

Research on the Image of China based on the Corpus of Singapore's Mainstream Media

-- Taking Reports on China Since the 20th CPC National Congress as Examples

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ABSTRACT

This research takes Singapore's *Lianhe Zaobao* and The Straits Times' China-related reports since the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) as the research object. By developing a news corpus and integrating frame theory with content analysis, the research leverages AntConc corpus software to scrutinize the perception of China by Singapore's mainstream media. The analysis reveals that the two newspapers predominantly present China as a nation that is politically impartial and congenial, experiencing steady economic progress, and undergoing rapid advancements in culture and technology. This representation underscores the escalating social power of China in international discourse.

KEYWORDS

Singapore; National Image; Corpus.

1. INTRODUCTION

The term "national image" denotes the collective cognitive, evaluative, and emotional perceptions of a country's political, economic, and cultural dimensions by both domestic and international publics. It constitutes a vital element of a nation's soft power[1]. The development of a national image is a central theme in contemporary studies of international relations and public diplomacy. This field explores the strategies through which nations shape and propagate their image to augment their international influence and soft power.

Over recent years, the intensification of the "Belt and Road" initiative has significantly bolstered the level of engagement between China and Singapore[2]. This is evident in the enhanced political dialogue, the expansion of economic trade, and the deepened cultural exchanges. Within this framework, Singapore, recognized as a pivotal economy and a leading international financial center in Southeast Asia, plays a substantial role in influencing China's endeavors to craft its national image.

The research utilizes *Lianhe Zaobao* and *The Straits Times*, the two mainstream media outlets in Singapore, as the basis for investigation. Employing the Factiva platform to construct a news corpus and leveraging the AntConc corpus analysis tool for comprehensive data exploration, the study analyzes the content and distinct features of the reporting on China by these media since the 20th CPC National Congress. It further examines their sentimental orientations and the resultant perception

of China, with the intention of providing significant references for the enhancement of national image, international dissemination, and the development of the “Belt and Road” initiative.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

2.1. Research Methodology

This study draws upon frame theory and content analysis, integrating corpus-based research methodologies. Utilizing the AntConc corpus software, it conducts a thorough analysis of the structure, content, and linguistic aspects of China-related reporting in Singapore’s mainstream media outlets, *The Straits Times* and *Lianhe Zaobao*. The research aims to investigate the construction and representation of our national image, with the objective of providing actionable recommendations for our international communication strategies. This will contribute to the development of a more comprehensive and multi-dimensional national image.

2.2. Research Design

This research focuses on the coverage of China by two leading Singaporean media outlets: *Lianhe Zaobao* and *The Straits Times*. *Lianhe Zaobao*, as the highest-circulating Chinese language newspaper in Singapore, offers insights into the Singaporean perspective on China, characterized by its objective and accurate reporting. The narrative techniques and areas of focus in its China-related reports are of particular interest for in-depth analysis[3]. *The Straits Times*, known for its extensive history and broad content coverage, provides an opportunity to comprehensively assess the perception of China within Singapore’s mainstream English-language media[4].

In this research, a search was conducted in the Factiva database for news articles in *Lianhe Zaobao* and *The Straits Times* that featured the keyword “China” from October 16, 2022, to April 16, 2024. Following manual review to eliminate irrelevant and duplicate content, a collection of 34,417 China-related news articles was compiled, comprising 13,584 from *Lianhe Zaobao* and 20,833 from *The Straits Times*. A random sample of 1,000 articles was then extracted from this collection, with 500 from each publication. These articles were meticulously processed to remove superfluous blank lines and spaces, converted into plain text format, and preserved, resulting in the creation of a self-constructed news corpus with a total word count exceeding 1.6 million.

3. ANALYSIS OF SINGAPORE’S MAINSTREAM MEDIA COVERAGE ON CHINA SINCE THE 20TH CPC NATIONAL CONGRESS

3.1. Advanced Reporting Framework: Analysis of Reporting Themes

In this study, a manual review and categorization of 1,000 report titles from the corpus was conducted. The China-related reports from the two media outlets were organized and classified based on primary themes of politics and diplomacy, economy and trade, while secondary themes encompassing culture and science, military and health, and society and people’s livelihood.

