a domain subject to external rules and control.

4.5. Semantic Prosody

Semantic prosody is an attitudinal meaning situated on the pragmatic side of the semantics/pragmatics continuum (Sinclair, 2004).

In CD, relevant discussions are steeped in a positive and collaborative semantic prosody:

- have **reached a fundamental consensus** on 13 agenda items...
- participate in **sustainable and green trade practices...**

Such expressions frame the process as stable and fruitful, associating China's initiatives with globally recognized normative goals.

In contrast, the AA corpus is dominated by a negative, vigilant, and conflict-oriented semantic prosody:

- at a time when China is **seeking to dominate global digital trade...**
- However, this model **exposes economies to significant risks...**

These expressions systematically associate China's actions with domination, unfairness, risk, and damage, forming a persistent negative evaluation and crisis narrative. Even when cooperation is mentioned, as in official's word, it is immediately undercut by accusations of victimization, replacing any positive tone with suspicion.

These five levels of co-selection are not independent analytical categories; rather, they form an integrated hierarchy in which each higher level abstracts from and reinterprets the level below. Node words establish the initial discursive entry point; collocation assembles recurrent semantic fields; colligation encodes patterns of agency and relationality; semantic preference condenses these patterns into stable discourse types; and semantic prosody emerges as the evaluative atmosphere that permeates each corpus. This hierarchical integration means that the five levels function as a coherent system of meaning-making, producing not a collection of isolated linguistic features but two stable, internally coherent, and mutually opposed discourse models.

4.6. Hong Kong Media as a Discursive Intermediary

A supplementary observation of leading Hong Kong English-language media reveals an intermediary discursive position in representations of China's digital trade opening-up. Unlike the development-oriented discourse in CD and the politicized orientation in AA, Hong Kong media adopt a hybrid framing strategy.

Their reports frequently invoke institutional and rule-based discursive resources, including WTO frameworks, multilateral governance, and policy coordination, aligning with CD's emphasis on rule-based cooperation. They also engage with geopolitical and regional governance contexts, reflected in references to the Indo-Pacific, regulatory divergences, and institutional tensions, which partially resonate with AA.

In terms of evaluative stance, Hong Kong media generally adopt a neutral and technocratic style, focusing on policy interpretation, institutional arrangements, and market implications rather than explicit value judgments. This orientation moderates the development–risk polarization observed in CD and AA, reflecting Hong Kong's institutional environment and its potential role in digital trade governance.

5. CONCLUSION

Through a corpus-assisted discourse study approach combined with Sinclair's co-selection framework, this study examined how Chinese and Anglo-American media constructed China's digital trade opening-up between 2023 and 2025. The analysis systematically compared CD and AA across multiple linguistic levels, revealing that the two corpora construct fundamentally opposed discursive objects through coherent and internally consistent co-selection patterns.

CD consistently frames China's digital trade opening-up as a development-oriented and cooperative process, which is institutionally embedded and oriented toward shared growth and benefits. Through lexical choices that emphasize policy coordination, high-standard rule alignment, and mutual benefit, CD constructs it as an enabling force that contributes to global economic cooperative and modernization. By contrast, AA constructs the same policy phenomenon within a discourse of governance, risk, and geopolitical competition. Though both corpora recognize digital trade as a key arena of global competition, AA frames China's opening-up as a strategic challenge that requires monitoring and regulation. Grammatical choices embed trade within possessive and parallel structures that link it to national security and geopolitical rivalry, producing a vigilance-oriented narrative where economic opportunity is perpetually shadowed by strategic threat. In this sense, the discursive opposition uncovered in this study is not simply about how digital trade is described, but about how China's global role is imagined, whether as a partner in shared development or as a competitor. Only through systematic and innovative discourse practices can Chinese media present a more comprehensive, authentic and three-dimensional image of China to the world, thereby contributing Chinese strength to promoting the establishment of a more just and reasonable international media landscape.

In addition, the supplementary analysis of Hong Kong English-language media demonstrates an intermediary discursive position that integrates heterogeneous discursive resources and moderates the polarization observed in the two corpora. This intermediary position reflects Hong Kong's unique institutional environment as a Special Administrative Region that bridges mainland China and the global market. And this provides evidence for understanding its potential role as a regional hub in digital trade governance and cross-border rule communication.

This study contributes to existing research by extending digital trade governance research to incorporating media discourse, demonstrating the value of Sinclair's co-selection framework for comparative media analysis, and enriching scholarship on international communication. The findings also have practical implications for understanding the dynamics of international communication and digital governance.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study focuses on selected English-language media and a specific time period, which may not fully capture the diversity of global media discourse. Future research may expand the scope of data sources, incorporate multilingual corpora, or examine the

evolution of discourse over longer time spans to provide a more comprehensive understanding of digital trade communication.

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