The data presented in the table indicate that following the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, *Lianhe Zaobao* features the highest proportion of politics and diplomacy-themed reports, constituting 31.6% of its China-related news content. This is closely followed by economy and trade news, which differs by only 1%. Social welfare-themed reports rank third, comprising 12.8% of the total. The themes of culture and science with military and health are the least covered, with similar percentages of 8.6% and 8% respectively. In contrast, *The Straits Times* predominantly covers political diplomacy, which accounts for a significant 42.4% of its China-related news. Economic and trade reports are the second most common, making up 29.2% of the total. Cultural technology reports

constitute 20.6% of the content, while society and military health themes are less prevalent, each accounting for approximately 7.4% and 7.2%.

Table 1. Statistics on the themes of China-related reports in the *Lianhe Zaobao* and *The Straits Times*

Newspaper	Politics and Diplomacy	Economy and Trade	Culture and Science	Military and Health	Society and People's livelihood
<i>Lianhe Zaobao</i>	158	153	43	40	64
<i>The Straits Times</i>	212	146	53	36	37

3.2. Intermediate-level Reporting Framework: Analysis of Reporting Length and Bias.

3.2.1. Analysis of Reporting Length

The present research classifies news reports into three distinct categories based on their length: short (fewer than 800 words), medium (between 800 and 1500 words), and long (over 1500 words).

Analysis of the 1000 reports within the corpus reveals a distribution of 87 short reports, 460 medium-length reports, and 453 long reports. From a genre classification perspective, short reports predominantly feature as news briefs, providing concise and timely updates on recent events. For instance, in *Lianhe Zaobao*, a report titled *France Aims to Establish a More Balanced Trade Relationship with China* succinctly conveys the message of Le Maire's visit focusing on Sino-French trade balance and opposition to decoupling with China.

Medium-length and long reports predominantly encompass news features, special reports, and commentaries. These reports offer a more comprehensive and vivid depiction of news events, delving into the background, causes, and implications of the events, and integrating the media's analytical insights and perspectives. For example, in *Lianhe Zaobao*, a report titled *Why Does the American Media Take Lianhe Zaobao So Seriously* narrates the incident where *The Washington Post* accused *Lianhe Zaobao* of deviating from the neutral position of the Singaporean government. In response, *Lianhe Zaobao* issued a formal statement, affirming its neutrality as a newspaper and highlighting the bias present in the other party's report.

3.2.2. Analysis of Reporting Attitude

The research categorizes reporting attitudes into three distinct types: "positive," "neutral," and "negative." Positive reports primarily focus on the favorable aspects of events, expressing endorsement and affirmation for individuals, entities, or policies. Negative reports, conversely, primarily critique adverse occurrences and erroneous actions, voicing skepticism or concern regarding specific events. Neutral reports aim for impartiality, presenting facts without prejudice, devoid of overt emotional undertones or value judgments, and emphasizing the principle of objectivity.

The author manually perused a random sample of titles and report contents, compiling statistics on the reporting attitudes of *Lianhe Zaobao* and *The Straits Times*.

Table 2. Percentage of attitudes towards China-related reports in the *Lianhe Zaobao* and *The Straits Times*

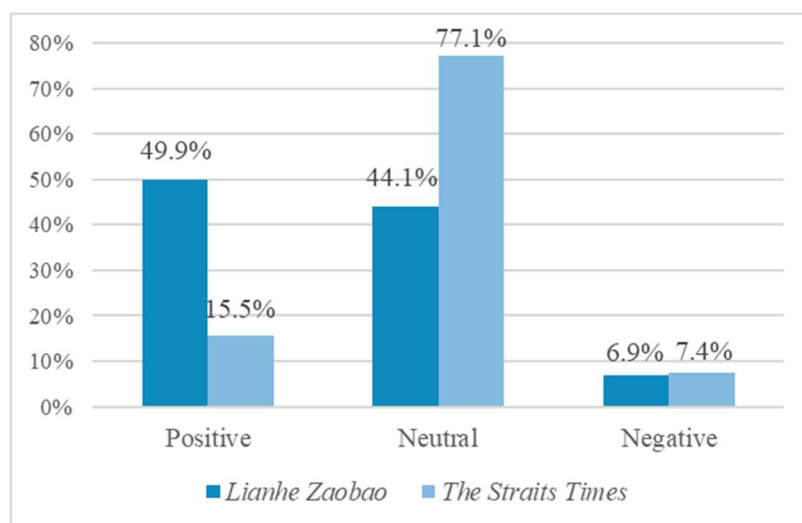


Table 2 reveals that *Lianhe Zaobao* predominantly features positive and neutral reports, whereas *The Straits Times* primarily presents neutral reports.

The research indicates that the positive coverage of China in the two major newspapers is primarily focused on economic and trade themes. Both media outlets acknowledge China's significant contribution as the world's second-largest economy in fostering global economic growth and advancing trade liberalization. For instance, "China's robust and sustainable economic growth is advantageous to both the Chinese and global economies." Furthermore, both media outlets recognize China's pivotal role in driving economic growth in neighboring countries, noting, "Despite facing multiple risks in its economic recovery, China's growth potential should not be overlooked, and it will exert a significant driving force on the economic development of Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Africa."

The negative coverage of China by the two major newspapers is predominantly centered on political and diplomatic themes, with a focus on expressing concerns regarding the potential adverse effects of the strained relations between China and the United States on the interests of nations such as Singapore. For instance, "As a small nation, our growth and prosperity are contingent upon a stable external environment, and it is a matter of concern that we have little influence in shaping such an environment. ASEAN nations yearn for a stabilization of the deteriorating relationship between the United States and China."

3.3. Fundamental Reporting Framework: Analysis of Report Content

The research employs the word frequency statistics and collocation analysis features of AntConc to delve into the key areas of focus in the China-related reporting of the two major newspapers since the convening of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. The author utilized the AntConc corpus analysis tool to conduct a detailed examination of the most frequently occurring concrete terms within the self-constructed news corpus. By excluding the term "China" to enhance the specificity of the analysis, the study isolated the top 10 high-frequency words and subsequently conducted a comprehensive statistical analysis of their frequencies, as well as the common collocations associated with these terms, across the China-related reports in both newspapers.

Table 3. High-frequency words of China-related reports in *Lianhe Zaobao*

No.	High-frequency words	Frequency	Common collocations
1	America	3649	American economy, American president, American strategy
2	Economy	3246	Economic development, Economic growth, Economic recovery
3	Nation	2108	National security, National interest, National relations
4	Market	1198	Market confidence, Market prospect, Market competition
5	Issues	1197	Taiwan issues, South China Sea issues, security issues
6	International	1188	International relations, International order, International cooperation
7	Government	1156	Chinese government, Government policy, Government work
8	Singapore	1100	Chinese Singaporeans, Singaporean companies, Singaporean economy
9	Policy	1086	Foreign policy, Epidemic prevention policy, Industrial policy
10	Sino-US	1066	Sino-US relations, Sino-US competition, Sino-US trade

Table 4. High-frequency words of China-related reports in *The Straits Times*

No.	High-frequency words	Frequency	Common collocations
1	Taiwan	1194	Taiwan Strait, Taiwan issue, Taiwan military exercises
2	Economy	1144	Economic growth, Economic coercion, Economic cooperation
3	Nation	1075	National development, National relations, ASEAN nations
4	World	1064	World trade, World organization, World multipolarity
5	Government	858	Chinese government, Government support, Government subsidies
6	Market	818	Market competition, Stock market, Domestic market
7	Military	810	Military defense, Military power, Military exercises
8	Security	799	National security, Security concerns, Security collaboration
9	Policy	775	Defense policy, Public policy, Industrial policy
10	Trade	726	Investment and trade, Trade wars, WTO

3.3.1. Concentrating on Sino-US Diplomacy and Cross-strait Relations

Statistical data reveals that “America” and “Taiwan” are the most frequently recurring terms in the China-related reporting of the two major newspapers. This underscores the vigilant attention of Singapore’s mainstream media to the dynamics of Sino-US relations and the Taiwan issue, reflecting Singapore’s profound concern for regional security and stability as a significant regional actor. For instance, a report in *Lianhe Zaobao* asserts, “A regression in Sino-US relations would result in a regression of global development, and instability in Sino-US relations would lead to global turbulence. Addressing this quandary is no longer confined to the bilateral realm; it is a critical issue that the international community must prioritize and collectively seek an appropriate resolution.” This statement underscores Singapore’s significant emphasis on these issues and their impact on international stability.

3.3.2. Endorsing China's economic Achievements Since the Initiation of Reform and Opening-up Policy

Data indicates that the two major newspapers generally acknowledge China's economic policies since the commencement of its reform and opening-up era, frequently employing terms such as "growth," "development," and "recovery" to characterize China's current economic condition. For instance, *Lianhe Zaobao* highlights in an article, "China has indeed achieved something to be proud of: an economic miracle in 40 years, good social order, people living in peace and contentment, and almost no phenomenon of homelessness can be seen." Furthermore, despite the economic growth slowdown in China due to the COVID-19 pandemic, *The Straits Times* underscores in a report, "The importance of China to Singapore's economy cannot be underestimated." This underscores the positive stance of Singapore's media towards China's economic development.

4. THE IMAGE OF CHINA IN THE CHINA-RELATED COVERAGE OF SINGAPORE'S MAINSTREAM MEDIA SINCE THE 20TH CPC NATIONAL CONGRESS

4.1. A Neutral and Friendly Political and Diplomatic Image

From the perspective of Singapore's mainstream media, China is continuously enhancing its national strength and steadily elevating its international standing amidst the trend of multipolarity in the global landscape. Beyond the frequent discussions on Sino-US relations and the Taiwan issue, the two newspapers have also extensively covered China's international diplomacy with countries such as Singapore, Japan, South Korea, and Africa. In these reports, the Singaporean media closely monitors the statements of Chinese foreign ministry personnel, shaping China's image as a major power committed to upholding national independence and sovereignty through peaceful means and firmly opposing foreign interference in internal affairs. For instance, *Lianhe Zaobao* has lauded in an article, "China's diplomacy amidst adversity has thus far been characterized by composure, magnanimity, and rationality, with a distinct sense of identity as a 'responsible major power.'"

4.2. A Steady and Positive Economic and Commercial Image

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted economic development in China and globally. Nevertheless, the Singaporean media maintains a positive outlook on China's economic prospects, as articulated by *Lianhe Zaobao*: "Over the decades since the reform and opening-up, China has experienced astonishingly rapid development. It is precisely because of this that, as China reopens its borders, recovers from the pandemic, and begins to restore economic and social order, the international community continues to hold positive expectations for China." Additionally, both major media outlets have affirmed the significance of economic and trade cooperation between China and Singapore, noting that "while the pandemic has indeed had a negative impact on the China-ASEAN community with a shared future, it has not been able to halt the progress of building this community."

4.3. An Open and Inclusive Cultural and Technological Image

The two major newspapers frequently highlight key phrases such as "telling China's story well" and "communicating China's voice" in their China-related coverage. For instance, *Lianhe Zaobao's Misconceptions and Problems in Telling China's Story* and *The Straits Times's China's Paradox: Hard-selling Culture to Gain Soft Power* both explore China's accomplishments and challenges in enhancing its cultural soft power from an objective and neutral standpoint. They endorse and support China's principle of "harmony in diversity," crafting an image of China that promotes openness and inclusiveness and seeks a shared beauty. Additionally, both newspapers have frequently reported on China's continuous enhancement of technological strength under the backdrop of the Sino-US trade

war. For example, *The Straits Times*'s article *AI seeps into everyday life in China* indicates that, despite its later start and lagging behind the United States, China's artificial intelligence technology is still in a leading position in many fields, reflecting China's growing prominence and rapid advancements in the global technology competition.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *Lianhe Zaobao* and *The Straits Times* have, overall, portrayed China in a positive, proactive and friendly as a major nation in their China-related coverage since the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, albeit with relatively few negative reports and commentaries. From the perspective of the Singaporean media, China's national image still faces challenges in terms of dimensionality and comprehensiveness, indicating that China's efforts to promote its national image could be further intensified.

In order to enhance China's national image as perceived by Singapore in the future, the author suggest that greater emphasis should be placed on the cultural exchange awareness of "telling China's story well," enhancing the sense of cultural belonging and self-confidence among the populace. Efforts should be made to foster broader consensus and strength. What's more, deepening cooperation across various sectors between China and Singapore, aiming for mutually beneficial outcomes, can help garner more positive coverage from Singaporean media. In addition, utilizing the convergence of digital technology and multimedia, combined with a blend of online and offline initiatives, innovative communication strategies, and diverse display and dissemination channels can contribute to the construction of a more multi-dimensional and compelling image of China as "credible, lovable, and respectable".

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